Re-visiting World War I

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Re-visiting World War I

Interpretations and Perspectives of the Great Conflict

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Introduction

The hot summer of 1914 seemed to be another wonderful leisure point of the *Belle Époque*. Józef Korzeniowski, the famous writer better known under his pen name of Joseph Conrad, spent the first lengthy vacation of his life in the old city of Cracow in the Polish part of Galicia, at that time belonging to the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Like the overwhelming majority of people around the globe, he did not expect that shots fired in Sarajevo at the end of June would bring the end of the whole era of the long 19th century, and the beginning of a gigantic cataclysm marking the birth of a short, but turbulent 20th century. Conrad-Korzeniowski seemed lucky. As a British subject, astonished by the outbreak of the war in the territory of hostile Austria-Hungary, he could expect imprisonment or, at least, internment. Instead, he hid for a couple of weeks in the mountain resort of Zakopane where he met several Polish writers. They discussed the current political situation of Europe, and the prospects of the reconstruction of an independent Poland during or after the military conflict which had just broken out, ruining the summer vacations of so many Europeans, but expected to be soon over. Finally, as October became November, he was able to cross the frontlines and return safely to his home near Canterbury in England.

Millions of dead, wounded, missing, refugees who lost everything were not as lucky as Conrad-Korzeniowski. They suffered all the horrors and brutality of the war which did not finish before Christmas 1914 as was commonly anticipated, but lasted more than four years and, in many territories even longer. The overwhelming scale of the conflict, which broke out more than one hundred years ago, meant that, it was quickly called 'The Great War' and, later 'The World War.'

However, regardless of the unprecedented damage, the madness of an endless bloodbath and the extent of material losses, this war also heralded the beginning of many important changes in Europe and all over the world. Three old empires (Austria-Hungary, Russia, and Ottoman Turkey) and one new (Germany) collapsed. Many hitherto dependent nations of Europe, situated between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea, gained the chance to develop the frameworks of their own sovereign states shaped according to the imagination of their leaders. The war also marked the emergence of the United States and Japan as world power players. It was true that the main battlefields were situated in Europe, but it should not be overlooked that World War I knocked, sometimes quite astonishingly, at the

doors of extra-European countries, for example, the case of the cruisers' battle of Penang, in Malaya. But more importantly, it should not be forgotten that for the first time on such a large scale, many ordinary Africans and Asians came to Europe – as soldiers and as labourers – changing their perception of their own countries. Under most circumstances they would never have left their homelands and seen how people actually lived in Europe. In addition, all these Moroccans, Senegalese, Indians, Ghurkhas, Maoris, soldiers from Vietnam, Chinese workers and representatives of other colonized nations, were fighting or working side-by-side with the Europeans as brothers-in-arms, demonstrating to them that they were exactly the same human beings as their colonial masters from Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain or Portugal.

The mobilization of huge armies heightened awareness of the power of the masses which could sweep away old, conservative and reactionary regimes. The war also contributed to spreading new technologies which could be used not only as tools of destruction, but also during peace time for the good of mankind, for example, new means of transportation and communication.

World War I also led to the elevation of women's rights. With men fighting on the frontlines, labour shortages at home meant that women had to work, and this changed the world radically. When the men returned home, women did not want to again become housewives. They won political rights (quite often the right to vote for the first time) because societies realized that without women, countries, small and big, could not function.

And it also should not be forgotten that World War I became an inspiration for artists, writers and filmmakers. It seems that one consequence of the Great War of 1914–1918 was to influence constantly our perception of the condition of the human nature, its dark and nobler side, as well as the significance of history as such.

However, at least equally important was another indirect consequence of the Great War. Especially in the immediate post-war period, the idea of the self-determination of nations was heard widely and preached – for totally different reasons – by the President of the United States, T. Woodrow Wilson and the leader of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, Vladimir I. Lenin. As a result, leaders of anti-colonial movements questioned why it couldn't be applied to colony nations, and why couldn't they determine their own future according to this noble, allegedly universal, noble principle? The consequences of putting forward these questions appeared to shape the future of the whole world in more ways than seemed possible at first glance.

Within the framework of this relatively limited project, it is not possible to discuss all aspects of this conflict. It necessarily focuses on topics proposed

by contributors resulting from their own research interests. Nevertheless, as a result of common efforts, re-visiting these chosen aspects of the Great War of 1914–1918 enables us to present a volume showing the multidimensional nature and consequences of World War I which seem to have been a turning point in the history of particular nations, if not all mankind. Besides, this book, if treated as an intellectual journey through several continents, shows that World War I was not exclusively Europe's war, and that its consequences touched – in different ways – more parts of the globe than has always been understood at first glance.

As just mentioned, the authors of this book invite the Readers to be involved in a form of a travel through continents and countries (going from east to west: from Australia, through Japan, Vietnam, Malaya, Persia, Arab lands where the British were fighting with the Turks, the Balkans, Italy, Austria-Hungary, Central Europe, the Russian Empire and Northern Europe, Germany, Britain, France to the United States). Nevertheless, this journey does not exclusively involve travel through different territories, but – even more importantly – it includes travel through a variety of problems carefully studied by contributors to this volume. All problems relate to the Great War and the wide spectrum of its aftermath.

Let us begin with the antipodes (as Australia is perceived by the Europeans; however, we should bear in mind that, for example, the distance from Prague to Melbourne is exactly the same as the distance from Melbourne to Prague and, therefore, for the Australians, Europe is equally remote). The chapter by **Stephanie James** focuses on ways that World War I exposed inherent divisions in Australian society, identifying both German and Irish-Australians as 'outsiders' in a society where the 'insiders' were part of the dominant British culture. Nineteenth century evidence reveals explicit anti-Irish sentiment typically at times of crisis. Despite most Irish-Australians supporting the war unconditionally – because Irish Home Rule seemed certain – many historians argue the dominant culture always viewed their contribution as qualified. Equally, German-Australians, identified with 'the enemy,' faced great public hostility during the Great War for also identifying as 'Australian' rather than British.

The next chapter by **Frank Dhont** depicts the role of the Japanese armed forces and Japanese government policies during World War I. The author's argument is that Japan in its quest to become a nation recognized by the Western powers as civilized and modern, tried very hard to demonstrate itself worthy of consideration as a modern nation through both exemplary military but also skilled political behaviour in World War I. He maintains that in World War I, while Japan did gain reluctant recognition as an Asian empire in a world increasingly afraid of a challenge to white hegemony and Western colonialism, it was also unable to completely open the door of first rank nations' club which constantly worked against Japan's

rising momentum in the region. This, in turn, would lead to increased frustration in the next decades, especially in the lead up to World War II.

The question of the mobilisation of close to 100,000 of Indochinese as soldiers and workers for overseas service in France and Europe, attracted the attention of **Frederik Rettig**. He discusses the political considerations, as seen both from the French and Vietnamese perspectives, behind this decision. Nevertheless, this chapter follows also the post-war political careers of five Indochinese veterans of the war: four civilian interpreters and one French naturalised officer. In post-war France, two of these former interpreters became activists who militated against French imperialism. Two more returned to French Indochina and became labour activists and founders of the Indochinese Communist Party. Much later, one of them, Ton Duc Thang, became President of the Democratic (Communist) Republic of Vietnam. In contrast, Nguyen Van Xuan, the first Vietnamese polytechnicien and the first French naturalised officer, would briefly emerge as a top-level politician in southern Vietnam.

Many Malaysians are familiar with World War II in terms of the repercussions of the Japanese Occupation in Malaya. At the same time, World War I is an absence. A search, however, reveals that World War I artifacts are still in existence today (cenotaphs; a roll of honor in Melaka; as well as a plaque in Penang and the War Memorial which marks what is now known as the Battle of Penang). In addition to these found artifacts, remembering can also be achieved through literary production and the re-visioning of the past. Historical dots are connected when artifacts are traced; the connection is achieved too when history and fiction merge in narratives. The chapter by **Noraini Md. Yusof** discusses ways of etching the memory of World War I in Malaysian literature written both in English and Bahasa Malaysia. Her chapter demonstrates how a creative writer can undertake a re-examination of World War I through the use of literary devices, re-visioning strategies and creative license.

Malaya, although far from the World War I's main theatre in Europe, was also affected by its aftermath. **Mohd. Safar Bin Hasim** showed the ways this war can be also considered as the reason for the introduction of media control in the Straits Settlements, then Malaya, and later by Malaysia. In the middle of February 1915, a mutiny by the Singapore based 5th Light Infantry Regiment took place. The subsequent investigations proved that the mutineers were politically aroused and motivated to launch their action. Despite the suppression of the mutiny within a few days, as a consequence of the event, a seditious publications law, and other laws to control the press were introduced. These remained in force for decades, and continued as part of Malaysian statutes after the 1957 declaration of independence.

Some formally independent and neutral, but relatively weak, Asian countries also experienced horrors which resulted from World War I. This applied, for example, in the case of Persia described by **Esmaeil Zeiny**. This country, although not directly involved in the war, was no less affected by the conflict because it witnessed a sharp decrease in its population where ca. 40% of its inhabitants (about 9 million people) died because of a war-caused famine and the various maladies that accompany malnutrition. It was collateral damage: the combined effect of the weakness of its central government, and the military intervention of World War I's belligerents in the territory of Persia – Great Britain and Russia on the one hand and, on the other hand, Turkey and Germany.

In some extra-European territories, soldiers of the European great powers interacted with indigenous populations which led to many, often tragic conflicts. The results of **Helena P. Evans'** research, based on the contents of letters written by British officers and soldiers serving in Arab lands, reveal that this kind of situation occurred in Egypt, Mesopotamia and Palestine. Aside from the animosities arising in wartime, the cultural and moral gulf between the British and the Arabs often led to relationships marked by tension. The contents of letters to family and to the British press resulted in widespread beliefs about Arab inferiority. This belief suited the British Government's agenda because it allowed them to carry public opinion with them as they sought to ensure their dominance in the region.

Moving further westwards, we enter Europe. To herald the introduction to Europe, we suggest a chapter by **Arnd Bauerkämper**. He noticed that no common memory culture of World War I has emerged in Europe, but that national memory cultures have persisted. Nevertheless, convergence in favour of memorialising innocent victims is clearly discernible. This narrative highlighting the suffering of soldiers and civilians has gradually replaced the previously dominant heroic and patriotic memories. The new departure has been triggered by public remembrances of the Holocaust. These, in turn, have been influenced by the recent rise in concerns and debates about human rights. At least in Western and Central Europe, learning from the suffering of helpless victims seems to be the only remaining sense of World War I.

The next author, **Alessandro Salvador**, concentrated his attention on the complicated story of Italian-speaking Austrian citizens from the territories of Trento and Trieste serving in the army of the Habsburgs and taken POW by the Russians in the eastern front. To save them, the Italian government sent a military mission to Russia. But Russia's 1917 collapse left thousands of Italian-speaking Austrian POWs and members of Italian rescue missions stuck thousands of miles away from home. Gathered in Siberia, they became involved in the activities of the Entente's international expeditionary forces against the Bolsheviks. The situation

forced them to enlist in the Italian Army while they were still in Siberia. There, through training, work and military service, they gained the opportunity of becoming Italian citizens.

Mika Suonpää considers *Punch's* representations of Macedonia in 1912–1918. During the First Balkan War, *Punch* celebrated the province's liberation from Ottoman rule and depicted the Balkan states as a group of militaristic small nations. In the course of the short Second Balkan War, the magazine began to feature caricatures on the worsening of the relations between the members of the Balkan League. During the Salonika Campaign of 1915–1918, *Punch* depicted Macedonia as an archaic world, and exemplified the image of the campaign as a large holiday camp. It was largely inaccurate because as a result of the military campaigns Salonika in particular was changing rapidly. Moreover, British soldiers were confronted with a variety of difficulties, including malaria and the Great Salonika Fire of 1917.

Another insight into the consequences of World War I in the Balkans is offered by **Ismar Dedović** and **Tea Sindbæk Andersen**. Their chapter investigates the creation and development of a Yugoslav and Serbian World War I memory narrative. The chapter argues that one dominant 'narrative template' was established out of Yugoslav World War I memory in the interwar period, and that this template prevailed throughout the Yugoslav period. In spite of this shared memory tradition, the war has been remembered very differently in the post-Yugoslav republics of Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia. While Croatia and the non-Serb parts of Bosnia have paid very little attention to its memory, Serbia continues to commemorate World War I, although it is now a singularly Serbian memory, often contested by other post-Yugoslav republics.

Alexander Mionskowski analyses the Austrian strategy of influencing public opinion in Germany in an attempt to establish a cultural dimension of the two main Central Powers, militarily dominated by the German Empire. Hermann Bahr and Hugo Hofmannsthal, who were concerned with the ideal of the *Kulturnation* and the narrative of its Austrian design, became acquainted with many members of cultural and functional elites in the German Empire. The poets' mission in Berlin was to represent Austria and make the Germans aware of its worth. This strategy failed when the German Empire developed as a military dictatorship. Nevertheless, due to the political mysticism of nation and community, the strategy to some extent became the blueprint for later national and socialist movements.

The chapter by **Tomas Sniegon** is devoted to some issues about the place of the memory of World War I in the historical cultures of Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The main questions are: how difficult is it to incorporate the memory of World War I into Communist, liberal-democratic and nationalist historical

narratives in these two countries at the turn of the 20th and 21st century? And, why is it necessary for those who experienced brutal Nazi and Communist dictatorships to commemorate World War I at all? During the last fifty years, both the Czech and Slovak historical cultures have ignored the memory of World War I. And, it was never seen as a crucial trauma in Czechoslovakia and its successor states. This fact becomes especially evident if Czech and Slovak memories of World War I are compared with its memories in Western Europe, or with Czech and Slovak memories of World War II.

Marek Kornat concentrates on the debates on World War I in historiography. The Great War is recognized as the European *Urkatastrophe* as George F. Kennan argued. From the perspective of one hundred years, both world wars are perceived in the framework of a great 'European Civil War' (1917–1945), as the German historian Ernst Nolte suggests. Currently, the negative legacy of the Great War is in the centre of historiographic debates. But in the eyes of Polish historians, for example, the perspective of 'European Civil War' must be different, because the Great War brought oppressed Central European nations (like the Poles) freedom. Obviously, the geopolitical revolution in East-Central Europe (1914–1919) developed as a catastrophe for empires. It became a positive turning point however for several hitherto stateless nations (Poles, Czechs, Baltic peoples etc.).

Alexei I. Miller examines the impact of World War I on the competition between Russian and Ukrainian nationalisms in the Western Borderlands of the Russian Empire. The author argues that Russian nationalism was on the offensive in the region before World War I. He then presented those factors which, during the war years, changed the national balance of power in the region (Russia's retreat in 1915, massive displacement of the population, separate camps for Ukrainian POWs organized by German and Austrian administrations, the occupational policy of Germans and Austrians in the Western borderlands, which undermined the Russian identity of the local population etc.). Generally, he discusses World War I as a complex event, one which both transformed the region, and launched new national identification processes.

In 1914–1917, the Grand Duchy of Finland, an autonomous province of Russia did not become a battlefield. **Jarosław Suchoples** analyses how it happened that during the relatively short period of time between 1917 and 1918, this situation changed dramatically. At the end of 1917, the parliament of the Grand Duchy declared its independence, although the subsequent civil war and interference from German troops caused the country to become a German protectorate. Germany's defeat in November 1918 left Finland isolated internationally. Only a radical reorientation of domestic and foreign policy to a pro-western position, and fulfilling the military and political conditions put forward by the victorious great

powers, enabled the gradual improvement and stabilisation of Finland's situation internationally.

Jan Asmussen explains the part played by the island of Heligoland in British and German military planning during World War I. The island, occupied by the British in 1807, was exchanged for German acceptance of British suzerainty over Uganda, Kenya and Zanzibar in 1890 and was then transformed into a major German naval fortress. In 1914, the sea at Heligoland became the point of the first major battle between German and British fleets. The chapter examines the perceived military value of the island for Britain and Germany as opposed to its actual importance for Allied and German naval war efforts. While Heligoland did not play any decisive part in the war, this was not the view of decision makers in Berlin and London. As a result, the island narrowly escaped being another major theatre of war that would probably have entered the records as another bloodbath like Gallipoli or Verdun.

The influence of World War I's experience on the artist's perception of the political and social realities of his own country is discussed in the chapter by **Raimond Selke**. He used the example of the German painter George Grosz, who, in 1926, produced his two masterpieces *Eclipse of the Sun* and *Pillars of Society*, in which he expressed his cynical view of the calamitous post-World War I Weimar Republic. He was one of many artists who had joined the Army shortly after the outbreak of World War I. After 1914, many artists had experienced war first-hand, and they started to produce detailed work reflecting the horrors they had witnessed. Such work frequently differed from previous depictions of war which had often been based upon second-hand accounts, and did not challenge people's sensitivities.

Eberhard Demm, after a short summary about the development of censorship and propaganda before 1914, analyses the following topics of World War I indoctrination: the principal aims, the organization and the handling of censorship and propaganda, the arguments, instruments and the distribution of propaganda according to the three principal targets: the home front and military front, neutral and enemy countries. Then the thorny question is discussed about the extent to which propaganda was successful. The heated controversy in the 1920s about the value and the shortcomings of war propaganda is also summarized. Last but not least, the author shows how similar indoctrination techniques continued after 1918 until to-day, not only in the authoritarian and totalitarian states, but also to a considerable extent in some parliamentary democracies.

Before World War I, the Breton society was largely homogeneous. It was a stronghold of Catholicism and mainly rural. In the west, Breton was the most common language of social communications. **Jacques-Yves Mouton** argues that the war upset this equilibrium. Because of a variety of reasons discussed by the

author, including the death of more than 200,000 Breton speakers, World War I ignited the process which limited the use of the Breton language, lasting to the 1950s. Widespread alcoholism in Brittany was a further result from this war because soldiers were freely supplied with wine or apple jack in order to keep their morale high. It is noteworthy that thanks to songs, books and poems written by Breton authors, both ordinary people and intellectuals who served in the trenches, we know a great deal about their horrific war experiences.

In context of new discussions about World War I and its legacy, **Jan M. Piskorski** firstly asks what Europe is. Unfortunately, this question has not appeared at all in the current discussions about World War I, although only answering this question allows a move to the next question, what was World War I for Europe: downfall, suicide, a catalyst of following European wars, the seminal catastrophe of the 20th century, or the catastrophe which ended as Europe's comeback? He stresses that while the years 1914–1918 were catastrophic for European empires, Europe itself was strengthened through the war and the development, which it allowed. He also reminds Readers that there can be no free Europe without free people, and without these specific small states and nations, which gained their independence in 1917–1918 as a result of World War I and the collapse of old empires.

At the end of our journey, we reach the coasts of the New World to present some aspect of the American World War I experience. The subject under study in the chapter by **Paul Cornelius** is the concept of the Frontier of the American West, in popular literature and film, and its encounter with the crushing impact of World War I on American attitudes towards art, notably in the cinema. Beginning with literary works from the pre-war years, including those of Zane Grey and Jack London, the initial focus is on a recurring preoccupation with notions of Social Darwinism entering into the popular culture. Turning from these works, the chapter next spotlights the films of Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack. The chapter ends with a brief look at images of the colonial Frontier, as imagined in filmed versions of Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan* novels.

The final chapter by **Oliver Janz** is a reminder that recent scholarship on World War I is increasingly undergoing a shift in focus away from Western Europe towards Eastern Europe, the Near and Middle East and other global dimensions of the war. Seen from this perspective, World War I was not only a truly pan-European and global war, but also a much longer war than hitherto conventionally acknowledged. In this context, he points at numerous wars and civil wars which took place right after the Great War in Central and Eastern Europe as well as in Russia, which, arguably, cost more lives than the Great War itself. In the Near and Middle East, World War I seemed to be only one part of a more far-reaching conflict that began with the Italo-Turkish War in 1911, transitioned into the Balkan Wars, and only

came to a final conclusion in 1922, a 'greater war,' which decimated the whole region, with long-lasting repercussions.

A geographical key applied as a central element of the volume's structure could be, probably, replaced by other criteria also providing the book's internal order. Chapters could be also systematized according to clearly existing thematic links connecting them. Those discussing the horrors experienced by civilians and combatants in 1914–1918 or the impact of World War I on art could create one part of the book, while the other one could consist of articles focused on memories of this conflict in different countries. Another group of chapters concerns World War I propaganda, and several others discuss the significance of World War I as a nation building factor. It is also possible, to use one final example, to point out articles presenting more theoretical and general approaches to the Great War treated as a historical, political or social phenomenon. Nevertheless, all these tempting possibilities, although carefully considered, were rejected and the geographical principle adopted as the leading one. Why? Because geography is neutral and, like the alphabetic order, independent of any personal preferences. The Readers who decide to accept the invitation and travel through lands and continents in times of World War I are, surely, able to construct – individually – their own thematic configurations from the material supplied by particular authors without any, 'external suggestions.' Each of such configurations, resulting from individual perceptions of history, interests or any other reasons, will be equally valid.

Regardless of any detailed explanations concerning the contents and structure of this volume, all contributors dare to hope that particular topics and conclusions presented on its pages can be useful in a broader sense, i.e. read not only as stories about old times and events which took place about a century ago. They believe that their considerations about World War I and its consequences demonstrate the positive, but also complicated, uneasy and so often horrific experience of mankind accumulated during the recent one hundred and two years, beginning with the hot summer of 1914. They also try to convince Readers that history is, actually, a kind of an applied science, and the historical experience as analysed by scholars, is an important element of the discourse, not only about the past, but also about the future of all of us – less sure than it could seem, and more fragile than we could expect.