

THE ORIGIN OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR ON THE POLISH MAGAZINES

TEXT 1:

Feast of the war, European society towards the outbreak of World War I

“Investigating reasons for the war-time enthusiasm, one should pay attention to several factors. Such an attitude was partly motivated by a conviction that the armed conflict about to begin was a form of self-defense. Even in Germany, which formally declared war to Russia and France and invaded Belgium, it was believed that Germans were forced to fight by the Triple Entente, which for years had been pursuing a policy of hemming in the Reich. Politicians skillfully manipulated societies, revealing fabricated fragments of diplomatic correspondence.

Forward at Any Cost

One should not forget about the strong influence of military circles on early twentieth-century societies and politics. A victorious war would legitimize the right of German, Russian and Austro-Hungarian elites to hold power, inhibit democratization processes and reinforce the status quo. Europe cherished an idealized false vision of a short military campaign that would last no longer than a couple of weeks and whose results depended on the efficacy of mobilization and railway transport, on the readiness to take offensive action and on the willingness to make high personal sacrifices.

As the German historian Christian von Krockow posits, No plans were made for a long war; it was believed that soon, when autumn leaves fell, around Christmas time at the latest, soldiers would return home covered with fame and crowned with laurels, like their heroic ancestors. And the number of the deceased would be such that the war veterans association would be able to annually celebrate the victory.

No one expected that the war would take a death toll of millions of people, that soldiers would spend years in trenches and die from the hands of an invisible enemy frequently using lethal machines or gas.

The Common Sense of the Working Class and the Powerlessness of Socialists

On July 28th the Social Democratic Party of Germany still organized a demonstration against the “war affair” and, despite heavy rain, thousands of its supporters gathered in the streets of a number of German cities. Many of them shared a fatalistic attitude and a deep concern about the future well-being of their families, once they leave for the front. Desperate, they asked: What do we care that the Austrian heir to the throne was murdered? Why should we sacrifice our lives for this reason?

The situation changed after mobilization was ordered. Even social democrats surrendered to the illusion that the war was imposed on the Reich by the hated reactionary tsarist Russia. Otto Braunn, one of the leaders of the SPD, asked a rhetorical question: Should we let half-Asian hordes of Russian Cossacks stoned with vodka trample German meadows, torment German women and children, and destroy German culture? This is the question to be answered now!

The Polish Case

Poland witnessed similar reactions as the ones observed in the capitals of the neighbouring countries. The armed conflict was perceived as a universal war for the freedom of the peoples, for which eighty years earlier Adam Mickiewicz prayed. Mobilization was more effective than it was expected. People enlisted to the armies of the partitioners, while politicians representing different political options called for loyal collaboration with the government”.

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