Jochen Böhler, *Civil War in Central Europe, 1918–1921: The Reconstruction of Poland*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 253 p. ISBN 978-0198-794-48-6

Historians sometimes make breakthroughs in historical writing not by discovering unknown archival records, but by offering a new perspective on a well-known body of historical knowledge. This seems to be the case in this intriguing and thought-provoking study, which takes a fresh look at ‘the process of reconstruction and forging the Polish nation and state in the fires of war and civil war’ (p. 2). The book has four chapters, and the first three are based mostly on secondary sources. But the perspective offered and the engaging style of writing turn it into a volume that will most likely stir up the dominant historiography on Poland and East Central Europe.

Böhler pits his argument against what he calls ‘the flawed popular narrative’ (p. 6) of nation-making in Poland, which is focused on imperial suppression in three occupied parts of Poland, their reunification in the shape of the Second Republic, and its heroic and victorious struggle led by the charismatic leader Józef Piłsudski against all Poland’s enemies. He is quick to point out that prior to 1918, the Polish leadership lacked unity, and a clearly defined Polish nation did not yet exist (p. 6). Loyalty to their emperors prevailed among most Polish soldiers in imperial armies for the best part of the Great War (p. 47).

The gist of his argument, though, is that all the wars in which Poland became involved after the First World War between 1918 and 1921 constitute and should be studied as a single realm of experience. He is absolutely right that this has not yet been the subject of more extensive academic studies (p. 9). He argues that warfare in this period was not conventional: wars were more intrastate than interstate, a notable feature was the massive amount of paramilitary violence against civilians, and one of the main actors that performed this violence was the Polish troops.

But Böhler does not limit himself to the Polish context. His point is that all of East and Central Europe (including Russia) was engulfed by civil war. If the Soviet state had its Russian Civil War, the new East and Central European states became involved in their ‘Central European

Civil War' (p. 61). If the first saw an ideological confrontation between Reds and Whites, the second was fuelled by ethno-national animosities between nascent nation-states.

Böhler defends his own notion of the Central European Civil War against the established definition of civil war (as a war between the citizens or inhabitants of a single country or community) by suggesting that the classic definition is too static. He prefers to define civil war in the context of the post-First World War period as 'a category of experience' (p. 62) that has two main features: unlimited violence, and blurred boundaries between the protagonists. In fact, he points out that, during the Polish-Ukrainian conflict, the locals referred to it as a 'civil war' (p. 82).

The volume offers numerous thought-provoking insights that challenge the dominant Polish nation-building narrative. One of the most important is the claim that there was nothing logical or inevitable in the reemergence of independent Poland. Independence in 1918 'was a result of highly improbable circumstances which were created by war and revolution' (p. 57). In this respect, Böhler follows a number of Western authors (such as Peter Gatrell, Alexandre Prusin, Peter Holquist, Eric Lohr, Joshua Sanborn, Robert Gerwarth, and others) who recently pointed out the importance of war violence and displacement to the constitution of the post-First World War political order. But he is one of the first to apply this perspective to Poland and its borderlands.

Böhler claims that from 1918 to 1921, Polish society displayed a 'total lack of patriotism beyond the city borders' (p. 131). Even the Polish-Soviet war mobilised only part of it, since the peasantry remained 'a silent majority' (p. 137). In two plebiscites that took place in Upper Silesia and southeast Prussia after the Great War, the local Polish-speaking population demonstrated 'ethnic indifference' by voting to join Germany (p. 114).

In the final chapter, which is based on extensive archival research, he points out that 'in 1918-1921 Polish soldiers were not only the protectors of their state, they were also its menace' (p. 166). He offers an explanation for their violence by pointing to their ideological mindset, superiority complex, anti-Semitism, poor supplies, lack of disciplined officers, and low instincts unleashed under the conditions of postwar disorder. The reader is astonished to learn of the lack of solidarity among Polish regular troops (Poznanian and General Haller's units versus troops loyal to Piłsudski), which at times almost took the country into civil war (p. 144). Meanwhile, the violent acts carried out by Polish paramilitaries were encouraged by various warlords, and the needs to

terrify the enemy and strengthen their group coherence (p. 189). The final chapter offers plenty of evidence of brutal violence that the Polish army and paramilitaries unleashed against the multi-ethnic populations of Poland and the borderlands.

Böhler concludes fittingly by pointing out that the postwar conflict 'affected mostly civilians of every age and gender' (p. 188). About 250,000 people died in this Central European Civil War. He claims that the violence on a local level was often the result of a total lack of demobilisation, and of ethnic conflict in the borderlands (p. 189). He agrees with authors who think that the underlying reason for the conflict was the weakness of state power. He points out that 'the unification of the Polish nation had not been achieved by 1918, and the ensuing fight for the borders did not unite it either, not even in 1920, when the Polish-Soviet War threatened the country's mere existence' (p. 192).

His other conclusion is that 'the violent military potential of the Second Polish Republic was domesticated, institutionalised, and instrumentalised in the service of the state' (p. 192). However, interwar Poland did not come to a rest due to political strife between the right and the left, the problem of minorities, and tensions within the army. Piłsudski's aura did not build the nation; it created an authoritarian military regime. His final insights go beyond the Polish context: the violent outcome of the First World War and the postwar conflict hampered the development of a stable international system in East and Central Europe because most of its nation-states turned authoritarian. They became fierce enemies, and failed to unite against great outside powers, first of all, Germany and the Soviet Union (p. 195).

Despite the above-mentioned merits of his study, Böhler's dismissal of the formulaic features of a civil war is debatable. If a civil war is mainly defined as a category of experience that involves unlimited violence and blurred boundaries between belligerents, then many conventional wars that displayed some of these features may also qualify as civil wars. More importantly, focusing on the category of experience alone may obscure the roles that emerging nation-states such as Lithuania or the Republic of West Ukraine played in the postwar conflict. Also, it remains unclear why Böhler treats the Soviet-Polish war as partly conventional, while he considers the Polish-Lithuanian and Polish-Ukrainian conflicts as civil wars. All three were notable for their unconventional warfare, the use of paramilitaries, and especially unlimited violence against civilians.

In my recent study on post-First World War Lithuania (2018), I suggested that the terms 'civil war' and 'civil wars' in fact obscure

and simplify the character of the post-First World War conflict in the borderlands. The problem is that historians who use them apply the ideological paradigm of the Russian Civil War (or its variants) to a region that faced a more complex multidirectional conflict than Soviet Russia. This borderland conflict, as Böhler also acknowledges, featured both interstate and intrastate elements. That is why, in my view, less politically loaded terms such as 'borderland conflict' or 'frontier war' are more suitable to describe them. Of course, we should also recognise that the post-First World War conflict was fought not only for the 'borders' of new political players. It was also a war, as this excellent volume reminds us, for mental frontiers and the political and cultural mobilisation of local populations.

There is no doubt that this book will find a well-deserved place in the growing body of historical works on East and Central Europe. It challenges the nationally oriented narrative of nation-making, and offers a fresh perspective, which invites us to rethink the role of violence in the creation of nation-states in the post-imperial era.

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