

Adam Kozuchowski

Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History

Polish Academy of Sciences

## Like Grass by the Road: The War of Civilians and Pacifists in Polish Literature

Before we begin, several preliminary explanations are required. The title may seem misleading, as it is not a proper literary analysis,<sup>1</sup> but a historian's view of literature considered as historical evidence, reflecting reality on a particular register of sensitivity and appealing to a specific sensibility. There is not enough space here to define this register in advance<sup>2</sup> and I can only hope that in the course of reading, it will evince itself. Due to the length of the text, only selected works were analyzed, representing what can be called the "civilian" experience. This is in contrast to patriotic and military writings, which focused on the Polish Legionary experience, or the fate of Poles serving in other Polish formations in the West and in Russia.

The distinctiveness of the reaction to the Great War in Polish literature naturally results from the distortion of perspective that took place as a result of regaining independence and war in the east in 1919–1920. Of course, it might be reasonable to consider that from the Polish perspective, the Great War ended in the late autumn of 1920. However, my intention was to rediscover what I assumed could be found underneath the heart-thrilling story of Polish independence, its recovery and defense, and thus about the war, that was conducted in the rigid time frame between summer 1914 and autumn 1918.

An obvious assumption was that this multi-faceted and dramatic experience should have left traces in the collective memory that were reflected

---

<sup>1</sup> Irena Maciejewska's essays seem particularly recommendable, in several places they go beyond the time frame of the title, see ead., "Proza polska lat 1914–1918 wobec wojny światowej", in: ead., *Rewolucja i niepodległość*, Kielce, 1991, pp. 156–207. See as well T. Burek, "Prozatorski obraz i bilans wojny: od notatnika z przeżyć do epickiego ujęcia tematu", in: *Literatura polska 1918–1975*, ed. by A. Brodzka, H. Zamorska, S. Żółkiewski, vol. 1, Warszawa, 1975, pp. 460–478. In addition, the reader will find valuable observations in the synthesis by Jerzy Kwiatkowski, *Dwudziestolecie międzywojenne*, Warszawa, 2000, pp. 209–215.

<sup>2</sup> I wrote about literature as historical evidence in: A. Kozuchowski, "'Zmyślenia i prawda', czyli dzieło literackie jako źródło historyczne", *Pamiętnik Literacki*, 96, 2005, no. 1, pp. 153–168.

in literary texts – and that these traces can be found and followed. Another, less obvious assumption was that the war, understood in this way, was something special in the Polish collective experience. That is a coming to grips with fear – unexpected and shocking after all – of modern war as such, stripped of the patriotic motivations that embellish and make sense of the war effort to those fighting under their own banner. This assumption has been confirmed in part (see below): the struggles of 1914–1918 were in large part seen by Poles through the eyes of terrified civilians, viewing them as a kind of natural disaster, and distrustful of the propaganda put out by the warring sides. In short, the literary evidence I shall analyze told the story of those who found themselves between a rock and a hard stone.

Nevertheless, although I will focus precisely on this kind of feeling in this text, I consider an overstatement the thesis by Jerzy Kwiatkowski, one of the leading Polish literary historians, who argued: “Neither legionary legend, nor a victorious campaign, nor the fact that it was in the wake of the great world war that Poland regained independence – did not blind Polish writers to the danger and cruelty of the wartime cataclysm. In their works, the Samaritan prevailed over Tyrtæus, civilian over soldier.”<sup>3</sup> It seems to me that there is no doubt that among “the bards of legionary deeds”, Tyrtæus prevailed decisively, and a series of authors (including Przybyszewski – which is not surprising, but also Nałkowska – which it probably should be) give a more or less subtle apotheosis of war as such in the post-Nietzschean spirit.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, from the very beginning of the war, the former leveled bitter grievances against civilians (later raised to the rank of political myth by the former Legionaries), for their lack of enthusiasm for the Legions, or more broadly – for their pacifism. In the autumn of 1916, a contemporary critic wrote mockingly (admittedly, of poets) that: “they feel grief towards society that they did not want to, or did not know how to, rise to the heights of enthusiasm for the cause and approach lofty political slogans with the scalpel of skeptical realism. Poets are indignant that you may not want to bite off more than you can chew [...]”.<sup>5</sup> The following commentary will concern the third group – those who did not so much measure their own strength, but tried to comprehend the effects of the forces that befell them.

<sup>3</sup> J. Kwiatkowski, op. cit., p. 209.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Irena Maciejewska’s remarks, which juxtapose Polish texts presenting war as an existential, bordering on mystical, and ethical experience with analogical (but much more numerous and, as it seems to be, more artistically significant) texts from the Weimar Republic (ead., “Proza polska...”, pp. 206–207).

<sup>5</sup> J. Zabiełło, *Nowy romantyzm w poezji polskiej czasu wojny*, Kraków, 1917, p. 41.

Obviously, the First World War was a powerful impulse for literary creativity that was attempting to express the horror and uniqueness of wartime experiences in other countries – including a number of classic pacifist works. In this context, another Polish literary scholar, Tomasz Burek, argued for a particular “accent of separateness of the Polish wartime experience”: namely, in the West, the patriotic enthusiasm of 1914 diminished over time, giving way to doubt in the sense of the overwhelming massacre – the literary symbol of which was Barbusse’s groundbreaking *Under Fire* – so as to finally transform into an open pacifism of post-war literature. In Poland, the initial horror of war was to give way to its justification, with growing hope for independence and then optimistic affirmation in connection with the victorious struggles of 1919–1920.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Burek’s thesis likewise needs significant verification because on the one hand, we have Polish literature glorifying the legionary effort written after just a few months of war, and on the other, the writings showing its senselessness and horror, written after the regaining of independence. The most evocative example of the evolution, contrary to what Burek wrote about, would be Andrzej Strug, who longed for the war in *Chimera* before it erupted, praised it in *Odznaka za wierną służbę* (“Badge for Faithful Service”) and fervently condemned it with *Żółty krzyż* (“The Yellow Cross”) at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, if one were to attempt to place Polish reactions to the war on the map of European literature, one would also have to account for Russia, where the World War experiences were also overshadowed by the revolution and the civil war.

## Texts and Topics

The dynamics of Polish war literature could be briefly described as follows. The majority of significant texts were written in the war years or shortly after, appearing in print between 1917–1925. These include, among others: Nałkowska’s *Tajemnice krwi* (“Blood Secrets”) and *Hrabia Emil* (“Count Emil”), Dąbrowska’s *Luna* (“Afterglow”), the novellas *Pomyłki* (“Mistakes”) and *Sen o chlebie* (“Dream of Bread”) and the novel *Charitas*, part of Żeromski’s literary cycle *Walka z Szatanem* (“Battle with Satan”), as well as Reymont’s literary cycle *Za frontem* (“Behind the Front”), Strug’s *Chimera* (which was set just before the war), “Badge for Faithful Service” and *Mogila nieznanego*

---

<sup>6</sup> T. Burek, op. cit., pp. 466–467.

*żołnierza* ("Grave of the Unknown Soldier"), Przerwa-Tetmajer's collection of novellas *W czas wojny* ("In Time of War"), and Kaden-Bandrowski's *Łuk* ("The Arch") and legionary literature. They are accompanied by a number of works by authors less-known today, such as Jan Żyznowski, Jerzy Ostrowski or Włodzimierz Perzyński (more widely known as a comedy writer), which will not be discussed here, nor the fictional reportage, mainly related to the Legions: Kaden's *Piłsudzczycy* ("Piłsudskiites"), Orkan's *Drogą czwartaków* ("The Road of the Fourth Regiment"), but also Edward Ligocki's *Płonące Reims* ("Burning Reims"). In addition, of course, the Great War was a topic regularly and abundantly utilized in poetry of the time, which has become the subject of a series of analyses by Polish literary scholars.<sup>7</sup> Finally, appearing on the borderline of the First World War, the revolution in Russia and the wars for the eastern borders of Poland, inspired such works as Eugeniusz Małaczewski's collection of stories *Koń na wzgórzu* ("Horse on a Hill"), Melchior Wańkiewicz's recollective report *Strzępy epopei* ("Tatters of an Epic"), Zofia Kossak-Szczucka's *Požoga* ("Conflagration"), and also, written after the passing of three decades, Florian Czarnyszewicz's *Nadberezyńcy* ("Berezina People"). The themes related to the Great War would be taken up many years later in Strug's three-volume novel "The Yellow Cross", and Wittlin's *Sól ziemi* ("Salt of the Earth") – the only volume of an unfinished cycle, announced in 1937. After the Second World War, the subject of the first would return in novels close to the trend of the so-called Habsburg myth: Kuśniewicz's *Królestwo Obojga Sycylii* ("Kingdom of Both Sicilies") and Strykowski's *Austeria*. This cursory comparison allows the thesis to be put forward that most Polish, war-themed works – basically up to "The Yellow Cross" – were created under the influence of original experiences, impressions, moods and thoughts, unrelated to possible foreign inspirations, that their authors simply were not aware of.

Of course, fine literature devoted to the war should also be viewed in the context of other types of texts devoted to it – journalism, reminiscences, historiography. In the interwar period, the stream of this type of publication flowed at a fairly constant rate: regular publications appeared, devoted to the wartime history of a given region, district or city, usually reconstructed partly from the authors' reminiscences and from documents and firsthand accounts. The distinctive number of publications devoted to the three episodes

<sup>7</sup> See: I. Maciejewska, op. cit., pp. 125–140; Z. Kloch, *Poezja pierwszej wojny. Tradycje i konwencje*, Warszawa, 1986; R. Przybylski, "Poezja I wojny", in: *Literatura polska...*, pp. 225–235. In addition, a lot of information about authors who are forgotten today can be found in the cited, highly polemical study by Jan Zabiełło (see n. 5).

(originating during the war, undoubtedly under the watchful eye of the censors of the partitioning powers and intended to demonize the enemy) should be considered characteristic: the Russian occupation of Lwów in 1914–1915, the shelling and plundering of Kalisz by the Germans in August 1914 and the evacuation of part of the population from Cracow in the autumn of 1914, in anticipation of a Russian siege.<sup>8</sup> These experiences clearly etched themselves in the memories of the time as symptomatic and unique, although neither the occupation of Lwów nor the evacuation of Cracow could in no way compete in drama and tragedy with the thousands of daily episodes from areas near the front. The following observations on fine literature will therefore be placed in the context of these types of publications from 1914–1918<sup>9</sup> and later. Some of them are cheap paperback editions of press coverage; these in part only concern local issues and focus mainly on material problems such as destruction and extreme wartime poverty. Systematic research and tracing the development of how the Polish press approached the war was beyond the scope of this article and constitutes material for a separate, undoubtedly extensive study or series of studies. The texts that I came across, nevertheless, better allow for literary works to be set against the backdrop of the entirety of the contemporary literature and state of thought.

## The Charms of War: Nature and Modernity

“The beginning of the war – one of the ladies said – was especially for us, women, one can say, interesting: so many troops, the entry of the Riflemen,<sup>10</sup> shouts; we had never seen so many new and interesting things. We were glued

---

<sup>8</sup> See, i.a.: W. Z. [“an eyewitness”], *Na zgliszczach Kalisza. Ku wiecznej pamiętce pogromu teutońskiego dokonanego przez Prusaków w sierpniu 1914 roku*, Warszawa, 1914; E. Starczewski, *Złowrogi sierpień 1914*, Kalisz, 1933; B. Szczepankiewicz, *Kalisz wśród bomb, granatów i ognia w dniach sierpniowych 1914*, Warszawa, 1936; S. Rossowski, *Lwów podczas inwazji*, Lwów, 1915; B. Janusz, *293 dni rządów rosyjskich we Lwowie*, Lwów, 1915; S. Przyłuski, *Wspomnienia z rosyjskiej okupacji*, Lwów, 1926; J. Białynia-Chołoddecki, *Lwów w czasie okupacji rosyjskiej*, Lwów, 1930; *Wysiedlenie wojenne Krakowa w r. 1914–1915*, Kraków, 1916.

<sup>9</sup> The reader will find a selection of such reports in *Polski wir I wojny. 1914–1918*, ed. by A. Dębska, Warszawa, 2014. However, this selection is also heavily tilted towards the “political” side, and thus shows Polish reactions to the war (diary, literary, press, official) primarily through the prism of the so-called “Polish question”; specifically the Legions and Piłsudski.

<sup>10</sup> The Riflemen (“strzelcy”) most probably refers to the members of Piłsudski’s troops that entered the region from Cracow in August 1914.

to the windows [...]” – related a reporter for Cracow’s *Czas* (“Time”) in an account from Jędrzejów.<sup>11</sup> Similar excitement combined with disorientation was characteristic of the first weeks and even months of the war, and not only for the anonymous residents of a border town, but also for Warsaw writers, such as Cezary Jellenta. War, which is worth remembering, was a phenomenon known to them mainly from literary and journalistic texts. It is not a coincidence that the reporter for *Czas* ended his report by comparing the war with another new and intriguing phenomenon, providing strong, previously unknown experiences to people of the day. For example, as a result of war activities in the town, the cinema theater was closed, but here, “Jędrzejów is the screen itself, where images of war appear a hundred times more terrifying than the most fantastic pictures [...]”.<sup>12</sup>

This report and other similar ones were meant primarily to satisfy curiosity, which could not be met by daily newspapers, which were based mainly on censored dispatches coming from the capitals of the partitioning powers. Readers in the Kingdom of Poland could sooner learn about German atrocities in Belgium than about events in Radomsko, which could only be reached with the help of another modern invention – the automobile.<sup>13</sup> Of course, the biggest sensation was caused by the use of airplanes. Already on 6 September 1914, “Lwów residents were witnesses to an extraordinary scene in the skies, namely in a battle between Russian and Austrian airplanes. Initially, it was not known what these reckless aerobatics meant and it was presumed that the Austrian flier had shot the Russian [...]” – in fact, the planes did not have any offensive weapons, and the Russian one simply crashed, trying to ram the enemy.<sup>14</sup> In Warsaw, during the German offensive in the summer of 1915, as a result of which the city was occupied, it was reported that “flashes of cannon shots were spotted in the evenings, and during the day, the airmen in low-flying planes were almost treated to black coffee. The German army approaching Warsaw in the storm of war did not interest anyone.”<sup>15</sup> In turn, readers in the areas already occupied by the Germans could learn from the brochure *Krótkie opowieści żołnierzy polskich zaczerpnięte z pism katolickich* (“Short stories of

---

<sup>11</sup> *Wojna w Królestwie. Wycieczka samochodem po terenie walk*, Kraków, 1915, p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, s. 57.

<sup>13</sup> See S. Mikułowski-Pomorski, *Z pobjowiska. Opisy i wrażenia z miast i wiosek ziemi radomskiej po najściu wojsk niemieckich i austriackich w październiku 1914*. Odbitka z „*Gazety radomskiej*”, Radom, 1914.

<sup>14</sup> B. Janusz, *op. cit.*, pp. 99–100.

<sup>15</sup> *Polski wir...*, p. 115.

Polish soldiers taken from Catholic writings”), that in Metz, “a Catholic priest came to a dying German captain by airplane to give him the last rites and consolation.”<sup>16</sup> The car and the plane remained a sensational embodiment of the dangers of the war in the memory of a resident of Lwów, who recalled the Russian occupation of the city in 1914–1915 with horror after many years: “returning from the city, thanks to the Creator, I was not shot or wounded by an airplane bomb, a rifle shot directed at an airplane, or shot at the hand of a drunk, or half-lunatic, I thank God that I was not run over by an automobile, not crushed by a military wagon, or a galloping cavalryman, that a mad dog did not bite me, I was not robbed by an Apache, or that a policeman did not nab me and rush me to the earthworks [...]”.<sup>17</sup>

The echoes of these emotions are found in fine literature, such as in the Nałkowska novel, *Tajemnice krwi* (“Blood Secrets”), entirely devoted to emotional reactions to the war. In one of the issues, unrelated to one another, delivered as if incidentally in the author’s characteristic paradoxical-ironic tone, the following assertion is made: “– A famous actor told me that his little daughter can already pronounce: mommy, daddy and ‘opla’ – it means: aeroplane. – Now, in the countryside, storks and dragonflies are compared to aeroplanes.”<sup>18</sup> Many years later, in Strykowski’s *Austeria*, the first contact of the inhabitants of the Jewish town with the war is also marked by the sensational appearance of an airplane, which “flew in broad daylight. Shamelessly! And he could not aim! He dropped a bomb! A huge fire fell on the one-story house near the hospital. The entire city came to look at the torn-off roof and half-demolished wall. Such a gentile force!”<sup>19</sup>

Such were the exciting beginnings of the war. The marches through of Russian and Austrian troops brought Polish people in contact with masses of exotic foreigners; the “calm, provincial being” was transformed, as the reporter for *Czas* stated, into the “center of world events.”<sup>20</sup> The cities were filled with landed gentry and the intelligentsia, seeking a sense of security, as well as wanting to be closer to information sources, obtain some official document or at last to “be useful” on some committee. The literature recorded these moods with a characteristic irony, contrasting the wartime liveliness with the boring

---

<sup>16</sup> *Wojna europejska. Krótkie opowieści żołnierzy polskich zaczerpnięte z pism katolickich*, Częstochowa, 1915, pp. 10–11.

<sup>17</sup> J. Białynia-Chołodęcki, op. cit., pp. 158–159.

<sup>18</sup> Z. Nałkowska, *Tajemnice krwi*, in: ead., *Opowiadania*, Warszawa, 1984, p. 230.

<sup>19</sup> J. Strykowski, *Sen Azrila. Austeria*, Warszawa, 1995, p. 143.

<sup>20</sup> *Wojna w Królestwie...*, p. 16.

routine of peacetime. One of the characters of Kaden-Bandrowski's "The Arch" "thoughtlessly enjoyed the mess, which now resounded through public, urban, and private life because of the Russian procession deep into Galicia. You saw all of your friends scattered around the world now, you had all of the misery of the country close at hand, you saw the grotesque slowness of administration in countless offices."<sup>21</sup> "The Arch" also shows with brutality, though coated with sarcasm, that the war, taking so many lives, and ruining others, was also an opportunity for others to enrich themselves and to leap across the chasm of the pre-war world of class and social divisions. As one of the protagonists put it "it allows people to break out, raises the social sphere."<sup>22</sup> This process is best illustrated by the career of the maid and housekeeper to the main heroine of the novel, which shocks the heroine: when the lady of the house leaves Cracow during the evacuation in late autumn 1914, the woman establishes a brothel, thriving thanks to the military clientele. The institution gradually transforms into a "respectable" guesthouse and thanks to her newly acquired acquaintances, the ex-maid becomes a "person of society", which she could not have dreamed of before the war. The main heroine of the novel – who should be considered one of the most remarkable portraits of the feminine psyche of the pre-emancipation era in Polish literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – is also forced to "cope" in ways that would never come to mind before the war, and even if they did, were not considered the most noble at the time. At the same time, she learns a lot about herself and the social world, suffering much less than she would have expected (and what "peacetime" morality would have required of her).

*Charitas* offers much less psychological or economic realism. Still, in his novel, Żeromski presents a somewhat contrived pastiche of the atmosphere of wartime excitement and feverish attempts to "situate oneself" in the new reality – or rather to predict what this situation will bring. The main character – the owner of a fabulous fortune, which includes, among other things, mysterious mines in Galicia – arrives in Cracow at the news of the outbreak of the war to save what he can, by transferring cash and securities to banks in neutral countries, and begins tiring peregrinations to the grotesquely inefficient offices. On the other hand, in the story *Ewakuacja Krakowa* ("Evacuation of Cracow"), Żeromski – who elsewhere gave a series of shocking descriptions of the cruelties of war (about which below) – ironically sums up the

<sup>21</sup> J. Kaden-Bandrowski, *Łuk*, afterword by M. Sprusiński, Kraków, 1981, p. 164.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 473.

evacuation, which is accompanied by many frayed nerves, chaos, doomsaying and gloomy melancholy of the residents of Cracow that are on “the last train” into the unknown. Here at the Podgórze station – the last one within the city limits, beyond which extends the dangerous land of exile – a certain staunch townspeople “practiced in railway environments” makes a fuss, demanding a place in a higher class car – but is silenced by her son, who is worried that the mother’s cries may wake up the bird he’s carrying in the cage. And then: “Despite the overwhelming sadness, everyone’s eyes look at the cage with the question, whether the blackbird evacuee was really awakened, or if it alone out of all of us had happily slept through this moment”.<sup>23</sup>

## The Truth of War

The presumed existential value of the war experience was the specific surplus offered by literary fiction in relation to the reports and memories of “ordinary people”. In this respect, Polish narratives about war are a limited but nevertheless distinct reflection of the processes in European literature in general, where the First World War was a momentous breakthrough: from the idealization and uplifting of war as a heroic and existential experience, to the discrediting of such ideas as they collided with cruel and senseless realities. At the same time, it should be emphasized that the “idea of war” expressed in literature was derived from two largely independent trends. This was perhaps articulated more clearly in the Polish context than elsewhere due to the lack of a state propaganda machine justifying the war effort in the eyes of the nations at war. On the one hand, it was a traditional patriotism, which in the imagination of Poles in the early twentieth century, perceived the armed struggle primarily in the context of romantic uprisings – struggles “measuring forces for intentions”. On the other hand, it was a modernist fascination with violence as a bloodletting of the dark side of human nature suppressed by peacetime culture – which demands its rights and which despite its ambiguity is generally approved, precisely because of its naturalness and spontaneity. Literature attributes to its protagonists such motivations and feelings, drawn from the literary-philosophical tradition and political commentary – and although it is difficult to find them in equally pure, discursive form in the

---

<sup>23</sup> S. Żeromski, *Ewakuacja Krakowa*, in: id., *Sen o szpadzie. Pomyłki*, Warszawa, 1973, pp. 247–253.

reminiscences of the epoch, it is also impossible to claim that they are pure fantasy or stylization.

Let us confine ourselves to three examples that are meaningful in that they are attempts to fuse these two tendencies into one in the attitude of fictional heroes. The main character of Andrzej Strug's novel, under the dubious title *Chimera*, a young Pole Przecław, changes his negative attitude towards war, joining the marksmanship courses organized by a socialist organization in France:

He desired to experience and survive it. He was driven by a feverish curiosity towards war, as a terrible mystery, where, among blood and fire, a knightly assault face to face, a bandits ambush will be weighed against a ruffians power against power for life and death, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, with all strength and every which way: with money, hunger, bullets, knives, infernal shells, betrayals, treacherous tunnels, where science and all the genius of humanity and the purest holy sacrifice of life will serve a frenzied beast – man, man in war. The soul was already plunging in a restless, greedy dream. He will not renounce it anymore, he will not get rid of it. Like a poison it had absorbed the breath of war [...].<sup>24</sup>

The ambiguous drive to war as a sinister and powerful force and as a kind of madness, of course, somehow justifies – in a moral sense – and explains – in a psychological sense – the protagonist's patriotism. At the same time, however, this patriotism and ideological motives themselves are somewhat compromised by the sinister means that the war demands.

A complex and at the same time a somewhat clichéd picture of the fascination with war as an existential experience, was given by Nałkowska in "Count Emil". The war is presented as a challenge to patriotism and the coming to the fore of natural instincts, eradicated by the civilization of the time of peace. The title character of the novel – somewhat of a modernist dandy, a loner seeking intense experiences in the arms of exotic women and constantly disappointed with their shallowness, and a bit of a patriot in the romantic tradition – is quite a cosmopolitan and able to look at national affairs with detachment. Even before the outbreak of the war, the thought comes to him several times as to whether the "love of the fatherland" is not simply an irrational "overwhelming wish for the drunken soldiers in front of the barracks, and the spying guards on the way to absolutely be Poles?"<sup>25</sup> He signs up for courses in Piłsudski's rifleman squads for reasons not altogether clear – perhaps a bit through patriotism, a bit

<sup>24</sup> A. Strug, *Chimera*, Warszawa, 1918, p. 277.

<sup>25</sup> Z. Nałkowska, *Hrabia Emil*, Warszawa, 1977, p. 90.

through modernist *ennui*, and a little bit led by a run-of-the-mill fascination with the strength, health and directness of socialist fighters. When the war breaks out, however, he is on his property in the Russian partition and views it initially through the eyes of a civilian – a wealthy landowner in whose manor, as a matter of fact, the Tsarist army organizes a field hospital. This causes some inconveniences, but the owner is treated with a reverence owed to his social position. He is therefore reflecting on the war in the Nietzschean-Darwinist spirit, he thinks that: “war has no purpose, like nature. It appealed to him only as a manifestation of the terrible, blind will of the nations, as the only possibility to give voice to the immense instinct of murder and destruction. ‘War’ was for him the expression of this naive health, this wonderful madness, the revival of all noble thoroughbred instincts.” In a word: war is natural and necessary, and opposition to it – a “moral suggestion”, which is an “artificial product of civilization.”<sup>26</sup> This view is finally summed up by the not quite unpleasant cousin of the protagonist, who just lost her fiancé in the war:

Fighting – this is a calling. A brave man robs not for plunder, he does not kill for some benefit – even the highest order, not for the fame or praise of the commander, and – now do not be offended – not for the homeland. The war, for a man’s man, is something he does completely disinterestedly, it is a cheerful game, a joy in itself and for himself, a wonderful game of death [...].<sup>27</sup>

The protagonist’s wartime experience basically confirms this view. It is true that the author tries to do justice to the realities of soldier’s life, with its dirtiness, chaos and constant preoccupation with food troubles. Still, she also underlines the aesthetic and ethical dimension of soldiering – not as a patriotic sacrifice, but a cleansing experience that turns a jaded young gentleman into a man living life to the fullest, which consists of “a hard duty, the turmoil of the working day, frivolity after hardships and a great peace of conscience, rocked to sleep with reverence and love for the leader”<sup>28</sup> (never mentioned by name).

Finally, let us cite an example of the stoic position, according to which the war itself, though tragic and signifying nothing but trouble in conventional categories, was also a lesson in life – it taught to reconcile oneself with what it brings: with good and evil. This attitude is presented by Kaden-Bandrowski, bearing in mind the life attitude of one of the secondary protagonists of “The Arch” – the Cracovian music professor Kałucki:

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 126, 175, 203–204.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 203–204.

He was pleased with his fate and thought that there was no sense complaining about the war. It is madness to complain about what is. Besides, the war taught him the “art of restraint”. In the past one lived in ever-widening circles, now he descends into himself and deepening, narrowing circles... A simple thing: when everything is taken away from man, what is left for him is only his self... He must dig into himself like in a seed... He gets to know himself thoroughly – and this is good.<sup>29</sup>

All these interpretations that present war experiences in a more or less positive light, or indicate what benefit might be gained from them, are linked by the conviction that during the war, man is in a way more himself, he reaches deeper towards his nature, he gets to know himself and retrieves that which remains hidden in time of peace. Even a stoically conceived war seems to be a somehow ecstatic and liberating experience. One can see in these attitudes traces of the ubiquitous conviction that culture and civilization constrain man and mislead him – undoubtedly a conviction imported to Poland from the West, typical not only of the “end of the age” period. For artists and intellectuals fully immersed in the spirit of decadence, the war turns out to be the long-awaited victory of irrationalism – both in the lives of individuals and societies. As Juliusz Kleiner, a distinguished literary scholar, wrote in 1916:

it turned out to be something more new and surprising, something more powerful, enormous and terrifying than anything else in the world that the human spirit had ever accomplished or encountered. In the current system of thinking, it is beyond measure. It is the logical closure of all modern history – we see this clearly; and the more strongly we feel how little we understood the course of the ages, what a mystery human action was to us.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, the intoxication of the encounter with the “truth of war” and the satisfaction that the veil of “false civilization” had been torn away, could be felt until the bloody senselessness of the war was exposed. The motif of the mysterious, irrational sense of war, which this time did not have anything sublime in it yet will remain fascinating, returns in the form of a monstrous caricature in Strug’s “The Yellow Cross”, written in the decade after it came to an end. Once, as a “purposeless work of pure art, sheer lunacy in its courage as a literary fabrication, written in blood by the purple fire of the world.”<sup>31</sup> A different time as a utopian project of one of the many heroes of a multifaceted novel, concocting a vision of creating a work whose object would be:

<sup>29</sup> J. Kaden-Bandrowski, op. cit., p. 306.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in: T. Burek, op. cit., p. 465.

<sup>31</sup> A. Strug, *Żółty krzyż*, Warszawa, 1976, vol. 2, p. 378.

the discovery of the mystery of war, impenetrable to the world's greatest minds, not to mention, take pity o God, commanders and headquarters, reigning kings and emperors, their chancellors and ministers, the presidents of warring republics and their democratic parliaments. These principal factors of war are a bit too concerned with murdering each other, licking their wounds and fabricating lies to shield them from responsibility for someone else's bloodshed and colossal mistakes. Philosophical or evangelical moralists, sociologists – pacifists with great names, seated in the comfort of neutral states, are too overwhelmed by their scholarship and their own nobility, to perceive the living truth of war.<sup>32</sup>

## An Iron Broom

Both war relations and journalism, as well as fictional works devoted to wartime civilian experiences, say basically the same thing and with the additional help of quite similar stylistic means. Except for occasional executions due to suspicions of espionage or other forms of collaboration with the enemy army – which Żeromski in *Charitas* described in his naturalist manner – usually taking place in the first months of the war, numerous civilians died in it, killed by a stray bullet or grenade, which was noted with horror. From the very beginning of the conflict, however, it meant enormous, permanent material destruction in the countryside, which placed the entire country before the spectre of hunger. Awareness of this state of affairs had been common since the first months of the war and over time only increased, to apocalyptic dimensions, which Reymont gave, for example, in his stories of the war.

The war has cleaned out these lands with an iron broom, nothing remains of entire villages – wrote a reporter for *Czas* – The army passes through and then leaves, the official language and authorities change [...]. Only two things almost never change: out of nowhere, large food deliveries for the city cease, which becomes more hazardously stripped bare, and the distant glow seen in the evening, sometimes closer sometimes farther away, seldom fades.<sup>33</sup>

I can literally say – stated a reporter from the other side of the front – that our farms were so indispensable for the armies of all three states, that if it were not for the better organized operations, the expansions of the belligerent states would have been shorter, as the horses for the cannons would have run out, and above all, so would have their feed [...]. We stand on the precipice, we are threatened with hunger and illness, an indispensable companion of not only physical but also moral suffering...<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., vol. 3, p. 202.

<sup>33</sup> *Wojna w Królestwie...*, pp. 4, 15.

<sup>34</sup> S. Mikułowski-Pomorski, op. cit., pp. 30–33.

In the reports from the Western front (an adaptation of an article from *Berliner Tagesblatt*) we read about the “dead city” of Malines, where “what people had never seen, what the morbid imaginations of Hoffmann or Poe had never been imagined, had been realized. In the great city, people, as if struck by a sorcerer’s cane, suddenly vanished without a trace.”<sup>35</sup>

Of course, the literature also presents images of death in battle, both sudden and tragic, but after all, as if aesthetic and – especially when it came to Legionnaires – sanctified by a higher purpose or at least sanctioned by a cultural norm. It also reports on the suffering that this death brings among the soldiers closest to one another. Nałkowska’s “Blood Secrets” is probably the best example artistically (though perhaps by its sophisticated construction, somewhat overly esthetic). The entire story unfolds in the rhythm of a fragmented, multithreaded discussion about the war in cultured and affluent company, to the accompaniment of a distant cannonade. There is talk of material damage, cultural losses, chauvinism and sacrifice – until finally the discussion is interrupted by a discreetly delivered message about the death on the front of the only son of the hostess. The indescribable magnitude of this individual tragedy is confronted with the “theoretical” side of the war: what is known, what is regretted and what is worried about in rational, collective categories.<sup>36</sup>

What should be emphasized is that, compared to numerous books of this type in the West, Polish literature did not produce any work describing wartime experiences from the point of view of a rank and file soldier – who is confronted with the boundlessness and senselessness of death over many years of struggle. It is not possible to count works in this category describing service in Polish units – in Poland, in Russia and in the West – despite all the cruelty of descriptions imbued with the spirit of patriotism and national sacrifice. Books comparable to Western classics of the war will only appear later with Rembek’s *Nagan* (“A Nagant”) and *W polu* (“In the Field”), regarding the war with the Bolsheviks. Regarding the First World War, Józef Wittlin made a similar or rather larger-scale attempt with *Powieść o cierpliwym piechurze* (“Story of a Patient Infantryman”) – focusing on the Hutsul (Eastern Carpathian highlander) Piotr Niewiadomski, serving in the Royal-Imperial Austro-Hungarian Army. But Wittlin only finished the first volume, in which his hero is enlisted into the ranks and subjected to military training thus becoming acquainted with the crushing omnipotence of the state-war machine, but not with frontline

---

<sup>35</sup> *Wojna europejska...*, pp. 15–16.

<sup>36</sup> Z. Nałkowska, *Tajemnice...*, pp. 227–241.

combat. Wittlin – in the figure of the staff officer *Feldfebel* Bachmatiuk – and also Żeromski – in the figure of the borderline demonic Captain Śnica from *Charitas* – paint a picture of the military careers of dehumanized creatures, people satiating themselves through the possibilities decreed by the war and military top brass, of tormenting and killing others without punishment.

Thus, in Polish literature the apocalypse of the First World War took the form of describing the suffering of the civilian population, dying from an accidental bullet, mourning their sons and husbands, and deprived of all possessions and even a roof over their heads, homes destroyed by war, requisition and the purposeful policy of warring armies. Tomasz Burek described the texts of this trend as “miserabilism” – it should be emphasized, however, that they not only render the misery of the civilian population, but also attempt to elevate it, precisely by hitting apocalyptic tones, though not in a strictly religious or historical expression. It was foreshadowed by fresh reports from the front during the war. “It was a terrible sight – we read in the description of the destruction of Kalisz by the Germans in 1914 – whose shadows and contours might be found somewhere in the murkiness of ancient times, dating back to the Huns and Tatars.”<sup>37</sup> Four decades later, Florian Czarnyszewicz echoed this in his epic description from the Borderlands: “Since the Tatar invasion, Poland had not suffered similar destruction. Villages turned to rubble, cities in ruins, and people rushed by the Cossack whip driven to wander the world.”<sup>38</sup> These legendary invasions, far enough in the past that their biblical and naturalistic associations – half war, half natural disaster – were supposed to bring to mind the end of the world. Maybe not the end of the entire world, but the one known thus far.

The culmination of this tendency is found in a series of Reymont’s stories, published under the collective title *Za frontem* (“Behind the Front”). They are connected by the theme of misfortunes that befall the Polish peasants from the Russian and German armies, causing an immensity of despair mourning the loss of loved ones and the life’s work of entire generations, or alternatively, isolated, hopeless attempts of individual revenge, ending with brutal retaliation on the part of the occupiers. Serving as an author’s commentary can be a fragment crowning Reymont’s story in *Dola* (“Fate”):

The war was trampling the whole country with iron feet, so that all lands became like one graveyard, above which only black chimneys rose here and there like gravestones

---

<sup>37</sup> W. Z., op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>38</sup> F. Czarnyszewicz, *Nadberezyńcy*, Lublin, 1990, p. 76.

dripping with still-living blood. Even the fields lay disgraced, torn, full of filthy remnants of murders, ashes and fires. Even the air was saturated with the smells of decaying corpses and burning. Death howled upon the corpses and ruins with a merry hymn of power.<sup>39</sup>

Particular turmoil in this context was caused by Russian “scorched earth” tactics or, as it was described, the withdrawal of the “Kutuzov system”; i.e. the forced, chaotic evacuation of peasants with whatever they managed to take with them and destroying buildings and farmland. “All livestock that they could not take, they killed, and only hunger, ashes and ruins were left – a desert” – wrote Jerzy Gąsiorowski.<sup>40</sup> These events became the canvas for the extensive title story of Reymont’s “Behind the Front”. The author with passion and excitement describes not only the destruction wrought by specially delegated Russian troops and the resulting chaos, misery and the spectre of famine, but also vividly reflects the apocalyptic impression that the “Kutuzov system” made on peasants. Death from an errant shot, requisitions or even rapes and executions are a tragic but imaginable and to some extent understandable side of the war in the eyes of the peasants. The destruction of property, the killing of livestock, the burning of harvested crops and homes are in conflict with their basic notion of the inherent order of things, and evoke associations with the punishment of God and the end of the world. The “thoughtless” destruction of property is in the eyes of the peasants a devilish activity, inconceivable to man. This dilemma is partaken in by the main character of the story – a rural priest who is also trying to patriotically enlighten the peasants, combating their suspicions that the advancing Germans are in collusion with landowners and Jews, whom only the “Muscovite” can defend against. Shocked by this attitude, the priest explains that first, Moscow is an eternal enemy, and the Germans should not be feared and that they carry with them a “higher civilization” – schools, roads, railways – but finally he explodes and declares that: “both are our mortal enemies”. The following story confirms this diagnosis (although the priest falls into doubts under the influence of the total destruction of the village): the Russians burn the village and crops, the Germans requisition the remains of their possessions, which still belonged to the peasants, and which the tsarist army did not take with them.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> W.S. Reymont, “Dola”, in: id., *Za frontem*, Warszawa, 1919, p. 43.

<sup>40</sup> J. Gąsiorowski, *Jak wojuje żołnierz polski, czyli Opowieść o Legionach 1914–1916 r.*, Piotrków, 1916, p. 32.

<sup>41</sup> W.S. Reymont, *Za frontem...*, pp. 71–78.

## Trapped Feelings

Most of the literary works cited here, even if written during the war and under its immediate impression, already appeared in independent Poland. However, in the accounts published during the war, under the military censorship of the partition powers, there was a pervasive complaint about the nature of this war, in which Poles as a community were only an object. It can be seen even in legionary literature, such as in a brochure issued in 1916 by Jerzy Gąsiorowski, who wrote: “We all know well that a terrible war fell upon us in 1914 like a storm on frightened birds: we could not find any defense or advice, or our own separate path in this turmoil. Enormous countries hurled themselves at one another, trampling us, like grass by the road.”<sup>42</sup>

The “saddest” part of this war, stated in the previously quoted report from the battlefields in Radomsko *Z pobojuwiska* (“From the Battlefield”), was that “Polish regiments” – Austrian and Russian, made up of recruits from both partitions, fought against each other.<sup>43</sup> *Krótkie opowieści żołnierzy polskich* (“Short Stories of Polish Soldiers”), announced in Częstochowa in 1915, reported that during a break in the Russian-German positional battles, two Polish cousins recognized one another in enemy trenches – and their only consolation was that they had failed to kill each other.<sup>44</sup>

The “fratricidal” character of this war – which was alien to Poles, fought not in their name, nor for their ideals, was at the same time somewhat of a civil war, engaging them on different sides of the conflict – also inspired poetry right away. Thus, Leopold Staff called the Poles the “helots of the war” – because as obedient executors of the orders of others they stood lowest among all belligerent nations. As Ryszard Przybylski informs, this motif had been present in Polish literature at least since Franciszek Karpiński’s poem *Do księcia Mikołaja Repnina* (“To Prince Nikolai Repnin”), published in 1796.<sup>45</sup> It appears commonly in poetry, in press brochures and in literary prose depicting the realities of wartime. In the stylized story of a simple soldier *Niezwykłe przygody leguna z I Brygady Legionów Polskich* (“The Extraordinary Adventures of a Legun [Legionnaire] from the 1st Brigade of the Polish Legions”) by Bronisław Bakal, it is summed up with a simple yet moving apostrophe: “And

---

<sup>42</sup> J. Gąsiorowski, op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> S. Mikułowski-Pomorski, op. cit., pp. 21–22.

<sup>44</sup> *Wojna europejska...*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>45</sup> See: R. Przybylski, op. cit., pp. 225–235.

this is our poor Poland! The Germans have plenty of Poles, the Austrians have plenty, the Muscovites have plenty! Brother must go against brother, and brother must hurl himself upon his brother with a rifle! Holy Mother, have you abandoned us?"<sup>46</sup>

This motif is analyzed more deeply by Stefan Żeromski in the short story *Pomyłki* ("Mistakes"), which may be seen as a pacifist manifesto. Regaling the reader with a healthy portion of descriptions of nature, the narrator is in a place where the "the mother of all battles" took place between the Germans and Russians, which he comments upon as follows: "Horrible anger, God's vengeance brought them here among these speechless trees. Here she told them to shed blood. German on Muscovite, Muscovite on German – an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – murder in a furious vengeance for bloody Polish tears, for enslavement, for so many years of chains. Yes! Okay, so be it!" Patriotic ecstasy gives way to confusion when the narrator finds Polish surnames on the graves of the fallen on both sides: "Our feelings have been caught in a trap. Neither right nor left!" – he explains, unable to either abandon his argument or continue to believe in it. The dilemma is resolved in a closing story by a moral exhortation: "Someone is troubling themselves by sending hail clouds over rye fields, unleashing wars, directing steps towards the stars of humans and nightingales. I do not kill! [...] We cast away this command into the heavens, by the people thrown into the thunder and trembling of the earth: do not kill!"<sup>47</sup>

## Our Boys and the Invaders

The Great War was a great opportunity to revise – or to confirm stereotypes about the partitioning powers. The inhabitants of Galicia found themselves under Russian occupation for several months, and the inhabitants of Congress Poland and the Taken Lands (*Ziemia Zabrana*) under German control from over one year up to three years. The Germans and Russians were mostly seen in uniforms: ravaging the countryside, carrying out requisitions and summary executions, preceded by fearful gossip. That, as reported from the front, the Hungarians – "artists in this profession" – deliberately set fire to the barns and

<sup>46</sup> B. Bakal, *Pazurami! Niezwykłe przygody leguna z I Brygady Legionów Polskich*, Warszawa, 1933, p. 141.

<sup>47</sup> S. Żeromski, "Pomyłki", in: id., *Sen o szpadzie...*, pp. 145–160.

destroy livestock,<sup>48</sup> and the Russians pillaged shops and abandoned homes.<sup>49</sup> And above all, how easy it is to fall victim to “spy mania” – which commands Germans to shoot priests suspected of pro-Russian sympathies, Austrians to take hostages in villages where the moonlight reflected in a window was taken as signals being given to the Russians, and for the Russians to drive into exile a townswoman from Lwów, Ms. Hirsch, who was accused of spying, because, being unable to fall asleep due to a toothache, she got up and put her hurting cheek against the window pane.<sup>50</sup> The literature quite copiously, even if only briefly, drew from this reservoir of impressions. Naturally, it is difficult to consider the texts analyzed here as representative of all Polish opinion, or even the opinion of any group; however, some consistencies can be noticed in them.

Except for the horror aroused by the above-mentioned “Kutuzov system”, much less in the texts discussed here concerns the Russians than the Germans. This can be considered natural, since the tsarist army was already well known to the inhabitants of the Russian partition, and the occupation of Galicia turned out to be a short-lived episode. Characteristic in this respect are the already mentioned reports from the Russian occupation of Lwów, in which there is often talk of the “barbarity” of the Russians (implicitly: culturally lower than Poles) – but apart from various, relatively cumbersome regulations (mainly Russification regulations in education and the judiciary which were not implemented due to lack of time) the only dramatic accent of this occupation was the deportation into Russia of a number of representatives of local authorities in the face of the Austrian-German offensive.<sup>51</sup> This relative sense of superiority towards the Russians manifested itself in understanding for the Russian soldier, perceived as a victim of the tsarist system rather than a war criminal – with the significant and sinister exception of the Cossacks. This formation, known for suppressing demonstrations and police actions and participation in pogroms in Russia before the war, was suspected of cruelty and brutality – especially in relation to women and Jews. The stereotype was strengthened by the fact that during the war, the Cossacks were utilized for operations outside the front and aiming towards the civilian population.

As mentioned, many authors, especially those associated with the Legions, wrote bitterly about pro-Russian sympathies in the early phase of the war, which

---

<sup>48</sup> S. Mikułowski-Pomorski, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>49</sup> *Wojna w Królestwie...*, p. 27.

<sup>50</sup> S. Mikułowski-Pomorski, op. cit., pp. 11, 22–23; J. Białynia-Chołodecki, op. cit., p. 153.

<sup>51</sup> See, e.g., B. Janusz, op. cit., p. 179.

were partly honest and partly caused by the habituation to Russian rule, which the “common people” did not imagine would ever end, and hence were afraid of “what will happen when our people return” – meaning the Russians.<sup>52</sup> This confusion of identities in legionary literature was something deeper: for Riflemen, even if they were considered “ours” were also feared a bit as the germ of the next troubled uprising, which by definition must end badly, and hence those a little less “ours” but nevertheless not entirely foreign invaders, were viewed favorably. With a warm irony seldom seen in these matters in Polish literature of this period, Kaden-Bandrowski summed up this point of view, directing the main protagonist of “The Arch” to reason: “Poles are already shooting... sadness overwhelmed her... a Polish uprising is happening again... It’s good that at least the Austrians are in command... Nothing so terribly noble will happen again, for which people would be later hanged wholesale...” Similarly, when a legionnaire, wounded in battle, dies in her presence and when routine remarks begin that he died for his homeland and “the homeland is a great thing”, the heroine consoles herself with the thought that her husband, serving in the regular Austrian army, “did not love this homeland so terribly much,” and so maybe he will not die for sure (which she naturally could not say out loud).<sup>53</sup>

The Germans, on the other hand, are fundamentally alien and not only in the eyes of authors from the territories of the Russian partition, but also from Galicia. Of course, this is preceded by the ambiguous, respect-lined, but usually characterized by far-fetched dislike, stereotype of a Teutonic warrior, a great and ominous power. An intriguing treatment of dehumanization and humanization upon the return of German soldiers is given in Kaden-Bandrowski’s “The Arch”:

[...] German soldiers with bluish faces, wearing covered *Pickelhaube* – like people with heads vaulted in a pointed horn. In clouds of gasoline smoke, in a crushing crash of wheels amidst the jangling of heavy chains, dressed in the rectangular steel bar of their uniforms, screaming towards the stupefied, white-faced public, rough, like grated stone, words about their homeland [...]. These people are in Prussian uniforms, but they also have wives and children [...].<sup>54</sup>

However, the image of bitter disappointment and resentment towards the Germans as perfidious representatives of a false civilization, appearing under the banner of high culture, but in fact greedy, brutal and cruel, prevailed. One

<sup>52</sup> See B. Bakal, op. cit., p. 98.

<sup>53</sup> J. Kaden-Bandrowski, op. cit., pp. 214–215, 235.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

can look at it in two ways. On the one hand, the Wilhelminian Empire with its culture steeped in militarism and racism (whose key point was the superiority and hostility towards the Slavs), and its boundless self-confidence, running an exploitative economy and hypocritical policy on occupied Polish lands, calculated to acquire temporary and limited sympathy of society, deserved this disdain. On the other hand, it is impossible not to see in this picture, stressing hypocrisy above all as the German main sin, a bright tracing of the eternal stereotype of the German, dating back to the Teutonic Knights. His key elements – perfidy, embezzlement and desecration of lofty ideals (once Christian, now civilizational) – were carried over to twentieth-century literature practically *in toto* from the arguments of Polish lawyers in disputes with the Teutonic Order in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, that were disseminated by the authors of the caliber of Włodkowic, Długosz and Kochanowski, then Mickiewicz and Sienkiewicz in the nineteenth century. As it turned out, the war reality provided Polish authors with a number of facts that confirmed this stereotype. Nevertheless, the “Teutonic” stereotype came to the fore even where German brutality, it would seem, spoke for itself and did not demand any historical justification. In relation to the destruction of Kalisz in August 1914, we read, for example:

Man does not believe that such a thing could happen, that it must be a dream or illusion. No, people: it was true, pure and real; this truth testifies and will testify for a long time to this high, gorgeous culture of the Prussian Junker, who, apart from his magnificence, is not afraid of anyone but God! O irony, o mocking monstrously, nasty Teutonic arrogance and lies! [...] The intention of the Germans to stir up faith in them and trust in their freedom has had the opposite effect. This true Teutonic hypocrisy provoked all the greater hatred, disgust and indignation from the whole country [...].<sup>55</sup>

The anonymous author of this account, on the one hand, described events so tragic and frightening that their moral expression had to be unambiguous, on the other hand, he drew profusely from the reservoir of historical analogies, which were mentioned above. However, also in the accounts of events much less dramatic and bereft any such historical connotations, a similar motif comes to the fore: the Germans, who are considered a civilized nation, turned out to be ruthless and brutal in reality. As the author of the account with the unambiguous title *Okrucieństwa Niemców na Kresach Wschodnich Polski* (“German Atrocities in the Eastern Borderlands of Poland”) – that is, from the areas where the Germans were a tiny fraction of the population before

---

<sup>55</sup> W. Z., op. cit., pp. 26–33.

the war – reports of the German’s initially masked and then open pursuit of subjugation and ruthless exploitation of the country was “more severe in its effect than wild and mindless Russian cruelty.”<sup>56</sup> Similarly presenting the Germans was Florian Czarnyszewicz in “Berezina People”, that takes place on the furthest reaches of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth among the nobility of the gentry. At the beginning, so long as the Germans were known only from rumors and newspapers, respect and admiration for German culture prevailed. As the rumors had it “in Germania nobody was lying, stealing, getting drunk; they were all hard-working and that they were able to farm so well as to make the smoke from chimneys turn to their advantage.” From this exaggerated opinion and from these excessive expectations, a great disappointment, bitterness and finally hatred arises as a result of rubbing shoulders with the occupation army, which is characterized by brutality, greed, crude manners bordering on “bestly”. After two months of German rule, the narrator sums it up, “everyone said that these are only savages organized in regiments and seasoned for murder – eternally hungry, greedy, cruel.”<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

The texts analyzed here are only fragments of impressions and accounts from the wartime reality. However, it seems that they can be regarded as symptomatic of the Polish experience of the war. What is more, the confrontation of literary images and the transposition of war experience with the emerging news reports, allows us to note a series of convergences and continuities, both thematic and stylistic. The veiled (probably because of censorship) observation of a Radom journalist from autumn 1914, could be considered one of the most important Polish “civilian” reflections on the war: “It is striking, the terrible power of the general interest, for which the state, sometimes sacrificing epochal accomplishments, starts wars.”<sup>58</sup> Indeed, from the Polish point of view, this “collective interest”, in the name of which the wartime struggle in Poland was fought from 1914 to 1917, mainly took the form of a terrible, and at the same time largely inexplicable force, crushing vast swathes of the country and hundreds of thousands of its inhabitants.

---

<sup>56</sup> M. Nałęcz-Dobrowolski, *Okrucieństwa Niemców na Kresach Wschodnich Polski*, Warszawa, 1918, p. 3.

<sup>57</sup> F. Czarnyszewicz, op. cit., pp. 272–273.

<sup>58</sup> S. Mikułowski-Pomorski, op. cit., p. 14.

As for the common themes of all the texts analyzed here, one could summarize them as follows: 1) sufferings of the civilian population and material destruction in the countryside, and the resulting specter of famine and civilizational collapse; 2) ideological and political disorientation of Poles, aware that in this war their interest is completely irrelevant, and Polish lands are treated by warring armies as a source for ruthlessly draining provisions; 3) the painful awareness that Poles are fighting with their countrymen serving in opposing armies, which is the basis for conclusions on the absurd and nihilistic nature of war. Some pieces of literary fiction add to this list a specific fascination with war as an existential experience that is supposed to bring man closer to the dark side of his nature; some respond with an attempt to compromise this idea. Certainly, there are no accounts of the experiences of frontline soldiers of an ideological and artistic weight comparable to the classics of Western literature of the “lost generation”. On the other hand, focusing attention on the suffering of civilians and the devastating nature of a mobile war (and yet causing unimaginable ruin) can be considered its trademark.

Finally, it should be emphasized that, already in the first accounts, prepared by the authors who never even had a brush with the literary Parnassus, the stylistics of fear and the macabre are demonstrated, shocking with images of glowing fires, disfigured corpses, smoking ruins and “horrifying curses” of ghosts of the dead, which we find later with recognized authors. The contemporary literary imagination, also at the popular level, was evidently well acquainted with these kinds of clichés and imaging methods, which suddenly found a painful counterpart in the actual, visible reality.