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0521661579 - War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I

Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius

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Introduction

During the First World War, the experiences of German soldiers on the Western and Eastern Fronts seemed worlds apart. These separate worlds shaped distinct “front-experiences” (even for soldiers who fought on both fronts) which proved to have important consequences both during and after the war, testimony to the impact of war on culture. While all was “quiet on the Western Front,” a routine hell of mud, blood, and shell shock in the trenches, a different ordeal took shape for the millions of German troops in the East from 1914 to 1918. What they saw among largely unfamiliar lands and peoples, both at the front and in the vast occupied areas behind the lines, left durable impressions. These crucial first impressions in turn had profound consequences for how Germans viewed the lands and peoples of the East during the war itself and in the decades to come, until ultimately these ideas were harnessed and radicalized by the Nazis for their new order in Europe. In this sense, the eastern front-experience was a hidden legacy of the Great War. The failures of the First World War had vast consequences, for out of this real encounter over four years there grew a vision of the East which encouraged unreal and brutal ambitions. It is crucial to understand that when German soldiers invaded the lands of Eastern Europe under Nazi direction during the Second World War, it was not the first time that German armies had been there. Rather, the eastern front-experience of the First World War was an indispensable cultural and psychological background for what came later in the violent twentieth century, a preexisting mentality.

The aim of this study is to reveal the assumptions and ideas which derived from the eastern front-experience, shaped by the realities of German occupation. Above all, it seeks to understand the psychological outlines of this experience and the outlook on the East it produced. The very idea of a galvanizing, transformative front-experience was important in Germany during the war and in its aftermath, as millions searched for some compelling, redemptive meaning to the sacrifices of a global struggle ending in defeat. In the West, this front-experience was marked by industrial warfare, in a blasted landscape of mud, barbed wire, machine-

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gun nests, bunkers, and fortified emplacements facing no man's land, over which swept barrages, high explosives, and all the technological energies of terrible battles of attrition, the shattering and grinding trials of Verdun and the Somme. This western front-experience of the trenches, ran one important myth of the Great War, hammered a "new man" into being, a human war machine, the hardened "front fighter." After the war, the works of former shock-troop commander Ernst Jünger and the tidal wave of "soldierly literature" cresting in the late 1920s presented a new and brutal model of heroism in the person of the storm trooper, and a military model of society in the *Frontgemeinschaft*, the "community of the trenches," which had supposedly overcome the weaknesses of liberal individualism and class division in a true egalitarian moment. Technological modernity and materialism were also transcended, the passionate argument ran, by the *esprit* of an elite forged in battle and its transformations: these steeled "princes of the trenches" mattered more and more in modern battle, while ordinary individuals counted ever less. Even Remarque's pessimistic *All Quiet on the Western Front*, indicting authorities who had sent crowds of innocents into the "blood mill" of the West, still plaintively avowed that this generation had been changed by the experience, and while wounded and crippled, might represent revolutionary potential in its generational unity. While these ideas were clearly the trappings of myth rather than realistic social descriptions, myths have consequences. The mythologized western front-experience provided impetus and symbols for the militarization of politics and the acceptance of political violence in Germany between the wars.

As the mythical figure in the West gained in definition, growing clearer in outline, in the East limits were lost. There, with widened eyes, the German soldier faced vistas of strange lands, unknown peoples, and new horizons, and felt inside that this encounter with the East was transforming him because of the things he saw and did there. Armies in the East found themselves lost, far beyond their homeland's borders, in huge occupied territories of which most knew little. In general, before the war, ordinary Germans had little direct experience of the lands just to their east. Norbert Elias, later a famed sociologist, recalled that when the war broke out, even as a student he knew about Russia "nothing, absolutely nothing. The Tsar and the Cossacks, barbarous. The barbarous east – that was all beyond the pale."¹ During the course of the war, such hollow commonplaces were replaced by specific details and anecdotal generalizations about the East, drawing on the immediate, first-hand experience of soldiers, conditioned by occupation policies and practices.

The eastern front-experience thus illuminates modern German perceptions of the East, and about what sort of things could be done there.

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While millions of soldiers were involved in the first-hand experience, many others at home were also touched by the propaganda of military authorities in the East and the enthusiasm for annexations in significant portions of the population. As will be shown, while the eastern front-experience of all the individual soldiers was not identical in every detail, they shared many broad assumptions and common features. The hallmarks of the eastern front-experience were significantly different from the typical features of the West, even for soldiers who experienced war on both fronts. Above all, the stay in the East was marked by the central fact of German occupation. Unlike in industrial Belgium and northern France, the occupiers seemed to face not modern developed lands, but what appeared as the East's primitive chaos. The second decisive difference came into focus as the war neared its end, a basic and essential point, though often forgotten. After the peace of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, imposed on beleaguered Russia, it appeared to Germans that half of the war had been won. This central fact, that war in the East apparently had ended in German victory, made it all the more difficult to accept the failure that followed upon Germany's weakening in the West that same summer and the collapse into revolution at home. The perceived lessons and conclusions drawn from the eastern front-experience and its failures would constitute a hidden legacy of the first World War.

In scholarship on the First World War, the Eastern Front has remained to a great extent the "Unknown War," as Winston Churchill called it nearly seventy years ago in his book of the same name.² Since then, many standard works on the conflict have concentrated on western events, casting only occasional glances at developments on the other front.³ Norman Stone's excellent *The Eastern Front, 1914–1917* finally gave a detailed account of the military history.⁴ For an understanding of the role of the East in German war aims and internal politics, the appearance of Fritz Fischer's *Griff nach der Weltmacht* in 1961 and the explosive debates which followed were decisive.⁵ Fischer documented annexationist demands in the East, indicating suggestive continuities between strivings of the *Kaiserreich* and the Nazi regime. Detailed monographs followed, investigating avenues Fischer had opened and seconding some of his conclusions.⁶ Yet there never appeared in this scholarship, nor in general overviews of Germany's relationship with Eastern Europe, a comprehensive evaluation of the significance of the experience of the Eastern Front for the masses of ordinary German soldiers who lived it, and this encounter's cultural impact.⁷ A clear view on the meaning of this episode in the East had yet to resolve itself.

In the last decades, historical research on the First World War took on a new impetus, as scholars focused on the cultural impact of the war that

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had ushered in modernity, breaking traditions, altering and recasting old certainties, and overthrowing empires. In these investigations, “culture” was not restricted to “high art,” but was defined more broadly, in an anthropological sense, encompassing a society’s values, assumptions, governing ideas, and outlooks. From the 1970s, new studies explored the first World War as a decisive experience shaping modern society. John Keegan’s original work opened the way to a fresh understanding of war’s cultural significance and its experiences in terms of ordinary lives, insisting that “what battles have in common is human.”⁸ The ascendancy of social history further strengthened emphasis on experience as a category of historical analysis, encouraging works looking beyond a chronology of military events to seek out the interpretations which participants in the First World War formed from their experiences. Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory* sketched the myths of “the Great War as a historical experience with conspicuous imaginative and artistic meaning,” as lived and reworked by British writers and poets.⁹ Other studies provided social histories of trench warfare in the West.¹⁰ Building on these efforts, cultural historians moved to assess the importance of the First World War in molding the distinctive contours of the modern. Robert Wohl’s study of the mythologizing of the generation of 1914 demonstrated the war’s impact across Western Europe, forming a powerful articulation of identity with profound political and cultural consequences for the turbulent interwar period.¹¹ Through close reading of symbols and memorials, George Mosse’s *Fallen Soldiers* defined the conflict’s role in shaping modern nationalism. Jay Winter’s *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* explored the cultural history of “mourning and its private and public expression,” revising the earlier exclusive emphasis on radical discontinuity by showing how traditions played a crucial role in helping individuals and societies cope with the personal and collective loss of the war’s more than nine million dead.¹² Most broadly, Stephen Kern’s *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* and Modris Eksteins’ *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* claimed for the Great War the status of a watershed event, the defining moment for modernity, when basic human ways of apprehending reality were changed forever.¹³

Yet these illuminating examinations of the psychology of the front-experience and its ramifications focused almost exclusively on only one half of the war, the Western Front. Discussions of the First World War’s cultural impact either completely neglected the eastern front-experience or allowed it only glancing, peripheral mention. It is striking to compare this omission with the volume of historiography on the Eastern Front in the Second World War. The contrast could not be greater, as the Second

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World War in the East, marked by fierce ideological combat, harsh German occupation policies, and the events of the Holocaust in particular, has been studied in great depth. In particular, Omer Bartov's work on the front-experience of the East offered especially striking insights into the character and mechanics of the Nazi pursuit of war, while casting light on the soldiery's social context, the culture and beliefs which they brought into the ranks.¹⁴ Yet this important body of work would likewise benefit from a clear view of the German encounter with the East which preceded the devastating Nazi invasion, when German troops returned to areas where their armies had been before.

The neglect of the Eastern Front in historiography of the First World War, then, is a striking gap. It might be explained in part by the remoteness of the events and area to western scholars. After the Second World War, it was believed that all but fragments of the German documentary material had been lost to bombings, especially at Potsdam, while archival holdings in the Soviet Union were inaccessible or unknown (in fact, though scattered and sometimes incomplete, significant documentary material survived).¹⁵ Moreover, it seemed in those Cold War decades that Eastern Europe's complexity was no longer a vital issue, frozen in the apparent stasis of communist regimes. Even the crucial issue of ethnic identities in this region was treated most searchingly not by historians, but recorded as personal experience in the writings of Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz.¹⁶

The eastern front-experience still remains conspicuous by its absence in historiography. This is in itself a telling feature of the "Unknown War." The German eastern front-experience was so disorienting, conclusions drawn from it so unsettling, that it was not mythologized in the same ready way as the world of the western trenches in the decades after the war. Instead, it constituted a hidden legacy of great importance, formed out of a decisive episode in the history of Germany's relationship with the East, and holding crucial implications due to the "lessons" drawn from this encounter. Significant cultural assumptions about the East and a German civilizing mission there were shaped under the impact of war. And yet until now the eastern front-experience and its long-term legacy have remained *terra incognita* to historical scholarship.

This study explores the significance of that distinctive eastern front-experience. Its dramatic outlines emerge from a broad variety of sources, as the study ranges widely to capture the images, ideas, and characteristic assumptions recurring in German views of the East. These sources include official reports, administrative orders, propaganda bulletins, personal letters, memoirs, diaries, visual evidence by war artists and amateurs, army newspapers, poems and songs, and realistic novels by

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participants recording their confrontation with the East. Moreover, for a truly comprehensive, unretouched picture of German administration in the East, it is important to also draw on sources from parts of those native populations subject to German rule, as a crucial corrective and supplement to official German sources. This study uses the case of the largest ethnic group under military occupation in the northeast, Lithuanians, to provide native sources giving a “view from below” of the structures of the occupation (thus moving beyond narrow national history). This produces a more complete anatomy of an occupation, dissecting its impact on both occupiers and occupied and the clash of their cultures in the turmoil of war. Given the disorganized realities of post-1918 Eastern Europe, it is necessary to draw in not only official sources (for statistical evidence is sometimes impossible to adduce), but also popular native sources chronicling the occupation (sometimes in tendentious terms which need to be dissected critically, at other times offering recurrent motifs and charges which illuminate how natives experienced and understood the occupation). In addition, the use of Lithuanian sources indicates the impact of total war on a population in a corner of Europe less familiar in the West. This episode, while little known, is important to a full apprehension of the First World War’s total European impact. It also forms a crucial chapter in Germany’s longer relationship with neighboring peoples to its East, an interaction spanning centuries and marked as much by cultural exchange and influence as war and military domination. However, one should add that the very multiplicity of languages also presents a specific problem for any historical narrative on this area. In northeastern Europe’s contested lands, each city and town bears many names in different languages (Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian, Yiddish, Polish, Russian), each laying claim to the designated place. Since this study deals above all with German perceptions of the occupied East, which military authorities claimed as a “New Land” for German administration, this study uses German names given to the locations under occupation to reflect and trace those ambitions, providing current names as needed (while obviously in no way endorsing those ambitions).

For German soldiers, the eastern front-experience began with crucial first impressions and encounters, shaping how they regarded the East. Unexpected military triumphs in 1914 and 1915 brought German armies into possession of vast territories in northeastern Europe, along the Baltic coast. Mental pictures of a unitary and monolithic Russian empire, which most Germans held before the invasion, broke down before the varied and chaotic scene they now faced, a patchwork of distinct “lands and peoples.” The occupiers confronted a strange landscape and foreign populations, with unfamiliar traditions, cultural identities, and histories.

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Backdrop to all of this was the devastation of war, leaving the territories in desperate chaos, heightened by the frantic “scorched-earth policy” of retreating Russian armies. Seeing the East for the first time during war, in a whirlwind of human misery, dirt, disorder, disease, and confusion, produced visceral reactions in soldiers. These horrible sights seemed to be ordinary, abiding, and permanent attributes of the East they now surveyed, not just examples of universal human sufferings under the lash of war. Yet the very destruction and disarray held out an alluring possibility to officials. The army could bring order to these lands, making them over in its own image, to realize a military utopia and establish a new German identity charged with a mission of bringing *Kultur* to the East.

The result was the attempt to build a monolithic military state beyond Germany’s borders, named “Ober Ost” (after the title of the Supreme Commander in the East, *Oberbefehlshaber Ost*). Poland, to the south, was put under a separate civil administration where different practices and political goals obtained, and thus for the most part lies outside of the scope of this study. Policies in Ober Ost, the largest compact area of German occupation, indeed had significant similarities to those pursued in other occupied territories, Belgium, northern France, and Poland: harsh economic regimes and requisitions, attempts at political manipulation, outbreaks of brutality against civilians, and the use of forced labor. In important respects, however, Ober Ost was different: in its purely military rule (excluding natives from administration), the relative unfamiliarity of lands and peoples of the region for Germans (compared to Belgium or Poland), and in the ideological terms on which this military state in the East was built. Belgium and Poland, as scholars have shown, were approached with prejudices and predispositions which shaped the occupation (fear of Belgian civilian snipers, long-standing anti-Polish sentiments), but the encounter with the East in Ober Ost created new terms for understanding the region.¹⁷ The distinctive ideological understandings, occupation practices, and ambitions crafted in Ober Ost give this episode its importance.

In Ober Ost, General Erich Ludendorff, mastermind of the military state, and his officials built a huge machinery of administration in the occupied territories, jealously maintaining a complete monopoly of military control. Ober Ost was to be the embodiment of the army as a creative institution. This military utopia’s ambitions went far beyond traditional conservatism or monarchism, instead showcasing a modern kind of rule, bureaucratic, technocratic, rationalized, and ideological. Under the slogan of “German Work,” which claimed for Germans a unique capacity for a kind of disciplined and creative work that organized, molded, and directed, it would reshape the lands and peoples, making them over to

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pave the way for permanent possession. Out of this ambition there emerged two specific practices aiming to control and shape the occupied territories. In both cases, these practices were less unitary, step-by-step blueprints than assumptions and ambitions implicit in many different aspects and policies of the occupation regime. Precisely because they animated so many spheres of the regime's activity, it is instructive to examine these ideas and their ramifications.

A particular practice aiming to remake the area was called "movement policy," *Verkehrspolitik*, by which officials sought to place a severe grid of control over the territory and its native populations, directing all activity in the area and turning it to the uses of the military state, working towards a rational organization of the occupied spaces. It used modern techniques of surveillance, registration, and documentation to mobilize the resources, material and human, of the area.

The ambitious intellectual counterpart to this "movement policy" was a wide cultural program. Ober Ost's administration sought to form and manipulate the identities of different native populations, shaping them through the German Work of arbitration and cultural mentoring in special institutions designed for this purpose. In essence, the military state tried to dictate a culture for Ober Ost, where crude and untutored primitive peoples would be cultivated and ordered by German genius for organization. German soldiers, meanwhile, were also confirmed in their role as supervisors of German Work from above, separate from native populations below, in their own institutions of culture in the East: army newspapers, military homes, and theatre performances at the front.

At the same time, the eastern front-experience and practices of the military administration formed in German soldiers a specific view of the East and the sort of things that might be done there. Increasingly, the area was seen not as a complicated weaving of "lands and peoples" (*Land und Leute*), but as "spaces and races" (*Raum und Volk*) to be ordered by German mastery and organization. For many, a new German identity and mission directed against the East grew out of the eastern front-experience. The message of a mission in the East, already buttressed by concrete achievements, found ready reception back in Germany as well, where promises of future prosperity won by conquest attracted not only enthusiasts of the annexationist war aims movement, but ordinary Germans as well, enduring wartime privations. In the context of total war (demanding the complete participation and mobilization of entire societies, economies, and home fronts of nations) and the attendant militarization of education, the ground was further prepared in Germany for propaganda on the East's possibilities and promise.

Yet ultimately, fatal contradictions were built into Ober Ost's project

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for total control. Vaunting, overreaching ambition led to constant conflict between the utopian ends and brutal means of the state's policies, which sped towards immobilization. In 1917, as war in the East seemed to be won and Ober Ost's administration lunged at the chance to make its rule permanent, the state's political efforts seized up. Instead of successfully manipulating native peoples, yoking them to the program of German Work, the regime called forth desperate native resistance, as subject peoples articulated national identities in a struggle for survival. This study follows that catalytic process through Lithuanian sources, where outlines of a culture clash emerge, as natives championed their own values against the military's future plans. At the same time, the state was to have given soldiers an identity founded on the mission of *Kultur* in the East, but the results were disappointing. Collapse in November 1918, coming just after the euphoria of what seemed final victory in the East, was beyond comprehension for soldiers of Ober Ost and many Germans at home. Shame, fear, and disappointment created a furious rejection of the East and its dirty, chaotic "spaces and races."

Denial and hatred found expression in the rampage of *Freikorps* freebooters and German mercenaries in the Baltic lands after the war. This brutal coda to the eastern front-experience underlines that the First World War did not end neatly on November 11, 1918, but continued in reverberations and aftershocks into the postwar period. The experiences of the Eastern Front and Ober Ost were reworked in postwar Germany, forming an important backdrop to Nazi plans for realizing a racial utopia in the East. Categories of practice and perception which marked Ober Ost's rule were radicalized, forming an integral part of the Nazi ideology of biological war for "living space." Thus, the earlier military utopia's failure had enormous consequences, as the Nazi regime moved to cleanse and order the spaces of the East, emptied of those populations which Ober Ost's administration once tried to manipulate and form.

The significance of the eastern front-experience of the First World War is revealed in the disastrous ambitions built up in Ober Ost. Such ambitions, even after they ended in failure, enlarged the mental horizons of those who had seen the East, establishing radical new possibilities and practices, offering ideas and conclusions about the East's nature, its dangers and opportunities for Germany, forming a crucial cultural and psychological background and preexisting *mentalité* to be exploited and built upon by the Nazis. The lessons drawn from the failure of wartime plans in the East would have profound consequences, as they returned again in a more radical permutation in Nazi ideology.

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NOTES

Translations are all my own, unless otherwise stated.

- 1 Norbert Elias, *Reflections on a Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1994), 19–20.
- 2 Winston S. Churchill, *The Unknown War: The Eastern Front* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1931).
- 3 Newer surveys offer more complete coverage: J. M. Winter, *The Experience of World War I* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Bernadotte E. Schmitt and Harold Vedeler, *The World in the Crucible, 1914–1919* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984); Holger H. Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1918* (London: Edward Arnold, 1997).
- 4 Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front, 1914–1917* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1975).
- 5 Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht. Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland, 1914/1918* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1961); Wolfgang J. Mommsen, "The Debate on German War Aims," *Journal of Contemporary History* 1.3 (July 1966): 47–72.
- 6 Gerd Linde, *Die deutsche Politik in Litauen im ersten Weltkrieg* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1965); A. Strazhas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg. Der Fall Ober Ost, 1915–1917* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1993); A. Strazhas, "The Land Oberost and its Place in Germany's Ostpolitik, 1915–1918," in *The Baltic States in Peace and War, 1917–1945*, ed. Stanley V. Vardys and Romualdas J. Misiunas (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978), 43–62; Wiktor Sukiennicki, *East Central Europe During World War I*, 2 vols. (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1984); Pranas Čepėnas, *Naujujų laikų Lietuvos istorija*, 2 vols. (Chicago: M. Morkūno spaustuė, 1976). Other studies: Georg von Rauch, *Geschichte der baltischen Staaten*, 3rd edn. (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1990); Werner Basler, *Deutschlands Annexionspolitik in Polen und im Baltikum* (Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1962); Börje Colliander, "Die Beziehungen zwischen Litauen und Deutschland während der Okkupation 1915–1918" (Ph.D. diss., University of Åbo, 1935); Stanley W. Page, *The Formation of the Baltic States: A Study of the Effects of Great Power Politics upon the Emergence of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959); Alfred Erich Senn, *The Emergence of Modern Lithuania* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); Marianne Bienhold, *Die Entstehung des Litauischen Staates in den Jahren 1918–1919 im Spiegel Deutscher Akten* (Bochum: Studienverlag Dr. N. Brockmeyer, 1976).
- 7 Walter Laqueur, *Russia and Germany: A Century of Conflict* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1965); Günther Stökl, *Osteuropa und die Deutschen. Geschichte und Gegenwart einer spannungsreichen Nachbarschaft*, 3rd edn. (Stuttgart: S. Hirzel Verlag, 1982).
- 8 John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 297.
- 9 Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), ix.