

**HEADLINE: Poland immersed in history. It will make us understand why over a million of Ukrainian immigrants, who have been welcomed here with open arms, live and work in Poland. Also, we will find out about at the European Union summit where the Polish Prime Minister is (successfully) striving for a plan of extensive economic support for Belarus.**

**TITLE: How different the echoes of the Great War sound**

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**EXCERPT: The political mission of the contemporary Polish state has been built due to a specific "transmission" of the Union to the East. Being unaware of this fact, it is utterly impossible to understand Polish policy of the last 25 years.**

The famous book *The Sleepwalkers*, by British professor Christopher Clark, investigates World War I, diagnosing it to be more of a tragedy than a crime. The Great War was started by the title "sleepwalkers", unaware of the historical scale of the catastrophe they had perpetrated. Not only the hecatomb of victims and the scale of the destruction turned out to be catastrophic but also, above all, the collapse of the European political order, admired by many to the present day as the "beautiful 19th century". Six years ago, when the centenary of that war took place, Clark's book became the "political bible" of politicians and intellectuals who, smacking their lips with appreciation, discussed its theses at countless conferences, always concluding with the same caution against repeating the "sleepwalking" precedent. Looking from the Western European perspective of „*la belle époque*”, which was brutally interrupted by that war, one may say that this kind of narration dictated to Europe by Clark is not only logical but also holds the value of moral nobility. However, this narrative must struck the Pole by the radical difference of the 20th century experience in Central and Eastern Europe. The difference that a contemporary French, Italian or even German probably is not aware of, not to mention he or she would accept it.

One of the most famous passages from Polish literature, kept in the memory of every Pole since school time, is the prayer from the Pilgrim's Litany by the greatest Polish poet, Adam Mickiewicz: “For the general war for the freedom of peoples! We ask You, Lord”. [translator's note: literal translation] The passage is perceived to be a prophetic announcement of the outbreak of war, which, followed by lasting more than a hundred years of occupation, will finally bring Poles freedom and the possibility of living in their own country. In this Polish narrative, 1914 is neither a “crime” nor a “tragedy.” Quite the opposite, it is a historical announcement of freedom restored four years later. It was the time when the unexpected result of that war entailed the fall of the three occupying emperors: German, Russian and Austrian.

It was a key moment for the Polish understanding of the world and the position of Poland in it. Having won the war, England and France paved the way for Poles to regain freedom, and thus these two powers were inscribed as “friendly” and “allied” in the code of Polish political self-awareness passed down from generation to generation. But that's not enough. Every child in Poland knows that the victory was only possible due to the fact that the Americans entered Europe for the first time in history. As they had left the continent shortly after, being disgusted with the quality of European politics, it did not take long for the tragedy to happen again. The Second World War became the most obvious proof of this. So, this belief in the almost “magical” power of Americans' presence in Europe was also rooted in the political DNA that shaped the identity of Poles.

The Polish state, reborn in 1918, could not think of itself other than in terms of some broader Central European union. Obviously, it was a memory of the old days gone by when the Lithuanian Jagiellonian dynasty ruled a vast federal power with two capitals in Krakow and Vilnius. Although there were more ethnic categories where the Polish national movement was leading the way in the new statehood, but the fact that Józef Piłsudski come to power (on the day of the historic truce of Compiègne on November 11, 1918) meant that it was not "nationalists", but "promhetists" that defined the post-war mission of the Polish state. The military alliance with Ukrainians and Belarusians, who were also liberating themselves from Russian domination the sense of which was to re-establish a union in Central and Eastern Europe, broke down under pressure from the Bolsheviks. There was barely enough strength to defend the endangered Polish statehood against the Bolsheviks who in the summer of 1920 gathered just near the outskirts of Warsaw. It was impossible to gather up enough strength to renew the idea of a union in the Middle East of Europe. Although the union was not formed then, and this part of Europe was soon to become a battlefield of nationalism, that time, immediately after the Great War, turned into an echo that has been constantly sounding in Polish politics throughout the last century until today.

Primarily, it is an echo of dreams of political integration which could no longer be established specifically in the centre of the east part of Europe. Over time the inability to maintain such state of affairs was getting more and more obvious. However, the dreams could be realized through a European great integration project for the whole of Europe. One should bear in mind that to understand Poles' enthusiasm for their own accession to the European Union in the 21st century, but also for its enlargement to include Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and Georgia. The peculiar "transfer" of the

Union to the East has built the political mission of the contemporary Polish state, and without awareness of this fact, it is impossible to understand the Polish policy of the last 25 years.

Unfortunately, there is also a distant echo ringing loudly in the Poland's memory of the fact that at a time when in 1920 all Polish plans threatened to fail, so did the very existence of the Polish state, the "allied" and "friendly" European powers, in particular England under the rule of Lloyd George, took paradoxically the side of the Bolsheviks. It was at the same time when, at the Spa conference, the Polish government was forced to surrender to Soviet Russia half of its territory that is everything that the Russian tsars forcibly appropriated themselves in the 18th century.

Never again has it been possible in Poland to eliminate this intuitive distrust of European "friends", which was strengthened in September 1939 and, in fact, continues today. In turn, however, the still resonating echo of those events also provokes a particular Polish sensitivity to harm and the rejection by Europe of Ukrainians and Belarusians, i.e. the only nations that a century ago faced the Soviet threat by armed forces with Poles. Everyone who wants to understand today why over a million of Ukrainian immigrants, who have been welcomed here with open arms, live and work in Poland. Also, we will find out about at the European Union summit where the Polish Prime Minister is (successfully) striving for a plan of extensive economic support for Belarus which is to start when its citizens manage to remove the tyranny that has prevailed there so far.

In his famous book, Professor Clark proved that the echoes of that Great War can be heard clearly in contemporary politics. It is true. Only that the Polish echoes sound a bit different from those heard by the great British historian.

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