

ARCHIVE

There are countries for which the First World War has not ceased to be a 'hot' part of their history, a medium for controversy between experts and aficionados of the past. The dispute over the German Reich's expansionist policy, triggered in the 1960s by the book by Fritz Fischer, or, quite recently, the astonishing renaissance of interest in the diplomatic reasons behind the outbreak of the First World War, incited by Christopher Clark's work, are the cases in point.¹ No phenomena of the sort have yet appeared in Polish historiography, which probably has to do with the marginal role played by the Great War in the local culture of memory. In spite of our accruing knowledge of the facts, founded upon the milestone synthetic depictions of the occurrences of the period 1914–18,² and despite the significance of these very years in the biographies of some outstanding Polish historians, we may perhaps still expect some spectacular turns and switches of research paradigms as far as historiography of the First World War is concerned.

Recognising these facts, our Editorial Board has resolved to publish in this volume, which focuses on conquests and occupations in East Central Europe until the 1920s, an essay written by an outstanding Polish historian, which is not a historical dissertation. The excerpts from the reminiscences of Marcelli Handelsman (1882–1945) refer to his service with the Fifth Infantry Regiment of the Polish Legions. Handelsman graduated from the Law faculty at the Russian Imperial University of Warsaw. He received his historical education in Berlin, where he combined his studies with political engagement with the Polish socialist movement. Expelled for propagation of propaganda amongst Polish workers in Berlin in 1906, he left for Paris where he worked on his PhD thesis (obtaining his degree, eventually, in Zurich). Handelsman returned to Warsaw two years before

¹ Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht. Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914/18* (Düsseldorf, 1961); English version: *idem, Germany's Aims in the First World War*, trans. Hajo Holborn and James Joll (New York, 1967); Christopher Clark, *Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London, 2013).

² Beginning with Jan Dąbrowski, *Wielka Wojna 1914–1918 na podstawie najnowszych źródeł* (2 vols., Warszawa, 1937) and ending with the most recent synthetic study: Andrzej Chwalba, *Samobójstwo Europy. Wielka Wojna 1914–1918* (Kraków, 2014).

the war broke out and three years before the German occupational authorities reopened the university in Warsaw. He joined the University team and remained part of it until the German invasion of 1939. He cofounded the University's Historical Institute and served, in parallel on a number of public bodies, rising to a leader of Polish historians' milieu. Moreover, Handelsman marked his presence in international arena as a delegate to the International Committee of Historical Sciences (CISH) and co-organising congresses of historians in the two interwar decades.

Handelsman's interests as a scholar and researcher were various. The first studies he wrote concerned culture, law, and social history of the Middle Ages; his doctoral thesis dealt, for a change, with Napoleon's policies with respect to Poland. Such duality of scholarly focus was characteristic of Handelsman as a lecturer; at the Warsaw University, he ran seminars on the Middle Ages as well as the nineteenth century. Compared to his Polish colleagues, he was genuinely interested in methodological issues, as evidenced by his essays published in the *Revue de Synthèse Historique* and the only original Polish handbook on historical cognition theory published in the interwar period³ (recently reedited for the third time⁴).

With the diversity of his interests, Handelsman consistently revisited the issue of national identity: its mediaeval origins and subsequent transformations. His research in this field was combined with social and political activities. Among other achievements to his credit, Handelsman, whose ideological stance is describable in terms of pro-state socialism, initiated and cofounded the Instytut Badań Narodowościowych (Institute for Ethnic Studies), tasked with rationalising Poland's policies with respect to its ethnic minorities. The excerpts from Handelsman's wartime memories published in this issue is an early testimony of this author's openness to problems of non-Polish ethnicities within the then-new state.

W piątym pułku Legionów. Dwa miesiące ofensywy litewsko-białoruskiej [*Two months of the Lithuanian-Byelorussian offensive with the Legions' Fifth Regiment*] is a collection of reflections from the breakthrough period in the Polish-Bolshevik war, moments before and

³ Marcei Handelsman, *Historyka. Zasady metodologii i teorii poznania historycznego* (Zamość, 1921; Warszawa, 1928²).

⁴ *Idem, Historyka*, ed. by Piotr Węcowski (Klasyki Historiografii Warszawskiej, Warszawa, 2010).

moments after the defeat of the Soviet troops near Warsaw. Loyal to his conviction about the decisive role of the psychological factor in history, the author focuses on analysing the sentiments and emotions of the Polish soldiers, of members of the enemy armies (Bolsheviks and Lithuanians), and of the locals of the areas where the warfare took place. As an original source for the history of conquests and occupations, mainly in the territory of what is now Belarus, Handelsman's essay is distinct with its clear-headed observations and commentaries, free of nationalist hotheadedness or aggression. The memoirist attempts to reconstruct the stances assumed by the people residing in the warfare area in all their wealth and diversity, spotting the hidden sentiments (such as the peasants' longing for the 'good old system' under the tsarist administration, and their lack of confidence in the new state structures), or the differences in the sensing of the perils and discomforts of the military campaign affecting the population in the countryside and in small towns. Handelsman deals with Jews to a relatively insignificant extent – an omission that might have had to do with his own identity. This assimilated, leftist-oriented Jew and ardent Polish patriot, more or less deliberately disregarded anti-Semitism amongst his regiment-mates. He seems to have ignored the news about the pogroms accompanying the retreat and resumed offensive of the Polish army and those formed of their allied Ukrainian and Byelorussian troops. His selection of topics might actually have resulted from the deeply optimistic tone of these reminiscences, clearly different as they are from the warfront observations of his French colleague Marc Bloch, written down at a later date.⁵ *W piątym pułku Legionów ...* is definitely a chronicle of a victory that brings about a hope for a robust future of the Second Republic of Poland.

Marceli Handelsman was a dominant figure in Polish interwar historiography. Owing to a cohort of his students (Tadeusz Manteuffel, Aleksander Gieysztor, Marian Henryk Serejski, or the APH founder Marian Małowist among them), this scholar has impressed a stigma upon the researchers of the subsequent generations, up to this very day. His own career collapsed in 1939: having refused to emigrate and thus escape the German occupation, Handelsman was active as a clandestine teacher and remained in hiding, together with his wife, near Warsaw. In 1944, he was

⁵ Marc Bloch, *L'étrange défaite. Témoignage écrit en 1940* (Paris, 1946); English edn. *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940*, trans. Gerard Hopkins (New York, 1968).

denounced to the Gestapo by unidentified perpetrators, probably some activists of Polish extreme Right. Imprisoned in Radom and Częstochowa, he was put into the Gross-Rosen concentration camp and eventually died of an epidemic at the Mittelbau-Dora, in March 1945.

trans. Tristan Korecki

Maciej Górny

Marceli Handelsman

**TWO MONTHS OF THE LITHUANIAN-BYELORUSSIAN
OFFENSIVE WITH THE LEGIONS' FIFTH REGIMENT
(FRAGMENTS)**

... When I was joining the army, being a historian, I kept in mind the idea that, provided I have weathered the war, I should retain a faithful memory of the experiences of the average Polish intellectual in the time of effort exerted by the whole nation in the summer and autumn of 1920. Enraptured by the chaos of the preparatory period, redeployed from one place to another, taught each day, from the very beginning, the same 'fundamental' things of formal drill, in the conditions of barrack life, which did not allow me – in spite of an extreme kindness I have encountered from the officers – to concentrate or even think elementarily; in the conditions of external material existence, which defied the simplest requirements of even a modest cultural man, I was unable to take down the experiences of myself or my companions. Afterwards, I was wrung by a command from the barracks, and, together with a division of volunteers and convalescents, set off for the war-front. We travelled a circuitous way: from Warsaw via Cracow, Przeworsk, Lublin, Siedlce, Platerów, we went through Bielsk, Białystok, Ossowiec, toward Janów Grodzieński, where we finally overhauled our own regiment, after a fortnight. The situation was changed completely; the alleged defeat was followed by days of genuine triumph, days of victories which, it turned out, stayed with us till the very end. Our mood changed fundamentally: the excitement caused by the success of our army still intensified at the moment we came into direct touch with the troops. Destiny planned for us a lucky entry in the war-front service: on 1 September, a wonderful day suffused with sunlight and with the blue of skies, after a solemn field mass, General Rydz-Śmigły distributed amongst the 1 Legion Division the first *Virtuti Militari* Crosses in front of a church in Janów.

...

In terms of observation, I kept an extremely advantageous position; my working conditions were enormously facilitated. Being a private, I had access to the other privates, my companions. I lived, dwelled, and ate meals like everyone else. The shared troubles of stop-overs and marching produce a common sphere of interests, and open access to the inside of men, which, opened once, remains so not only when everyday material existence is the subject of conversation. Being one of the eldest in the regiment, I could be a confidant of the others' concerns, although no longer did I directly participate in the amusements of the young comrades-in-arms. With the commander's confidence placed in me, I was appointed the regiment's education officer, gained the opportunity to broaden my observation field – as part of my responsibilities, and established a relationship with all the troops. Approached by the officers in a friendly manner despite no rank held, I accompanied the individual comp in their marching effort and in action, in their labours and merrymaking. I could see them afire and while resting; I cognised their properties, addictions and habits, took effort to understand and experience them, and now can be confident that I have managed to do so.

...

I understand that in the [following psychological] profile [of the military milieu], I yielded myself to an affection and bias benefitting my colleagues, and favouring certain types of service with the regiment; I nonetheless consider sympathy to be the best – if, perhaps, not the only – key with which to open the psyche of others. And still, it would not preclude the sharpness of vision at all: on the contrary, it adds the images being seen an adequately warm colouration.

This heartfelt 'tone' is merely a debt of gratitude I am paying-off in an overly modest fashion, the one I have drawn with respect to the commanders, officers and, in particular, the privates of the 5 IR of the Legions in those unforgettable days of the Lithuanian-Byelorussian offensive we have been through together.

THE BYELORUSSIANS, AND OUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS THEM

In the course of the long marches and march-pasts on the Narew, Neman⁶, Servech, or Usha Rivers, in the course of a series of stop-overs, accommodations at peasant huts and Jewish apartments of this vast country, which begins at the Bug River and stretches all the way to Minsk, I endeavoured one thing: to attain a real and direct impression of the surrounding reality. I tried not to remember what I knew about White Rus', its past, and about Byelorussians; and, to blur all the argumentations, alien and ours, inside myself, and see the life surrounding me, in the first place. I would not state that I freed myself completely of the apriority of my own ready-to-use formulas, so that I may acquire a completely new opinion on the matters and things otherwise known. There is one thing I have, for certain, attained: an opinion that is impartial, to the best of my strengths, based on direct observation of the relations that have, of necessity, repeatedly to assume a rather dim colouration amidst the flame of war.

...

... in the territory of Byelorussia, Poland is supposed not to confine the policy its pursues to certain ad-hoc benefits, or take into account, one-sidedly, the conditions of the local life: what Poland must do is assume with respect to the matter in question a clear, and resolutely creative, stance.

II

The issue in question has two forms presently: one, as above-outlined, is political, and fundamental; the other is apparently politically second-tier, related to the sentiments of the people of Byelorussia, and it proves thoroughly practical. The former is a work of Byelorussian politicians, the latter is an expression of the Byelorussian populace; either is not resolvable without the other. Therefore, in order for us to be able to express an opinion regarding our policy in that country, it would not suffice to take the primary elements of Byelorussian life as a basis: what one needs to do is enter into comprehension of the present-day sentiments – of the land's entire population. This is not

⁶ Handelsman uses Polish geographical names. Those of them referring to Byelorussian territory have been consequently updated to their current forms to facilitate the readers' comprehension.

easy a thing to do: passive, at all distrustful, the Byelorussians have become even more so in the time of the variable wartime vicissitudes. Cautiousness made them conceal their thoughts of essence from both of the armies, always banning them from unveiling their real views to anyone wearing a battle-dress. One might realistically conclude as to what the country's populace thinks and desires for, based, mostly, upon what erupts out of those people by itself, and what appears in their actions or reflexes, contrary to their conscious will – rather than upon words or opinions propagated. All the same, the populace's peculiar attitude towards the phenomena that have moved over through the area appears determinable, with quite considerable a certainty.

The attitude toward the Russia of yore is, naturally, the basic thing. The reign of Nicholas – this was a normal era, and as such, it still is considered, in spite of the disrespectful contempt for Nicholas himself, to have been good times, a time of fortunate peace. The tsarist rouble is the only lasting reminiscence of that time: the new Russian money is not acknowledged of by peasant, who would not ascribe the value of money thereto; he is not familiar with our Polish Marks, valuing them low, on equal footing with the former German Marks; he has considerable attachment to, and complete trust in, the rouble, which he preserves religiously, on awaiting a better tomorrow. Perhaps he would not himself be capable of determining such a time of future; quite plausibly, he figures it out in an old Nicholas-like shape.

Whether in the cities or in the villages, the people are now physically and, in particular, morally harassed by the war. The never-ending march-pasts, new troops continuously appearing, different supply-trains, burdens, duties, accommodations every now and then: neither the peasants nor the townsmen have for years now had a cottage or manor, horse or cart, of their own. Everything is in fact property of the passers-through, who are altering permanently. There is no time to respite, to rebuild what has been destroyed by the atrocities of the trench war (one example being Karelchy and its surrounding area completely destroyed), to bring things into useable condition, even if temporarily. It seemed for some time that everything was reassuming its normal condition: the short summer period and the autumn of 1919 was spent, here or there, on doing the rural labours; apart from potatoes, beet-roots and some fodder plants were planted. War descended again in the spring. The famished Bolshevik herds came

down, and not really war atrocities but, primarily, uncertainty over our future and unceasing dependence began affecting everybody. Psychical weariness was becoming exacerbated again, for calm was the only common desire. The Bolsheviks were the first to announce, since the beginning of October, that peace would come. Following the fleeing Bolsheviks step after step, our troops were learning from the locals that orders to this end had been issued on the Bolsheviks' side – establishing a peace as from 5, 7, or whatever day of October. The peasants repeated what they had been told by the Bolsheviks, and waited, full of uncertainty and restlessness, till the news be confirmed by us. 'Calm' – the word is not only on the lips of everyone, it is in the souls of all the people of this country, in the countryside and in the towns, amongst peasants, land-owners, and Jews. Longed-for by everybody, calm is also the measure of the opinion on the events that are taking place in Byelorussia and the source of attitude toward the phenomena emerging there.

Hence, the mostly negative attitude toward the bygone Bolshevik period. The Bolshevik propaganda came not as a herald of improved existence of peasants but as a new factor of concussion, and the peasants are presently willing to be unaware of this concussion. Meanwhile, however, apart from the announced new internal unrest, bolshevism has given the peasants nothing, bringing instead the countryside new, immeasurable war burdens and elemental disasters. The red army [*sic*] was a disaster to the populace, whether in victory or in failures: horses were confiscated; horses-and-carts driven for hundreds of versts, the drivers being afterwards released to go back, with no cart or horse, without a pay-off or food. Hundreds of peasants were returning from the vicinity of Warsaw all the way to Lithuanian Minsk. Potatoes were dug up and taken off from peasants as well as townsmen. Cereals were cut off or trampled down. The hay was taken away. The red-armian [*sic*] method did not differ, in the perception of the Byelorussian peasant, from the white-armian method, the only difference being that it came after the latter, and therefore, being the recent one, resided all the more vividly in the memory.

Within the radius of the ruthlessness of the reds' requisitions, given the menace of a new conscription, which in Byelorussia was carried out with all rigidity, a sense of solidarity of the country's entire population was emerging. In spite of, and contrary to, the propaganda, peasants would be reluctant in being used against

the manors: they would, simply, stand against the idea. A symptomatic case is known to me of the manor R., characteristic as it is for the psychical situation formed in Byelorussia. When the Bolsheviks wanted to take the manor's proprietor, Mr D., with them, the whole village of Chizhinovcy reported to the commissar to stand up for the grange's owner. At hearing the argument that they apparently stood for the Polish rule, the Orthodox peasants, holding their own against the charge, simply argued that they would not let Mr D., who always lived with them in neighbourly concord, be wronged, and they managed to rescue the 'neighbour'. Keeping their own horses and cattle in the woods, the peasants who found it easier to wait out the Bolsheviks would take off, for the days of bolshevism, the lordly cattle from the manors, conceal the grange's cereal at their own places, helping the manors, scarce in number as they were, outlast the red oppression. It was in the woods that the entire peasant youth were hiding as well, who, in spite of the nice-sounding anti-lordly-Polish proclamations, were won-over by the commissars into their ranks with difficulty and by force; once there, they would meet Polish bourgeois and petty-noble youth. In towns, evident political persecutions came down on Polish populace; in public view, resulting from denunciations from the local Jewish communists – sparse as they were, for all that – this Polish guard in the east were subjected to incessant robberies and fell victim to permanent apprehensions, endless chicaneries and, at times, death sentences. The entire well-to-do townspeople, barring none, were subjected, in parallel, to economic constriction: trade has been inhibited; bread, sugar, salt have disappeared from the turnover; deprivation faced everybody, and contributions fell on the shoulders of those who stood out with a relative wealth, on the Jews above all. The Bolsheviks have forgotten about their former allies; sensing, as it were, a pending nature of their rule, they pursued an economy that in the memory of the local people has completely obliterated the memory of any of the preceding occupations.

Amidst the battlefield shambles near Lida, I have found a scattered diary of some Bolshevik officer: the notes begin near Vitebsk, lead to the vicinity of Warsaw, and trail back from there all the way to beyond Hrodna. The diarist constantly notes down two phenomena: a fair weather and the people's adverse attitude towards the Bolshevik troops; adverse it was, though the Bolshevik authorities order to treat the people in the kindest fashion practicable. The attitude of the

rural people as well as of the townsfolk, despite their fear of a commissar and a red Cossack, is adverse indeed, and contemptuous. The contempt has even grown in the Byelorussian peasant when he saw the Muscovite swarm lie down in the dust, when he could watch, every day, hundreds and subsequently, thousands of famished, ragged and haggard war-prisoners being driven forth, escorted by a couple of 'Legionnaires'. A Legionnaire is, let it be minded, a Polish soldier in Byelorussia: this being so for the Byelorussian peasant and for the Jew alike, and particularly, for the townsman – a Pole who likes to proudly tell stories of a young son of his who has joined the Legions. And if not of the Legions, the Polish army is one of the 'lords'. No explaining, and no thousands of sons of peasants, of our nation and even of Byelorussia, will be of any use: the army is a lordly one; end of the story. There are two constituent elements: one is immemorial, historical, and the other completely new, campaigning-related. The manor in Byelorussia is definitely Polish. There is a Polish proprietor of grange, the lord. Thence, what is Polish is lordly, in things bad and good. This is the basis for identifying the Polish State factor with the social one; a possibility for fomenting anti-Polish sentiments in the context of social antagonism. The Bolsheviks have excellently exploited the moment in their campaigning action, in the pamphlets, proclamations and, in particular, in the colour posters, emphasising the social moment in view of their political and counter-Polish purposes. In their official literature, in Byelorussia and everywhere else, our army bears the specific name of '*legiony pana Pilsudskiego*'.⁷

The essentially negative attitude to the Bolsheviks and their fallen power marked, for the time being, a defence even against the construction of Polishness whereby the latter would be identical with lordliness and a villein-service system. But, the Russian marches were followed by Polish marches. Our army went along the same track as the Bolshevik troops, took-over the same passages, the same villages and towns, the same cottages and houses. Not having well returned yet from the Bolshevik horse-and-cart rides, the peasants' horses were made go with our troops. Before the bundles of hay on which the Russians had slept were removed from the shack-rooms or barns, they had to be given away to our soldiers' quarters. A new chain of troops was attacking the withdrawing enemy, arranged into a hundred-verst-long

⁷ Rus.: 'Lord Pilsudski's Legions'.

band; detached from their natural provisions basis, with deficient means of transportation and poor roads, they had to provide themselves with food on the spot, be it by starving the country through which they pushed through. Wherever masses of people go forward, pushing ahead incessantly, abuses come as a natural consequence. The country was starved-out legally, as well as illegally, the remainder left-over by the Bolsheviks having been taken off. Whilst this has not affected anti-Bolshevik sentiments, it aroused the reminiscence of Bolshevik proclamations, begetting a silent, suppressed reluctance towards us. Whilst the peasants mostly understood the necessity of the requisitions and the burdens coming down upon the country, they simultaneously rebelled with all their soul against the unjust lot that charged them, rather than anyone else, with the obligation to suffer the hardships of war. And, they prayed for peace continually. These peasants received the news on the Riga parley incredulously and with a barely pent-up enthusiasm, reassuring, "may this be true; ready they [= we] are for any final offering."⁸

Towns bore the burden of the march-pasts to a much weaker degree, although they also were steadily over-laden with the compulsory quartering. The Jews, apprehensive and dismayed in the beginning, not without a reason sometimes, and subdued, were soon regaining their balance. Even in small towns, discipline and regular life is easier to keep after the first moment of capture than in a period of everlasting marching-on-and-on in the field. Apart from active adherents of communism, generally sparse as they are now-a-days, who have migrated following the Bolsheviks, the commonalty of Jews breathed a sigh of relief after they exited. In Haradok, Lebedev, and in a number of other towns, it was said all around that ever since the Polish troops left, and until the order was established after their re-entrance, there was no trade in these towns whatsoever. Where there is no trade, gradual decline of Jews tends to occur. In spite of momentary, passing moments of fear, our army, especially from the moment the truce was put into effect, epitomised for the local Jews a re-enactment of the desired-for ordinary course of life, a resumption of the normal time. Whilst there is no regular, busy communication between the individual hubs within the land, they are getting ready for it and,

⁸ The Treaty of Riga between Poland and Soviet Russia was signed in March 1921.

in opposition to the Bolshevik system, count for an opportunity of the former profits, in case we are to bring the local relations into a conclusive order.

The Byelorussian of to-day (this being written in November 1920) ought to be regarded as a hesitant, distrustful man who looks into the future with fear, a result of his country having been completely denuded of cereals, hay, and potatoes; a hope for revival under the Polish rule of the former forms of economic activity, which once made the Jew an indispensable intermediary along the route of Vilnius – Maladzyechna – Lida – Białystok, has not expired in him.

Such were the sentiments that flew through the populace of Byelorussia in the recent, past weeks of the last year's summer and autumn.

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trans. Tristan Korecki

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