



Introduction

How many people have heard of Przasnysz? Probably not many. In 1914, it was a small Mazovian town close to the southern border of East Prussia. Depending on the point of view, whether Russian or German, Przasnysz was situated on one of the main roads leading to East Prussia or, going in the opposite direction, to Warsaw.

In November and December 1914, and again in February and July of the following year, hundreds of thousands of Russian and German soldiers fought three great battles in Przasnysz. In the July 1915 engagement, the Germans suffered 16,000 killed or wounded, while the Russian losses amounted to nearly 40,000 men. The total number of dead, wounded, and missing is unknown, but it certainly far exceeded 100,000. Why is it, then, that so few people have heard of Przasnysz?

There are three answers to this question, and each has contributed to the genesis of this book.

Contrary to what a Russian or an inhabitant of Central and South-Eastern Europe might think, it is only to the east and south-east of Germany that the First World War has been all but forgotten. In Germany itself, it is not uncommon to see memorial plaques honouring soldiers from a particular village or city district who fought in the Great War. Certain words and symbols as well as the titles of novels and names of battlefields have also remained in the public consciousness. Germany is, therefore, a transitional zone between East and West, as has often been the case throughout its history, and in this instance it is a transitional zone between memory and oblivion. Indeed, for the French and British, the Great War is commemorated as such; 11 November remains an important date: in France it is a national holiday, while in Britain it is known as Remembrance Day, which continues to be solemnly observed. Anyone who has seen the museums in Ypres or Péronne should not be surprised, for it was here that legions of young Belgian, British, French, and German men perished. Far away, at Gallipoli, the soldiers of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps were also massacred. The day they landed – 25 April (ANZAC Day) – is an unofficial public holiday in both former British colonies. These are European (in fact, global) places of remembrance that the Second World War has not overshadowed. The same could not be said of the museum in

the Slovenian town of Kobarid, which commemorates one of the bloodiest massacres of the First World War, namely, the twelve battles of the Soča (Isonzo) River that continued almost uninterrupted for twenty-nine months. Few have heard of the museum in Kobarid, but at least it exists. Just under 50,000 people visit it each year (a declining trend), whereas the museum at Ypres hosted nearly 300,000 visitors in 2013 (a rising trend).

In the places where the biggest battles of the Eastern Front were fought and where the trench warfare lasted longest – located in present-day Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, and the Russian Federation – the only extant reminders of the conflict are the war cemeteries (if at all preserved). For the inhabitants of those places, the First World War is prehistory, irrelevant to modern times. The difference is thus fundamental: for the French and British, the war is an element of their identity, and for this reason they commemorate 11 November, visit museums, and read books about it. For the inhabitants of our part of Europe, George F. Kennan's famous phrase that the First World War was 'the great seminal catastrophe of this century' sounds as if the American diplomat was barking up the wrong tree.

These fundamental differences in remembrance have their counterpart in historiography. As we were working on the Polish edition of this volume in 2013, the landscape of research in that area was almost completely barren. The most significant work on the subject was Norman Stone's study, by then almost forty years old.¹ Anniversary commemorations between 1914 and 1918 altered the image to the extent that a substantial amount of interesting books and articles on the eastern theatre of the Great War came out through imprints located roughly within the Helsinki–L'viv–Freiburg im Breisgau triangle. Aside from Jörn Leonhard's monumental study on the 1914–1918 period,² which returned the eastern fronts to their rightful place, historians from our region contributed huge amounts of new knowledge on states as far apart as Finland and Ukraine.³ Many studies also considered Austria-Hungary through that lens,⁴ but in this context the perspective did not change as significantly after 2013: the Habsburg monarchy collapsed under the concurrent blows of hunger, national aspirations, and the actual incapacity to manage the crisis

¹ Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front 1914–1917*, New York, NY 1975.

² Jörn Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora. Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs*, Munich 2014.

³ One example: Tuomas Tepora and Aapo Roselius (eds.), *The Finnish Civil War 1918. History, Memory, Legacy*, Leiden 2014. As for Ukraine, the extent of new writing makes any listing of titles a pointless exercise. The same applies to studies concerning the Jews as citizens of Russia and Austria-Hungary.

⁴ Manfred Rauchensteiner's *Der Erste Weltkrieg und das Ende der Habsburgermonarchie 1914–1918* (Vienna, Cologne, and Weimar 2013) was published while the Polish edition of our book was being typeset. For Rauchensteiner's latest publication, see his chapter in Helmut Rumpler (ed.), *Die Habsburgermonarchie und der Erste Weltkrieg*, vol. XI of *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918*, Vienna 2016.

exhibited by rulers who lost the necessary credibility following the failures of 1914 and the human losses in the battles at the Isonzo or in far-off Volhynia. That Austrian and German historians played a significant part in the process of civilizing the desert is not at all surprising.

Meanwhile, between 1914 and 1917 people across Europe were well aware of the existence of the Eastern Front, and it was not entirely forgotten during the inter-war period either. Austrians were told stories about a fortress with an unpronounceable name – Przemysł; Germans recognized the name Tannenberg; and everyone remembered the hunger and ration cards. Only in the next generation did the Eastern Front vanish from readers' and historians' minds; it became the 'Unknown Front', something from a far away place, where – with the exception of the revolutions in Russia – nothing important happened to alter the outcome of the war.

For decades, thus, Western historians hardly ever mentioned the Russian Front, let alone the fighting in Serbia, Romania, or Greece. When, in the 1990s, modern studies on the First World War began to emerge, the East remained slightly exotic, slightly marginalized, and still notably absent. In recent years the topic has attracted interest among a substantial group of mostly American and German historians, but the number of studies still pales in comparison with the body of literature about the Western Front. In Poland, the second-largest country of the region (after Russia), one could count on one's fingers the number of researchers currently working on the First World War. The same goes for the number of books written on the subject in the last forty years until very recently, when it increased to meet the demands of a string of anniversaries. Diaries and memoirs were an exception: usually written between 1914 and 1939 and often published during the inter-war period, they were for various reasons prohibited by the censors until 1989.

Censorship as a means of creating a socialist historical policy brings us to the third reason for writing this book. Already in the 1920s, interpretations of the recent past had a tendency to be ahistorical: although what happened before autumn 1918 was described by military historians, authors clung doggedly to the apparent logic of events and to the apparent infallibility of their protagonists. According to this logic, the war inevitably led to the final victory of Romania, to the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and to the realization of the national aspirations of the Finns, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles, Czechs, and Slovaks. Already before 1939, therefore, the First World War became a kind of lengthy prologue to the first chapter in the history of the nation-state. At school, children learned about the heroes of the struggle for independence, yet beyond its walls the people they usually met were veterans of the imperial armies. Czechoslovak and Polish Legionnaires were a small elite group with a disproportionately powerful influence not only on politics but also on the image of the recent past. In the mid 1930s, 80 per cent of Polish war invalids were former soldiers of the Russian,

Austro-Hungarian, and German armies, while the remaining 20 per cent had fought in the Polish Legions and in the Polish–Soviet war. If it were possible to measure the influence of these two groups in the public domain, the proportions would no doubt be reversed.⁵

After 1945, in turn, when the USSR assumed direct and indirect control over Central Europe and significant parts of South-Eastern Europe, the First World War was largely forgotten. It was written off as an episode that preceded the October Revolution, and the year 1918 was seen as a bizarre accident that ran contrary to the logic of history, for it was then that the communists should have assumed power in Bucharest, Riga, and Warsaw (and especially in Prague). Standing in the way of the communist project was the pernicious influence of the nationalistic elites, who aroused and then exploited the desire for independence while marginalizing the needs of the proletariat. After 1945, this narrative was promoted by institutionalized censorship, which replaced the self-censorship of the inter-war period. It played a major role in reducing the First World War to a history of betrayal by various non-communist political movements – reformist and ecclesiastical, bourgeois and peasant, fascist and nationalist – all of which ultimately led to a disastrous delay in the building of socialism in countries to the west of the Soviet Union.

After the collapse of communism, the year 1918 resumed the role it had played before the Second World War, although the process of recovering memory – even more so than in the inter-war period – did not encompass the entire First World War. On the contrary, the more the post-communist democracies built their national identities on the idea of a continuation of pre-war statehood, the less significant became anything that did not suit the narrative of a heroic nation fighting determinedly for four years to create or resurrect a nation-state.

Political manipulation, however, was not the only reason why the once ‘Great’ War was forgotten. This process is hard to imagine without considering another nightmare – the Second World War, which was even more ghastly for most countries of the region than the First, and its effects were even more dramatic. The massacres of Serbian peasants in 1914 and 1915 had little chance of remaining in the collective memory when juxtaposed with the ocean of blood that was spilled during the occupation of Yugoslavia between 1941 and 1945; the pogroms of the First World War were negligible when compared with the Holocaust. To the Greeks, the experiences of

⁵ Jan Sobociński, ‘Inwalidzi wojenni i wojskowi w Polsce według pochodzenia oraz przyczyn inwalidztwa’, *Praca i Opieka Społeczna* 14, 3 (1934), pp. 313–324; data from Katarzyna Sierakowska, ‘Niech się nasi bracia, ojcowie i matki dowiedzą [...], jakich se to wychowali bohaterów. Cierpienie w relacjach żołnierzy Polaków 1914–1918’, in *Zapisy cierpienia*, ed. Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz, Wrocław, 2011, pp. 267–282, here p. 281.

1914–1918 must have seemed very distant after the first winter under occupation (1941/1942).

There are many more places like Przasnysz, but, because they are hardly known, they cannot form even the kernel of a collective regional memory. Nowadays, Austrian and German secondary school pupils are unfamiliar with Przemyśl and Tannenberg, while to the French and Russians those names have never meant anything anyway. Polish schoolchildren, in turn, are certainly unaware that the most important battles of the Eastern Front in 1914 and 1915 took place almost exclusively within the borders of present-day Poland.

Hence our idea of writing a book that would restore people's memory of the horror that was the First World War in the lands between Riga and Skopje. Russians, Germans, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Jews, Poles, Belarusians, and Ukrainians fought in the uniforms of the Imperial Russian Army; Germans and Poles in the uniforms of the Imperial German Army; and Slovenes, Croats, Bosnians, Serbs, Austrians, Czech Germans, Czechs, Moravians, Silesians, Poles, Jews, Ukrainians, Slovaks, Hungarians, and Romanians all served in the Austro-Hungarian Army.

It was our war.

Contrary to legend, the battles on the Eastern Front were just as fierce as those in the West. It was in the East where most prisoners of war were taken and where the mortality rate in POW camps was the highest. Soldiers of the imperial armies and nation-states killed each other *en masse*; what set them apart was at times only their uniform – not their language, faith, or ethnicity. There is a place for heroism in this story, for the soldiers were capable of incredible bravery, but most of the situations and experiences we describe in this book were not part of the patriotic narrative: soldiers died for no reason, and without the sense that they were dying for a just cause. They marched into a battle only because they were told to do so by their lieutenants and corporals, who, statistically speaking, had even less chance of surviving the war than their subordinates.

When describing the fate of those men on the front lines, we refer to the debate that dominated historiography some twenty years ago. At that time, historians and psychologists asked the following question: how did the soldiers manage, for four years, to endure the hell in which they found themselves in the autumn of 1914? How could they cope with levels of stress that are unimaginable for Europeans today? The classic response pointed to the role of the nation-state and national identity: the idea of community generated a spirit of enthusiasm that made it possible to survive the trenches. On this interpretation it was easy to explain the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, where national identity was patchy and superficial, and even easier to explain the fragmentation of Austria-Hungary, where people's loyalty to their own national communities in the second half of the war proved to be stronger than their attachment to the multinational empire.

A captivating debate on the issue took place among mostly French historians. Some, associated with the Museum of the Great War in Péronne, argued that national identification was central to the resilience of French troops. Meanwhile, their opponents stress coercion as a decisive factor: even French soldiers, who arguably fought for a modern nation-state, would have gone home without a second thought had it not been for the coercion they were under for four years. The debate continues to this day. Currently, the prevailing view is that the truth does indeed lie in the middle sometimes. The English term 'endurance' seems to reflect the reality of the trenches better than any other. While it is true that soldiers on all the fronts may have at times displayed great enthusiasm, they were at times also terrorized by their commanders, the military police, and the court martials. In general, however, they simply came to terms with the new situation in which they found themselves. They knew that there was no alternative, and on the whole they did their duty conscientiously – without great enthusiasm, but equally without the threat of summary execution.⁶

Civilians also died, went on strike, and suffered disease and starvation not for the national cause – as post-1918 historiographies often liked to claim – but simply because they lacked food, fuel, medicines, and basic sanitation. These privations were generally not due to the barbarous policies of the occupiers, however. Shortages and danger were, surprisingly, just as likely to be experienced by fellow citizens behind the front lines as by the inhabitants of conquered territories. This is another forgotten aspect of the story, since all historiographies after 1918 sought to prove the uniqueness of their own country's losses, which were caused by the exceptionally destructive, rapacious, and ruthless policies of the occupier.

The present authors are cautious with figures because the statistics often contain discrepancies. Much of the data contained in the literature is evidently false, yet such data are reprinted from earlier publications for the simple reason that no one could be bothered to check the information (or, less frequently, no one was able to). In other cases we are forced to rely on estimates, since no reliable data were produced at the time. Still other figures derive from propaganda, and their purpose from the outset was to convince rather than to inform. We try to select the most reliable data, where possible verified, and to present them in a proper context (without which their significance would be difficult to comprehend).

⁶ See, among others, Arnd Bauerkämper and Elise Julien (eds.), *Durchhalten! Krieg und Gesellschaft im Vergleich 1914–1918*, Göttingen 2010; Julia Eichenberg, 'Consent, Coercion and Endurance in Eastern Europe: Poland and the Fluidity of War Experiences', in *Legacies of Violence. Eastern Europe's First World War*, ed. Jochen Böhrer, Włodzimierz Borodziej, and Joachim von Puttkamer, Munich 2014, pp. 235–258.

A while ago it became fashionable to use the term 'total war' in relation to the First World War, and at times one gets the paradoxical impression that the proof of its 'total' character was meant to augment the 1914 to 1918 period, raising it to the rank of a catastrophe as great as the period from 1939 to 1945. As the authors of this book, we do not feel compelled to elevate the subject of our research. We do not refer to the concept of 'totality' directly. Nevertheless, at this juncture, we owe it to our readers to mention the most commonly used elements of this definition. First, in terms of its intensity and geographical reach, 'total war' eclipses all previous conflicts. Second, the participants of that war do not feel bound by morality, common law, or international law; they are driven by hatred, which justifies crimes and coercion on a hitherto unprecedented scale. Third, the boundary between combatants and civilians becomes blurred. Civilians are treated as suppliers of goods and raw materials and as a reservoir of labour to be ruthlessly exploited. Their fate can be compared to that of the conscript, who is likewise milked for all he is worth. But the similarities go even further: civilians are exposed to the dangers of war whenever the military commanders consider it expedient. They face bombing and artillery fire, repression, including the death penalty, as well as starvation and epidemics. To a large extent, therefore, risk is equalized; in other words, the chances of survival are similar for soldiers and civilians alike. Finally, total war is about not just defeating, but annihilating the enemy. Readers will decide for themselves whether our narrative confirms this image of the eastern fronts and their hinterlands to the east and west.

We should warn readers who have chosen to start from the introduction, and not from any other chapter, that this book is not a typical work of military history. We try to find a happy medium between (not necessarily traditional) military history and social history, while taking into account the wartime history of science and culture in the broad sense. We thus describe the first years of the war in roughly chronological order, but what seems far more interesting to us than the sequence of events is processes and people's attitudes. In the subsequent two parts of the book, therefore, the narrative moves away from the chronology of events and focuses more on those two aspects. In wartime people kill and suffer, and each experience has a huge impact on them and their perception of the world. We are curious to know how our great-grandparents survived and how they were changed both by the war and by their experiences beyond the combat zone. Sometimes we feel as if we are describing things that are new or, to be more precise, things that have simply been forgotten. Wherever possible, we cite witnesses and participants of the events concerned. In our view, their voices exemplify the experience of a generation, social group, cultural community, or national community. We try to show that for many decades this experience was considered meaningless and interpreted as some sort of nightmare or even apocalypse. From our perspective, the fact that in 1918 an unforeseeable breakthrough was made,

giving sense to all the previous suffering and sacrifice, is of no consequence whatsoever. In any case, that breakthrough led to the falsification of wartime memory, and that is what this book seeks to challenge: its purpose is to remind the reader, whether in Cracow, Riga, Sofia, or Zagreb, of the common traumatic experience that established a region stretching between the Baltic, the Adriatic, and the Black Sea. Meanwhile, the Anglophone reader will learn of events in that region that preceded the Second World War and the Holocaust.

The timeframe of our narrative and its key moments also diverge from the traditional approach. We are not interested in the history of international relations. Why? Let us cite the most spectacular example. Over the course of several decades there have been hundreds of books and articles written about the July crisis, and most of these have led readers up a blind alley by trying to convince them that the war was inevitable. In the Marxist interpretation this inevitability had to do with imperialist conflict, which was driven by the arrogance and greed of the economic and financial elites and by their fear of the labour movement. According to another interpretation, perhaps the most influential, the decisive factor was the German desire for world hegemony ('a place in the sun'). Sometimes the causes – and therefore the blame – were attributed to the eternal Russian ambition of conquering Constantinople or to the Viennese vision of seizing the Western Balkans; at other times, it was said that the war was deliberately provoked by the Serbs. Every theory that apporitions blame to a single country can be supported by dozens, if not thousands, of documents, including those from July 1914 upon which historical descriptions of the July events are based. Yet none of these theories has stood the test of criticism. None has even attempted to explain the relationship between the origins of the war and its course, because no such relationship exists. It is for this reason that the July Crisis and other diplomatic events are, from our perspective, of scant importance. We encourage the reader to seek out great works on this subject published before ours.⁷

The timeframe of our book is 1912 to 1916: from the Balkan Wars until the death of Franz Joseph and the end of the Romanian campaign. Perhaps we shall be able to convince the reader that the conflict between the Ottoman Empire, Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania is a prologue which, in our view, was more important than the diplomacy that took place in the summer of 1914. Indeed, one of the reasons why the whole 1914–1918 period was erased from national memories is that it was followed by events which – for Russians, Balts, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Poles, Greeks, and Turks – were far more important in shaping the inter-war period than Gorlice or Gallipoli.

⁷ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914*, London and New York, NY 2013; less well-known, but equally interesting: Sean McMeekin, *July 1914. Countdown to War*, New York, NY 2013.

Until December 1916 the empires experienced difficult moments but they were still dominant. The Central Powers even seemed to be on the verge of victory, especially in the East. The first eastern empire to collapse did so in 1917, when new actors entered the scene.

The best book about the Great War in the East is, according to one of the present authors, *The Good Soldier Švejk* by Jaroslav Hašek; according to the other, it is *The Last Days of Mankind* by Karl Kraus. Our literary preferences have a certain connection with the structure of the present volume. The two aforementioned books belong to different national cultures, but they are both part of the legacy of the Habsburg monarchy. Although we try to treat the northern empires in the East in more or less the same way (we have no such ambition or capability in the case of the Ottoman Porte), we are principally interested in the Danubian monarchy. This is because, for decades, it encapsulated the problem of a multinational empire striving to maintain the primacy of the supranational idea over the growing national aspirations of its constituent peoples. Both Hašek and Kraus are aware of this tension, but this is not the reason their works have entered the European literary canon; in fact, they have done so for quite the opposite reason. While it is true that for both authors the brutality of the Great War often has an ethnic aspect, the reader soon realizes that national character is not the issue. These books are about the nightmare of our war, and the radically different perspectives they offer – the German–Austrian perspective, that of the empire’s Czech capital and main city of one of its provinces, and finally the war as seen from the front – give an insight into the multifaceted nature of its forgotten cruelty.

Linguistic note: when we write about ‘the Russians’, we of course realize that a huge minority of soldiers in the Czarist army belonged to other nations. For want of better terms, we use the adjectives ‘Russian’ and ‘Czarist’ interchangeably, while being aware of their limitations. When we write about ‘the monarchy’, we mean the empire of Franz Joseph. This work uses the English names currently in use when appropriate. In other cases the name is given in the language of the given state at that time.

The idea of writing this book emerged in the spring of 2012 in Jena, or, to be more precise, in Wenigenjena across the Saale river, in the garden of the Friedrich Schiller University guest house at 23 Charlottenstraße. Three scholars of the Imre Kertész Kolleg were sitting at a table: the present authors and their younger Serbian colleague, Aleksandar Miletić. Aleksandar, an expert on the inter-war period, simply could not believe that his country had suffered such massive losses during the First World War. Maciej Górny was in the process of finishing the draft of his postdoctoral thesis on the attitudes of non-Western intellectuals during that period. Włodzimierz Borodziej was

writing an article about the experience of the First World War in Central and South-Eastern Europe. During an evening conversation with our Serbian colleague we realized that it was not just in Poland that the subject of the Great War had been largely ignored by historians. As the privileged recipients of a scholarship awarded by the Imre Kertész Kolleg we decided that it would be a good idea to get to work on the topic. The first chapters of the book were therefore written in Jena and the remainder in Warsaw.

The conversations we had with other scholars and staff members of the Imre Kertész Kolleg were hugely beneficial to both of us. We would like to extend our special thanks to Viorel Achim, Jochen Böhrer, Stanislav Holubec, Jurek Kochanowski, Ferenc Laczó, Elena Mannová, Lutz Niethammer, Joachim von Puttkamer, Stefan Troebst, Raphael Utz, and Theodore Weeks. During our stay in Jena, Daniela Gruber and Diana Joseph handled all the technical and organizational issues, for which we are very grateful. Finally, the help we received from the institute's junior staff as regards ordering books and dealing with the photocopiers likewise proved invaluable.

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