

## *The "Outbreak" of World War One*

### **National Approach**

#### Poland's Perspective

The outbreak of the First World War was a result of the increasing conflicts escalating primarily in Europe in the late nineteenth century. Aspects such as gradually expanding territorial scope of the conflict, joining the war by non-European countries, duration of the warfare, the magnitude of war damages, and finally an unprecedented number of victims made this war an unparalleled event in the history of mankind. The outcome of the First World War changed the face of societies, not only in the countries involved in the conflict, causing huge transformations in philosophical, moral, economic, and political dimensions. What is important, understanding the consequences of First World War, both in terms of geo-political repercussions and impact on the way of thinking and attitudes of the post-war societies in Europe is a necessary condition for understanding the origins and causes of the outbreak of another global conflict in 1939.

Poland belonged to the group of European countries that in 1914 did not function as an independent body politic. This group of countries gained or regained their sovereignty only as a result of the First World War, more precisely the peace treaties that ended it. At the end of the eighteenth century, three neighbour countries – Russia, Austria and Prussia – took advantage of the Poland's political, economic and social weakness. These three countries came to an agreement under which they divided the Polish territory between them; took it over by force; joined (annexed) it to their own countries; and throughout the next century, together suppressed all Polish uprisings for national independence. The division of Poland between the three invaders meant that at the outbreak of the First World War, the Poles found themselves on both sides of the conflict. At the battlefield, the Polish soldiers fought in the ranks of three foreign armies: Prussian, Austro-Hungarian and Russian. These facts induced in Poles a specific perception of events taking place between 1914 and 1918, and as a consequence influenced the way the First World War is considered in Polish books and school textbooks.

From the Poland's point of view, the First World War was, most of all, a long-awaited conflict between the occupants: Russia, Austria and Prussia. These countries, for over one hundred years, worked together in order to eradicate Polish culture, language and national identity. In 1914, the first time since the ratification of the partition treaties, it happened that the occupants found themselves at war. For Poles, it was a unique opportunity to gain political freedom and perhaps even the independence for the territory of the former Polish state, provided of course that they would support the right (i.e. winning) side of the conflict. Hence,

enthusiasm of Polish people, regardless of the nationality they represented at the time, was the common reaction to the outbreak of the war in 1914. However, this enthusiasm was mixed with fear and grief caused by the fact that members of the same nation, and sometimes of the same family, had to act against one another in the ranks of foreign armies that were on opposite sides of the battlefield.

The result of the First World War was extremely favourable to Poland. Two Poland's occupants – i.e. Austria-Hungary and the German Empire were among the defeated countries. In 1918, the third of the invaders – Russia, despite participation during the war in the winning camp of The Entente Powers, was in political chaos due to the Bolshevik Revolution. In the eyes of the previous allies, especially Britain and France, the Bolshevik government was perceived more as a potential threat, rather than a partner whose interests should be taken into account during the peace treaties. Thanks to such a coincidence of circumstances supported by great military and political effort of the Polish society during the war, it was possible to rebuild an independent Polish state in 1918.

This does not mean that the Polish history textbooks and historical publications ignore completely the international aspect of the subject of the Great War. On the contrary, the juncture of the processes taking place in the international arena that led to the escalation of the conflict is recognized and widely analyzed. Also during classes, the formation of the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance is discussed including the sequence of events which was a source of political tension in international relations in Europe over several years preceding the assassination in Sarajevo. However, in the context of the course of the war and its consequences, the focus moves to the events that took place mainly in Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia. A special attention is paid to the efforts of the Poles on their way to independence. Only the most important events from the Poland's perspective are situated in the broad context of the international warfare and the political actions in which (apart from the Poland's occupants) a large part of the world participated.

## The Polish Material

The discussed text comes from the popular historical magazine oriented primarily to young people entitled 'Mówią wieki' (Centuries speak). The article by [Piotr Szlanty „Święto wojny. Społeczeństwa Europy wobec wybuchu pierwszej wojny światowej”](#) (“Feast of the War. European Societies in the Presence of the Outbreak of the First World War”) concentrates on the topics of social reaction to the events that took place in the summer of 1914 and led to the outbreak of the international conflict.

## TASKS

1. Read the article [“Feast of the War. European Societies Towards the Outbreak of the First World War”](#) („Święto wojny. Społeczeństwa Europy wobec wybuchu pierwszej wojny światowej”) from the [“Centuries Speak”](#) (“Mówią wieki”) magazine. What is the article about? With your own words, try to explain the meaning of the title "Feast of the War".
2. List the international events mentioned in the article that preceded the outbreak of the First World War. Which of them were the direct causes of the outbreak of warfare in 1914?
3. How did people at the time imagine the course of the conflict before the outbreak of the war in 1914?
  - a. Discuss in the group/class the following issue: what did the contemporary base their ideas about the course of the war on?
4. What are the values that the war should have brought to the European societies according to the intellectuals, philosophers, and politicians of that time?
5. Which social groups showed the greatest enthusiasm for the war? Which social groups approached the outbreak of war with scepticism? Discuss in groups possible sources of different points of view.
6. Taking into account information from the article, analyze the attitude of the Polish society living under occupation to the war. Discuss with your classmate possible reasons of such attitude.
  - a. What side did Poles support in the European conflict?
  - b. How and why the outbreak of the war changed the attitude of Poles towards the occupying countries?
7. What led to the collapse of the optimistic and patriotic atmosphere in the European societies over the following months of the war?
8. Discuss as a group/class your opinions on the legitimacy and practicability of the European societies' attitudes before the outbreak of the First World War. What are the consequences for societies, even today, associated with the war?