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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Introduction: 1918 and the Ambiguities of "Old-New Europe"

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Abstract

Our special issue discusses different perspectives on the important changes that took place in the transition from empire to nation-state at the end of the First World War, focusing especially on transnational connections, structural and historical continuities, and marginal voices that have been fully or partially concealed by the emphasis on a radical national awakening in 1918. Specific articles broach topics such as the implications of 1918 on notions of gender and ethnicity, 1918 and the violence of the "Greater War," and the legacies and memories of 1918 across the 20th century. Our approach treats the "New Europe" of 1918 as a largely coherent geopolitical and cultural space, one which can be studied in an interdisciplinary fashion. We contend that 1918 is not simply a clean break in which one epoch cleanly makes way for another, but rather it is an ambiguous and contradictory pivot, one which created an "Old-New Europe" caught between the forces of the imperial past and those of the national future. Our intention is not to dismiss entirely the importance of the transformations of 1918 but rather to show how there exists a tension between those changes and the many continuities and legacies that cut across the traditional chronology.

Keywords: 1918; First World War; Eastern Europe; Central Europe; Austria-Hungary

It is practically commonplace to note that historical and epochal demarcation points—centuries, decades, years, the beginning and the ends of eras, and events—are artificial impositions, far more permeable and mobile than they appear at first glance. The historical record is far more ambiguous, and we are often misled by attempts to divide it and categorize it in this way. This is especially true of those parts of Europe that underwent violent political change at the end of the First World War. The year of 1918 is often presented as a clean break, an uncrossable border between the old imperial world and the new national one.

Croat author Miroslav Krleža, an insightful observer and recorder of the histories of his lands and his people, understood this well. One of his most celebrated literary anecdotes took place in the last days of the First World War. Krleža attended an evening function put on by the newly formed National Council of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs, the hard-pressed committee of Habsburg South Slavs whose leaders had ushered the Croat lands out of Habsburg rule and were now desperately trying to stabilize the military situation throughout the lands under their control. The committee members were honoring Colonel Slavko Kvaternik, until recently an officer of the Austro-Hungarian army, but now chief of general staff of the National Council's improvised armed forces. Krleža made his outrage vocally known: that the group was honoring a man who

> chameleon-like, [was] kissing royal officers of King Petar Karadjordjević and who would that evening shoot anyone who was against King Petar Karadjordjević, just as last night he hanged anyone who supported Petar Karadjordjević, just as at the first opportunity he would again

> hang people for the Habsburgs against Petar, or for Petar against the Habsburgs, or for whoever appeared on the Drava or in this town on a white horse as victor. (Krleža 1956, 505)

Here was a man, according to Krleža, who would bend in any direction the times demanded, serviceable to whomsoever held power at the given moment. Here too was an ominous sign that that the vestiges of the old imperial order would linger on into the new age.

Krleža's own political loyalties in the war years had been no less protean that Kvaternik's. He had been a cadet at a Habsburg military academy, from which he was expelled, and had then served in Galicia as an enlisted soldier in the imperial army during the war years. In this time his politics had shifted from wholehearted support for South Slav unification under the aegis of Serbia, toward a belief in the revolutionary promise of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. Krleža would remain a committed, albeit maverick, communist, and the central figure of socialist Yugoslavia's nonconformist cultural policies after 1945, although his belief in the successes of the Soviet experiment waned. Kvaternik, too, would put himself at the disposal of many more masters. Always a soldier, he served briefly in the royal Yugoslav army, then the Ustashe in the Independent State of Croatia. These two historical figures, and their divergent paths and careers, show the complexity of institutional and historical continuities and ruptures across conventional demarcation points such as 1918. At every level—individual, national, regional, political, social, and cultural—the history of such transitions is far more convoluted, deceptive, and ambiguous.

This ambiguity is too often concealed not only by political leaders throughout time but also by historiographical narratives. The grand narratives of 1918 are well known. The peace settlements that ended the First World War also ended in Central and Eastern Europe a period of imperial rule that had lasted for centuries, upending in the process hierarchies of empire and replacing them with those of nation-states (whose political hierarchies were often no less pronounced). For some this was experienced as a catastrophic defeat, while for others this was a triumphant moment of national liberation. Even before the fighting had completely abated, notions of a tabula rasa with 1918 as its point of origin became entrenched in the public discourses and historiographies of the states in question, bound up with rationalizations of defeat or justifications for victory. But although the rulers of the new successor states in Europe were at pains to present themselves in diametric opposition to the empires they replaced, in many respects the successor states of "New Europe" shared the attributes and indeed the problems of their predecessors. In institutions, in memory, and at the margins of public life, legacies of the old order lingered on.

Such ambiguities are worth interrogating, and this is precisely what the articles in this special issue of *Nationalities Papers* set out to do. The contributions are based on papers given at a symposium held at Maynooth University, Ireland, in 2018, to mark the centenary of the nominal end of the First World War. We invited scholars from various disciplines to rethink how the transition out of empire and into the era of nation-states actually took place, and to consider how the many legacies and continuities of empire persisted across the 1918 fault line. We thought of 1918 not as simply a clean break in which one epoch made way for another, but rather an ambiguous and contradictory pivot, one which created an "Old-New Europe" caught between the forces of the imperial past and those of the national future, neither of which, we agreed, were wholly "imperial" or "national."

The contributions here approach this matter from diverse methodological and disciplinary approaches and with different geographical foci. Our emphasis throughout has been on transnational connections, structural and historical continuities, and marginal voices that have been fully or partially concealed by the emphasis on a national revolution in 1918. Specific articles broach topics such as the implications of 1918 on notions of gender, religion and ethnicity, 1918 and the violence of the "Greater War," and the legacies and memories of 1918 across the 20th century. We took into account the Irish setting of our symposium, thinking also about how Ireland's passage from empire after the end of the war—incomplete and ambiguous—closely resembled that of the successor states of Austria-Hungary. This too helped us loosen the constraints of geographical determinism and think instead about common themes.

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And what were those common themes? It is clear that violence persisted throughout much of Europe and the world after 1918, a fact that has been increasingly known and studied in recent years (Gerwarth 2016). The quickening of "New Europe" was a bloody matter. Confusion and a breakdown of order in the shatter zones of empire was a contributing factor to this. Fears or hopes of a revolution similar to the one which had occurred in the Russian empire in 1917 spurred on armed groups and would continue to do so throughout the interwar period. The desire to assert control in the chaos of the end of the war, and the desire to resist that control, also prolonged the violence.

We can see this clearly in Jiří Hutečka's contribution to this special issue. Hutečka concentrates on the military context of 1918–1919 through the example of Czech-speaking veterans of the Austro-Hungarian army. He focuses on the complexities of the "cultural landscape" in post-war Czechoslovakia, exposing how difficult, violent, and prolonged the transition process was in contrast to traditional narratives that have emphasized the significance of ethnic-based enthusiasm in the newly independent republic. Hutečka also shows how non-legionary veterans presented their memories of war and violence in the democratic and nonviolent Czechoslovak state, in an effort to try and escape the "culture of defeat" that lingered throughout the interwar period. Significantly, a detailed assessment of how the experience of these veterans compared to official commemorations of the First World War marks a new departure in the writing of the story of transition after 1918.

For Hutečka, the prolonged war was an opportunity for soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian army to redeem their wartime records through service in the nascent armed forces of the new national state (not a far cry from Kvaternik, then). This continued to be a matter of utmost importance throughout the lifetime of the First Republic. As a culture of Entente victory became a central component of the new state's patriotic culture, the many thousands who had fought on the "wrong side" during the war years risked exclusion from this culture of victory, unless, as Hutečka shows, a negotiation and a reinterpretation of the war years could be achieved. The article shows an attribute quite typical of the ambiguous transition out of empire at war's end: not only that violence continued well after 1918 and the formal cessation of hostilities, but also that the populations of the new states were deeply divided by their experiences of the war years.

Memory is at the heart of Tea Sindbæk Andersen and Ismar Dedović's contribution to the volume, which uses the study of school textbooks in contemporary Croatia and Serbia to show how the end of the war and the creation of the common South Slav state in 1918 has been reinterpreted to better fit contemporary national narratives. Andersen and Dedović present a nuanced interpretation of public memory narratives of the end of the war and the subsequent creation of the South Slav state. While the authors argue that both states have abandoned the Yugoslav communist narrative and that both Croatian and Serbian public memory of 1918 created lessons around loss and sacrifice, they provide an insight into the overall contrasting perspectives on national history in the two states. Ultimately, Andersen and Dedović draw attention to how First World War memory, heroism, loss, and pride relates to national identity in the early 21st century.

We are, in a sense, dealing once again with the need of state builders to adjust the history of the war's end to suit the contemporary political climate. What is fascinating in Andersen and Dedović's article is the counterintuitive way this has happened. The common assumption about the end of the First World War is that it represented a moment of national emancipation in Europe, the acceptance of the principle of self-determination in national and international affairs, and the gaining of sovereignty for many peoples throughout Europe. Indeed, this was the long-held narrative in Yugoslavia itself, but the collapse of that state in the 1990s has led to yet another reconfiguration of the concepts of self-determination and sovereignty. As contemporary Croatia and Serbia retell their histories to explain present-day independence, the creation of Yugoslavia is now understood in both cases as a loss, not a gain, of sovereignty. The lessons of the war and its end appear particularly bitter in Serbian textbooks, which focus on the great loss of life, heroism, and sacrifice of the Serbian people during the conflict. The year of 1918 is in this sense an unstable memory point. It remains highly relevant, but its meaning is mercurial and has shifted in accord

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with present-day borders and politics. This is true throughout Eastern and Central Europe, where the 20th century's dramatic political shifts have led to similarly dramatic memory shifts (although arguably none as dramatic as those in the successor states of Yugoslavia). Thus, subsequent changes in the political and territorial map of Europe have changed the way people think about the end of the war and the successes and failures of this period.

Wartime division and ambiguous transitions out of empire are, of course, not confined to Eastern and Central Europe, something that is underlined in Lili Zách's contribution. Zách seeks to address the transnational aspects of 1918 by analyzing Irish images of post-war Austria, tracing continuities from the days of the empire as well as transformations that occurred after the end of the war. By broadening our understanding of the significance of religion and borders in Irish political discourse, Zách investigates the impact of Catholicism as a significant marker of identity on Irish perceptions of Austria. In addition, the article reveals how Irish nationalists connected the issue of changing boundaries in the territory of Habsburg Central Europe to actual Irish concerns in the early post-war years, especially in relation to the question of national unity.

What is clear from Zách's article is that concepts of national liberation and of a coming "New Europe" were not bounded by geography or territory. Erez Manela and others have already shown how US President Woodrow Wilson's rhetoric created a global moment whose shockwaves echoed down through the 20th century and across the entire globe (Manela 2007). In this article—and in this issue—we show how nationalists in Ireland used examples from Central Europe to reflect on the proposed transformations taking place in their own lands. The postimperial nation-states of Europe were thus, to use Benedict Anderson's term, an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983), albeit an international rather than a national one. Of course, acts of imagining also involved, as always, concealing and forgetting the still present legacies of empire, and these are teased out in our contributions, too. Ironically, Zách's article seems to show that contemporary nationalists demonstrated a greater capacity for reflection and understanding of the transnational commonalities of the shift at the end of the war than do the historians who have sought to tell their stories in hermetically sealed nationalist narratives. What we are looking at is a lost world of contemporary comparative reflection on the part of political actors that defied geographical and historical boundaries. There is surely a lesson here for anyone attempting to negotiate the labyrinths of nationalist historiography.

The promise of emancipation, realized or not, could of course take more forms than the national, as Aneta Stępień's article shows. Stępień provides an insight into the hopes and ideas associated with newly independent Poland after 1918, with particular reference to the so-called women's question. The author identifies many new themes while exploring the controversies surrounding the agenda and activities of the Women's Organization for National Elections (NOK), whose primary aim was to defend national interests and traditional Catholic values in interwar Poland. A close investigation of the NOK reveals how the organization contributed to the division of the Polish women's movement, leading to the emergence of laws that targeted women's rights. The article also highlights that this process occurred in parallel with the systematic persecution of Jews and as a result of the successful anti-Semitic propaganda of the National Democratic Party. Stępień's article is perhaps a reminder that the national-liberation discourse of the era often made spoken or unspoken assumptions about the wholeness of the community for which they claimed to speak, but in point of fact it featured stark terms of exclusion. Here, female participation in the politics of the new era was quickly circumscribed through public debate and through legislation. The author draws out intriguing parallels and intersections with the Jewish population of Poland, another group to whom the newly emancipated national community was in practice far less than welcoming.

All of these seemed to us relevant and timely observations, coming as they did in a decade of commemorative celebrations marking the various red letter days of the wars and revolutions of a century earlier. Those commemorations often reinforced the notions of cut-and-dried divisions between one era and another, but they were also a chance for serious and critical reflection on the legacies left to history by these events. We hope our special issue falls firmly into the latter category.

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