The Central European Civil War, 1918-1921*

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In Western Europe, the end of the Great War in November 1918 also marked the end of armed struggle. This was not the case in the areas further to the East, where the collapse of the Russian, Habsburg, Ottoman, and German Empires, the repercussions of the Bolshevik revolution, and struggles for national independence blocked the road to peace in the years after the armistices of 1918. It was the final stage of a worldwide conflict, which turned from a largely conventional war between these very empires into a civil war between their heirs.

Historiography has had difficulty dealing with this seemingly random agglomeration of armed conflicts. Christoph Mick has identified as many as eight different types of war in Central and Eastern Europe in the wake of the Great War: 'civil wars and state wars, state building wars and revolutionary wars, wars of conquest and of liberation, offensive and defensive wars'.[1] Jonathan D. Smele's new interpretation of the Russian civil war follows this line: He describes it as not one entity, but as a whole decade of intermingled several civil wars in Russia that comprised 'national wars, international wars, interethnic wars and conflicts, wars of national liberation, and local adjuncts of the ongoing world struggle'.[2] Stainley G. Paine therefore proposes plainly to do away with the term civil war and use 'the wars of the tsarist succession' instead.[3]

Revolution – National Conflicts – Civil War

There are, of course, good arguments for this kind of differentiation. But by splitting up embattled post-war Central and Eastern Europe into such a variety of taxonomic entities, one risks missing the forest for the trees. As Joachim von Puttkamer rightly assesses, 'the immediate post-war period in this region appears in general accounts as a nearly impenetrable jungle of overlapping revolutions and national conflicts that is better left to a handful of specialists'.[4] But with the keywords 'revolution' and 'national conflicts', one can pick one's way through this jungle, and Peter Gatrell has done so convincingly:

> Two decisive shifts in geopolitics make sense of these conflicts. The first new element was the Bolshevik revolution in November 1917, which had repercussions far beyond Russia. A second, related element was the struggle for the legacy of the disintegrating empires of Austria-Hungary, Germany, Russia, and Ottoman Turkey, a process entailing the creation of new nation-states, often with the kind of friction such as border disputes, territorial claims, and population movements that encouraged armed conflict.[5]

The first element marks the constituent features of the Russian civil war, the second of the Central European civil war and of related, but not immediately connected, developments in Southeastern Europe.

The depiction of the Central European armed clashes between 1918 and 1921 as part of one ongoing civil war in which several nation states were formed challenges the prevailing interpretation of isolated bilateral conflicts between clearly defined nation states and their respective civilian and armed citizens: Poles against Lithuanians, Poles against Russians, Poles against Ukrainians, Poles against Germans, Poles against Czechs. It does so deliberately because we deprive ourselves of important insights as long as we ignore that these conflicts were not only often intermingled, but all had something essential in common: 'Thus after the Great War arises a new war of nations' *(hoc modo post magnum bellum mun-*

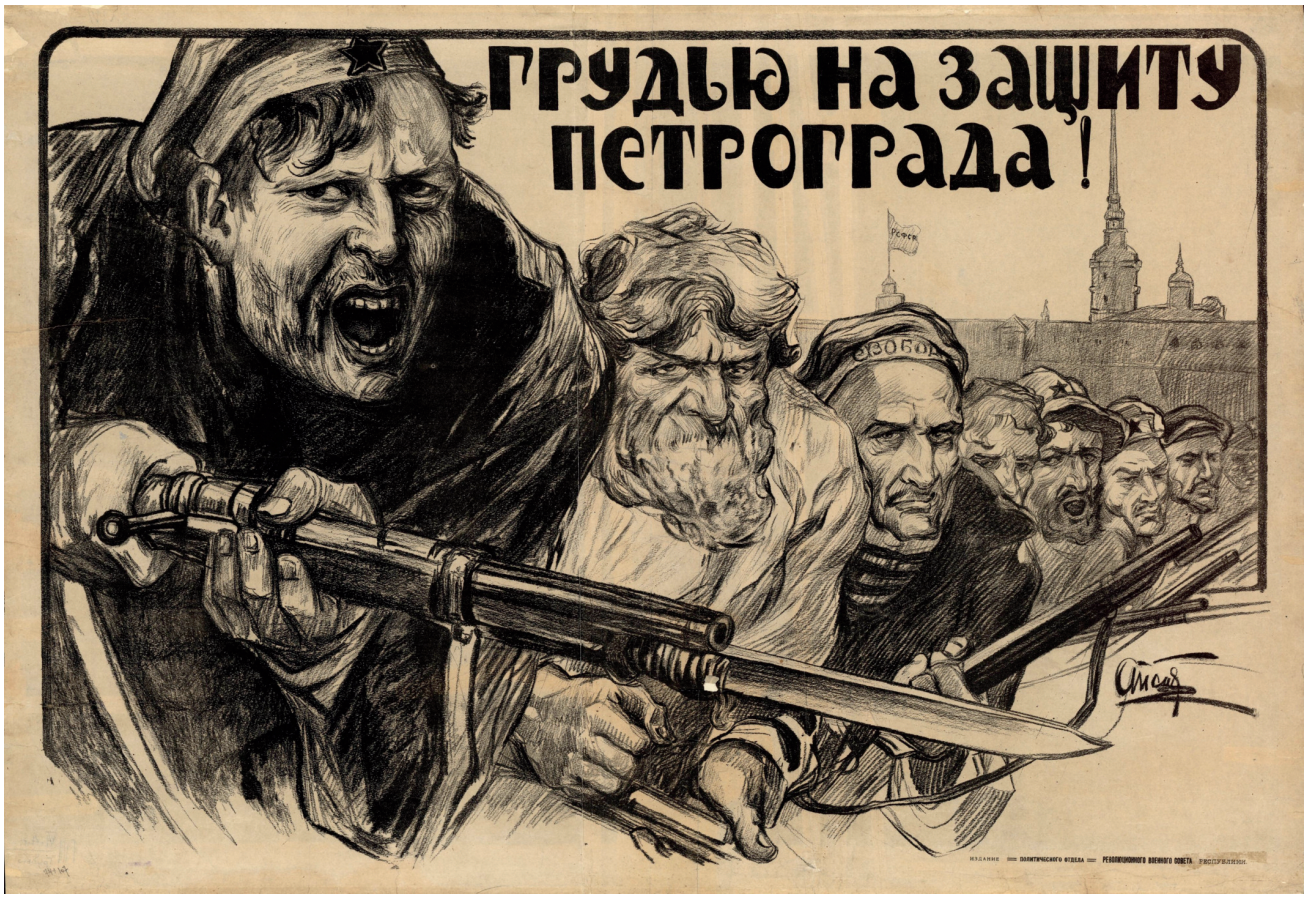

Fig 1: 'Head and Shoulders to the defense of Petrograd!' Russian propaganda poster against the Whites during the Russian civil war, Revolutionary Military Department of the Republic, 1918.

danum exorta nova bella nationum), the chronicler of the Jesuit college in the Galician town of Chyrów noted at the turn of 1918/19.[6] Clearly defined nations simply did not exist at the dawn of Central Europe's era of independence. Accordingly, nation states were rather the result of this encompassing civil war, even if they had officially been – with equal ostentation and haste – already declared at its outset. The Central European Civil War served as a catalyst to carve the future populations of the Central European post-war states out of the mass of imperial subjects they had represented only a few years before. Its outcome defined the boundaries between them and often led to their international recognition. As the strained relationships between these new states' titular nations and their respective minorities between the world wars show, these battles were not solely directed outwards, but inwards as well.

Following Gatrell's definition, it makes sense to treat this civil war theatre separately from the contemporaneous civil war in Russia, where the rise of national ambitions was superimposed by and intermingled with other powerful ideological currents. The main opposing powers – the Bolshevik ('Red') and the conservative ('White') movement – fought over the future of one country: Would Russia become a Soviet state, or would the old order return, even if in a moderated form? Peasant bands for their part fought for more autonomy and against interference and heteronomy from the capital, regardless of whether they were ruled by imperial elites or a Bolshevik nomenclature. Foreign intervention to the North, South and East, half- heartedly launched to contain the 'Bolshevik threat', further blurred the picture. Although the experience and forms of violence that strongly accompanied the Russian Civil

War resemble those of the Central European Civil War, its vast disarray of concurring and competing ideological agendas made it a genuinely different conflict. In Central Europe, many different national armies fought for one political vision – the nation state – to be realised in just as many different countries. The two conflicts overlapped in the Polish eastern borderlands (Kresy), where Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian, Belarusian, Polish and Ukrainian nationalists would – sometimes united, sometimes apart – fight for their own state and in the meantime against a Bolshevik takeover.

Fig. 2: 19th-century depiction of Sulla's troops entering Rome, 82 B.C.

What Makes a Civil War a Civil War?

Having delineated two different battle zones, I must still defend my notion of the Central European Civil War against the established definition of civil war. The Oxford English Dictionary calls it a 'war between the citizens or inhabitants of a single country, state, or community', and Payne adheres to this notion.[7] In my view, such definitions, though usually applied to the phenomenon, are too static, since they do not acknowledge the fact that countries, states, communities and identities undergo significant changes in the course of civil wars. Thus, civil wars by their very nature are transitional phases rather than periods of standstill. Historical examples where they marked the decline or rise of empires are legendary: the Peloponnesian War, the Roman Civil Wars, the French Revolutionary Wars, to name only the most prominent ones.

The case of Central Europe is unique, however, because here civil war set in immediately *after* imperial power – exerted by three different monarchs – was abolished in the course of conventional war and revolution. Thus, it was a post-colonial battle for a share of former imperial lands, which resulted in the establishment of a multitude of nation states. 'This is what the device of national self-determination logically suggests', writes Joshua Sanborn, 'not peace emerging from war, but the shift from an interstate war to an intrastate war.' With respect to its tendency to transgress pre-existing borders, he adds: 'These civil wars, especially those in periods of decolonization, are hardly parochial or limited', and 'great wars', on the other hand, 'are almost by definition conglomerations of multiple conflicts that proceeded simultaneously'.[8] Other knowledgeable authors have characterised the region in our period of interest as 'a protean world of shifting allegiances, civil wars, refugees and bandit gangs, where the collapse of old empires had left law and order, trade and communications in shreds'[9], as the theatre of 'a more extended European civil war'[10] and as 'a series of interconnected [inchoate and deadly] wars and civil wars' such as modern Europe had only witnessed once before, namely during the Thirty Years War of the seventeenth century.[11] Those conducting the most recent discourse on civil war, who see it as a human constant stretching from the dawn of mankind to our modern world, agree that it does not necessarily respect existing or emerging frontiers: 'Yet how do we tell civil wars apart from other kinds of wars, when so many internal conflicts spill over their countries' borders or draw in combatants from outside [...]?', asks David Armitage. His answer is as simple as it is ingenious: 'Civil war is, first and foremost, a category of experience; the participants usually know they are in the midst of civil war long before international organizations declare it to be so.'[12]

The notion of a Central European Civil War follows that line by concentrating on the experience rather than on the taxonomy of civil war. Its two main characteristics – unrestrained violence and blurred boundaries between the protagonists – have been decipherable since the very outset of civilisation. In Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, we learn:

> The Corcyraeans were butchering those of their countrymen whom they thought hostile to them:

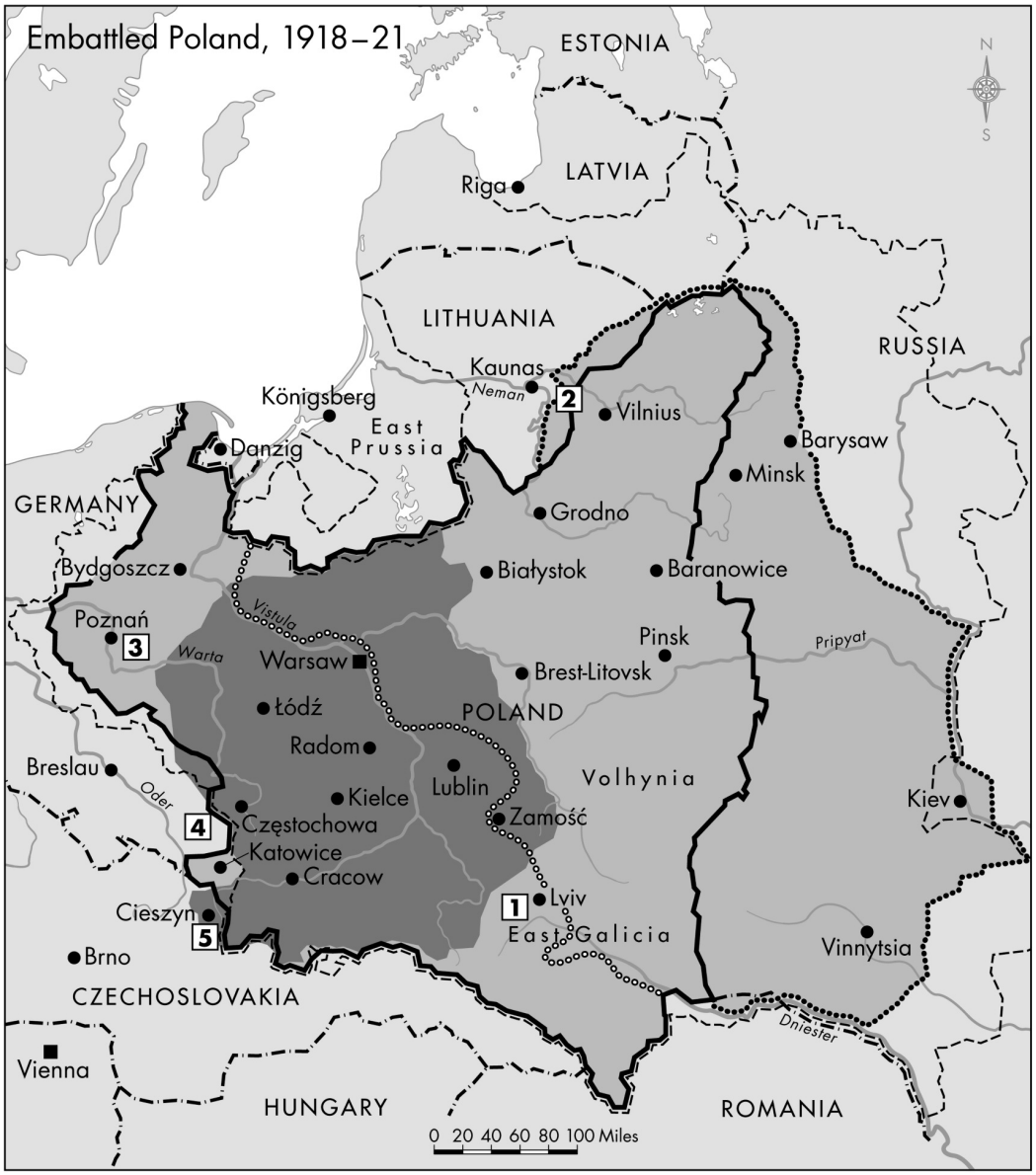

Fig. 3: Map of Poland and East Central Europe 1918-1921.

bringing their accusations, indeed, against those only who were putting down the democracy; but some were slain for private enmity also, and others for money owed them by those who had borrowed it. Every mode of death was thus had recourse to; and whatever ordinarily happens in such a state of things, all happened then, and still more. For father murdered son, and they were dragged out of the sanctuaries, or slain in them; while in that of Bacchus some were walled up and perished.[13]

Julius Caesar was reading from the same page when he noted in his *Bellum Civile:*

> The terror they had been thrown into by their generals, the severity shown in punishing, and the new oath they had been obliged to take [...] changed the soldier's minds, and reduced the war to its former state. [...] In a civil war[,] it was lawful for every soldier to choose what side he pleased; that the same legion, who a little before had fought on the side of the enemy, might, without scruple, return again to the same cause.[14]

Fig. 4: Soldiers and civilians in the streets of Lwów/L'viv, during the Polish-Ukrainian fight for the city in November 1918.

Civil War in Central Europe

Like in ancient Greece and Rome, the radicalisation and ambivalence of civil war led to considerable uncertainty, ubiquitous fear and arbitrary violence in post-imperial Central Europe, undergirding my argument for treating its population's experiences of war, paramilitary conflict, and violence during 1918-1921 as a coherent entity, a 'transnational zone of paramilitary violence'.[15] Geographically in the eye of the cyclone, late-1918 Poland harboured not only hope for a glorious future, but also the memory of a nightmarish past. Its independence materialised in shattered spaces. Before its moment of glory in November 1918, Poland suffered enormously under the effects of the war and witnessed some of the most fervent battles of the Eastern Front. The country was exploited, and the occupying Germans, Austrians, and Russians killed or deported hundreds of thousands of its inhabitants far to the East and West. Epidemics and famine plagued the rural and urban population in late 1918, and people were still dying in large numbers. With the retreat of the troops of the 'Supreme Command of All German Forces in the East' *(Ober Ost)*, large parts of Eastern Poland lacked any form of effective state control for months or even years. The area turned into something that has recently been dubbed Poland's 'Wild East'.[16] The future US President Herbert Hoover (1874-1964), then heading the American Relief Administration, correctly noted in 1919 that parts of Poland had witnessed seven invasions and retreats during the war, accompanied by mass destruction and hundreds of thousands of casualties.[17]

Fig. 5: Snapshot of an unknown Polish paramilitary unit in Upper Silesia in 1920.[21]

But this nightmare was far from over by 1919. Between late 1918 and early 1921, Poland was in a permanent state of declared or undeclared war on literally all frontiers except the Romanian. The emerging ethnic Polish nation state claimed territories that hosted minorities of almost all nations involved in the Central European Civil War. Not surprisingly, contemporaries living in Central Europe, especially in its borderlands, experienced the aftermath of the Great War as a time of fratricidal struggle, of neighbour fighting neighbour. Marceli Handelsman (1882-1945), a Polish-Jewish historian who earned international fame between the wars, noted in the summer of 1920:

> I will remember my conversation with a Lithuanian peasant in Ogrodniki. He told me that he lived there in Ogrodniki, while his brother-in-law was down in Bereźniki. Now, he said, this is Lithuania, and that's Poland. It used to be one, but now there's a border between Bereźniki and Ogrodniki; there's a war on. Is that how things should be? Don't we all go to the same church? Isn't it a disaster that brothers are divided and fighting?[18]

Michał Römer (1880-1945), a lawyer of Polish-Lithuanian origin, called this phenomenon – a little more sophisticatedly – a *'bellum omnium contra omnes'*.[19] Letters, diaries and memoirs written between 1918 and 1921 in all languages of the region prove that their authors experienced the forceful disruption of a mixed population that had been living together more or less peacefully over centuries as a tragedy. They thus contradict the simplistic national narratives of united people fighting for a national independence that patronising empires had previously deprived them of, and which was contested by malevolent neighbours after 1918.

As mentioned above, the main theatres of the Central European civil war were situated in the borderlands of the emerging Second Republic of Poland. With the Habsburg Empire collapsing, Ukrainians and Poles both aimed to take over Galicia. The conflict over the cultural capital Lwów started in early November 1918, with the Poles proving victorious after

three weeks of heavy street fighting, but the undeclared Polish-Ukrainian war lasted until the summer of the following year. Lithuania and Poland were at strife about the possession of Vilnius and the surrounding area, which Polish forces (allegedly without the consent of their military command) seized in October 1920. Between 1918 and 1921, Polish and German paramilitaries fought over the Poznań area and Upper Silesia, as did Polish and Czech paramilitaries over Cieszyn Silesia.[20]

Although they overlapped in time, at first glance we seem to be dealing here with isolated bilateral conflicts Poland fought with its neighbours to the East, North, West and South. In reality, the situation was much more complicated. Temporary, geographical and political lines blur in times of civil war, and that is exactly what happened in Central Europe after the end of 1918. The imperial armies' withdrawal from the battlefields of Central Europe left a vacuum, turning the area into a *tabula rasa* in which groups of various political, national or ethnic backgrounds tried to seize the moment. In late 1918, Poland had at least two political representations – the government in Warsaw headed by Józef Piłsudski (1867-1935), and the Polish National Committee in Paris under the leadership of Roman Dmowski (1864-1939). The two factions were divided over the territorial aspects of literally all of the ongoing border struggles, and so much at enmity that the newborn republic faced both a domestic civil and a territorial partition. The Polish peasants – who after all made up 80 percent of the population – largely ignored the call to the arms, since they needed every hand to rebuild their land and widely mistrusted the promises and feared the consequences of 'national independence'. In the meantime, two different Ukrainian state representations – the Ukrainian People's Republic and the West Ukrainian National Republic – partly sided with, partly fought against the Poles, while Lithuanians first fought against the Red Army, then sided with the Bolsheviks against the Poles. Except for a clash of arms between Poles and Czechs in January 1919, which lasted only a week, the struggles at Poland's southern and western borders were fought by paramilitary organisations that at least officially had no connection to their respective governments in Warsaw, Berlin or Prague.

Fig. 6: Polish-Czech war in Cieszyn, Silesia, late January 1919: According to Polish eye witnesses' reports, most of these twenty Polish soldiers were killed by Czech legionnaires from the 21 Czechoslovak Regiment after their surrender on 26 January 1919.

Paramilitary Violence as Encompassing Experience

As a matter of fact, in late 1918 none of the emerging nation states between Weimar Germany and Soviet Russia had a consistent and organised army at their disposal. On the contrary, they all had to be hastily built up initially from a core of a few thousand recruits who some months before had been fighting on different sides of the Great War's fronts. Equipment was insufficient, discipline was at its lowest ebb, desertion was a mass phenomenon and instead of protecting their own citizens, soldiers of these 'national armies' often pillaged the countryside or even engaged in anti-Jewish pogroms.[22]

The vengeance with which the battles following the world war were fought, and the paramilitary violence which accompanied them, differ dramatically from those of the First World War itself, a modern war by contrast, which though highly militarised was still largely fought according to the laws of war between 1914 and 1917.[23] The subsequent battles are more reminiscent of the fierce armed clashes in the Balkans in 1912/13, which *preceded* the First World War. The violent course events took after 1918, and the deliberate targeting of civilians, rooted in this conventional war's shift into a civil war. It now became a war of ethnically defined nations in which all sides regarded 'their'

respective civil population as allies and 'other' civilians as enemies of their state-building project. This attitude corresponded with an awakening military and national enthusiasm within the belligerent societies: all of a sudden, independence no longer seemed merely a distant dream, but a reality within reach. 'As we stopped at a small country station', the young American lawyer Artur Lehman Goodhart (1891-1978) noted on his train ride through Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1919, 'we saw a troop of young boys about fourteen years old marching past in military step. Instead of real guns they carried small wooden imitation ones. "It does not seem as if these people believe that the world's last war has just been finished", said the Colonel [a fellow traveller]. "You will get very tired of this militarism before you are through with your trip. Chauvinism has become popular everywhere. As far as I can judge, every second day in these new Central European countries is a holiday to celebrate their sudden national independence."'[24]

Conclusion

The depiction of the post-war conflicts in Central Europe between 1918 and 1921 as one civil war is unusual, if not provocative and criticisable. It surely needs at least a more encompassing treatment than can be delivered on the pages of this short essay. I am not arguing that authors who dealt with these conflicts separately and underlined their differences were entirely wrong. I am saying that two elements were imminent to all of those conflicts: they were fought by nations in the making that were not united and clearly defined at the outset, but whose members (excepting Ukrainians and Belarusians) built their respective nation states in the course of these very events; and they all featured a level of paramilitary violence which – together with their notion as fratricidal struggles – made them more of a tragic than a heroic experience for the population living in the contested borderlands.

Endnotes

* This contribution is a shortened and revised version of the chapter 'The Central European Civil War' in Jochen Böhler, Civil War in Central Poland, 1918-1921. The Resurrection of Poland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

1. Christoph Mick, 'Vielerlei Kriege: Osteuropa 1918-1921', in *Formen des Krieges: Von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, eds. Dietrich Beyrau, Michael Hochgeschwender and Dieter Langewiesche (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2007), 311-326, here 311.
2. Jonathan D. Smele, The *'Russian' Civil Wars 1916-1926: Ten Years that Shook the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 36.
3. Stanley G. Payne, *Civil War in Europe, 1905-1949* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 33.
4. Joachim von Puttkamer, 'Collapse and Restoration: Politics and the Strains of War in Eastern Europe,' in *Legacies of Violence: Eastern Europe's First World War*, eds. Jochen Böhler, Włodzimierz Borodziej and Joachim von Puttkamer (München: Oldenbourg, 2014), 9-23, here 10.
5. Peter Gatrell, 'War After the War: Conflicts, 1919-1923', in *A Companion to World War I*, ed. John Horne (Chichester, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 558-575, here 558.
6. Cited after 'Fragment kroniki klasztoru i konwiktu oo. Jezuitów w Chyrowie za lata 1918-1919,' in *Kościół rzymskokatolicki i Polacy w Małopolsce Wschodniej podczas wojny ukraińsko-polskiej 1918-1919: Źródła,* ed. Józef Wołczański (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Papieskiego Jana Pawła II, 2012), vol. 2, 27-79, here 28. Thanks to Maciej Górny for this quote.
7. Entry 'civil war, *n.*', in: *Oxford English Dictionary: online,* eds. Michael Proffitt, Philip Durkin and Edmund Weiner <www.oed.com> (accessed 14 June 2018).
8. Joshua A. Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse: The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 237, 4.
9. Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2003), 207.
10. Peter Holquist, 'Violent Russia, Deadly Marxism? Russia in the Epoch of Violence, 1905-1921,' *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History 4*, no. 3 (2003), 627-652, here 644-645: 'The violence of the Russian Civil War appears not as something perversely [sic] Russian or uniquely Bolshevik, but as the most intense case of a more extended European civil war, extending through the Great War and stretching several years after its formal conclusion.'
11. Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917-1923* London: Allen Lane, 2016), 7.
12. David Armitage, Civil Wars: A History in Ideas (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), 15, 238-239.
13. Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Henry Dale (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1891), 207.
14. Caius J. Caesar, *The Commentaries of Caesar, Translated into English: To Which is Prefixed a Discourse Concerning the Roman Art of War*, ed. William Duncan (St. Louis: Edwards & Bushnell, 1856), 233, 246. Thanks to Matthew Trundle for point-

ing out these and other relevant publications on the classical period.

15. Robert Gerwarth, 'The Central European Counter-Revolution: Paramilitary Violence in Germany, Austria and Hungary after the Great War,' *Past and Present* no. 200 (2008), 175-209, here 177.
16. Kathryn C. Ciancia, 'Poland's Wild East: Imagined Landscapes and Everyday Life in the Volhynian Borderlands, 1918-1939' (PhD thesis, Stanford University, 2011).
17. Włodzimierz Borodziej, *Geschichte Polens im 20. Jahrhundert* (München: Beck, 2010), 97.
18. Marceli Handelsman, *W piątym pułku Legjonów: Dwa miesiące ofensywy litewsko-białoruskiej* (Zamość: Zygmunt Pomarański & Spółka, 1921), 25-26.
19. Michał Römer, *Dzienniki, 1916-1919*, ed. Agnieszka Knyt (Warszawa: Karta, 2018), 689 (entry of 1 April 1919).
20. For a comparative overview of these conflicts, see Benjamin Conrad, *Umkämpfte Grenzen, umkämpfte Bevölkerung. Die Entstehung der Staatsgrenzen der Zweiten Polnischen Republik 1918-1923* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2014); Jochen Böhler, Civil War in Central Europe, 1918-1921. The Resurrection of Poland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
21. The image was probably taken by Captain James A. Stader of the US Army, who was engaged in the exchange of German and Polish prisoners of war. For reasons unknown, he noted on the reverse side "Polish irregulars for the plebiscite. In reality the Murder Squad". Polish and German paramilitaries both committed acts of terror against each other and the civilian population during the Polish-German conflict over Upper Silesia.
22. Piotr Wróbel, 'The Seeds of Violence: The Brutalization of an Eastern European Region, 1917-1921,' *Journal of Modern European History 1*, no. 1 (2003), 125-149; Alexander Victor Prusin, *Nationalizing a Borderland: War, Ethnicity, and Anti-Jewish Violence in East Galicia, 1914-1920* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005); Piotr Wróbel, 'The Revival of Poland and Paramilitary Violence, 1918-1920', in *Spießer, Patrioten, Revolutionäre. Militärische Mobilisierung und gesellschaftliche Ordnung in der Neuzeit*, eds. Rüdiger Bergien and Ralf Pröve (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 281-303; William W. Hagen, *Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland, 1914-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
23. Włodzimierz Borodziej and Maciej Górny, *Imperia*, vol. 1 of *Nasza wojna* (Warsaw: Foksal, 2014).
24. Artur L. Goodhart, *Poland and the Minority Races* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1920), 13-14.