

Zitierhinweis

Konrád, Ota: Rezension über: Tomas Balkelis / Andrea Griffante (eds.), *The Shaken Lands. Violence and the Crisis of Governance in East Central Europe, 1914–1923*, Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2023, in: *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung (ZfO)*, 74 (2025), 4, S. 648-650, <https://recensio-stag.lorax.syslab.com/r/dc24369feb6f4e93bc9e64c126cfa91e>



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The Shaken Lands: Violence and the Crisis of Governance in East Central Europe, 1914–1923. Hrsg. von Tomas Balkelis and Andrea Griffante. Academic Studies Press. Boston 2023. 258 S. ISBN 979-8-887-19173-7. (€ 130,95.)

Based on a conference held in 2020, this volume explores the impact on government of violence during World War I and subsequent conflicts in East Central Europe—topics that have become the focus of intense historical research in recent years.

The introductory chapter of this book presents its central concept: the devastating effects of World War I and the subsequent collapse of the Russian, Habsburg, and German Empires that followed created a power vacuum. This vacuum provided opportunities for various paramilitary groups and criminal gangs (with blurred distinctions between the two) to assert power and identity through violence. The emerging nation-states that arose from the ruins of former empires lacked power and resources. For these states, violence became a tool to define themselves, mobilize their populations, and assert the ruling nation's control over the territories they claimed. Although these claims are not new in existing scholarship, the book offers a particularly valuable perspective by highlighting the wide range of violence, its actors, and their motives.

The book's scope is not limited to violence committed exclusively by new-nation states of paramilitary groups, but rather it is categorized into three forms: violence perpetrated by state actors, violence by non-state actors, and "communal violence." Each individual chapter demonstrates how this violence and the people who enacted it were often shaped by local conditions. The complex web of shifting alliances and identity, demands and expectations imposed upon a new state by their citizens emerged as a defining feature of post war violence in the region.

A common element of this violence was aggression directed at Jews, who became convenient targets for post-war hostility. Perpetrators perceived them as an "alien element" in the new national bodies, disloyal citizens, war profiteers, or unwanted economic competitors. The authors engage (in varying degrees of explicitness) with the familiar "brutalization thesis." However, though the volume's chapters emphasize the critical role of war and wartime experiences in the "brutalization" of postwar societies, they rightly caution against monocausal explanations, highlighting the complexity of postwar violence.

In the first chapter, Vytautas Petronis examines the evolution of banditry in Lithuania during the war. He identifies four phases of gradual radicalization and shifting public perceptions of bandits as their actions became increasingly brutal. These changes were driven by the ongoing conflicts making it difficult for the state to intervene, and in some cases, direct state support for violence, such as Russian plans to incite guerrilla warfare in German-occupied territory. In the second chapter, Vasily Safronov analyzes contemporary testimonies of violence against civilians by German and Russian forces along the border. He highlights the frameworks within which these testimonies were constructed, such as portrayals of Russian backwardness and barbarism or the depiction of Germans as "crusaders." These narratives were often used to support national myths of suffering and sacrifice, clearly defining the enemy while overlooking a range of violent experiences, including inter-civilian violence and sexual assault. The chapter illustrates the limitations of firsthand accounts describing violence, and how the context in which testimonies were created shape our perception of that violence.

In the third chapter, "The Military Pogroms in Lithuania, 1919–1920," Darius Staliunas returns to the book's central thesis: the Lithuanian government's inability to control its military forces was the precondition for escalating violence. He also highlights the symbolic significance of violence by military units against Jews, who were perceived as potentially disloyal citizens of the new state. Staliunas views this violence as part of the nation building process. The aftermath of the war in the "Shatterzone of Empires" was characterized by depopulation, damaged infrastructure and economic and social destruction. This made successor states uniquely susceptible to foreign intervention, and Mart Kuldkepp demonstrates this in chapter four. Analyzing the violence committed by Scandinavian

ian volunteer troops and attributing it to several factors: their unique status as foreign volunteers, diverse motivations (ranging from ideological convictions to mere adventurism or criminal behavior), disdain for the local population, and the weakness of local authorities.

Béla Bodó's fifth chapter examines "white terror" carried out by upper- and middle-class paramilitary groups, such as the Hungarian Freikorps, citizen and student militias. Unlike most paramilitary units in Europe, whose members often came from the lower middle classes, these groups comprised Hungarian elites and aristocrats. Their motives ranged from personal revenge for the previous communist government, to ideological beliefs or even the simple desire for excitement. Above all, he emphasizes economic and social motivations, including the violent restoration of the old order and the elimination of unwanted economic competition, mainly targeting Jewish entrepreneurs in the countryside. In contrast to other contributors to the volume, Bodó argues that postwar violence was not due to state weakness. Postwar chaos "only" provided a space for escalating already existing pre-war social conflicts.

In chapter six, Jochen Böehler describes the chaotic postwar period in Poland. Rather than a single government and regular army, multiple competing power centers and paramilitary units operated, each pursuing its agenda from different regions. Böehler argues that this fragmented power structure, indicative of a state's weakness, significantly shaped the nature of postwar violence. He also explores subsequent attempts to create a unified narrative of the period, attempting to align the chaos of history with the future political interests of the interwar state.

The seventh chapter by Maciej Górny highlights the central role of trains in wartime and postwar conflicts. Beyond serving as a critical means of transportation and communication, armored trains became direct participants in battles. Transportation infrastructure, especially railway stations, played a key role in these conflicts. Toward the war's end and in the immediate postwar period, trains also became conduits for violence, such as when demobilized troops spread unrest into the hinterland. Górny shows how the trains manipulated the geography of postwar violence, connecting violence from the frontlines to the backlines.

In the final chapter, "Beyond Comparison? The Challenges of Applying Comparative Historical Research to Violence," Julia Eichenberg builds on the preceding chapters to explore the potential of comparative and transnational histories of violence. She identifies three key areas where this specific perspective holds the most merit: (1) the structural and spatial conditions of violence; (2) perpetrator and victim identities; and (3) types of violence. This entangled perspective on history is not only relevant to classical social history, but also to the study of social practices, which can inspire comparative cultural histories of violence.

Overall, the volume is a successful contribution to a vibrant field of research. With its clear conception, focus on a specific space and period, and appropriate selection of high-quality studies, it avoids the common pitfall of similar books where individual contributions are only loosely related by an overarching theme. Instead, the collection strikes a balance by maintaining a plurality of approaches and arguments that effectively capture the dynamic nature of the period they study.

The book's geographical focus, however, warrants deeper reflection. Most of the chapters refer to "East Central Europe", but use of the book's subtitle to refer to "The Shaken Lands" also appears sporadically throughout the text. The authors occasionally reference concepts such as "Shatterzone of Empires." What defines this space, and how does it influence the violence that occurred within it?

In fact, the book does not address East Central Europe as a whole. It focuses on a narrower space characterized by several simultaneous phenomena: a territory directly affected by war operations, which led to widespread material destruction, depopulation, waves of migration, and damaged infrastructure. This was the territory where former empires had collapsed, and newly established successor states, weakened by the war, grappled with in-

stability and fragile legitimacy for their governance and national projects. Furthermore, it was a multi-ethnic territory where various collective identities not only clashed but were still in the process of formation. In this volatile environment, violence often became an acceptable or even normalized means of resolving conflicts and asserting authority.

This characterization does not apply to the entirety of East Central Europe (leaving aside the question of its precise borders). This may explain why Bodó's interpretation of violence in his chapter diverges somewhat from that presented in other sections. The same might be true for other East Central European countries that are not included in the volume, such as Czechoslovakia and Austria. These regions were mostly spared the direct impact of war operations. In the case of Czechoslovakia, the successful establishment of centralized state control prevented the rise of paramilitary groups after the war. Also, a comparative analysis of other postwar European regions would help to define the distinct structural features of the "Shaken Lands" and to define them more precisely.

This concluding remark is not a critique of the volume but a suggestion for future research. *The Shaken Lands* successfully encourages further scholarly inquiry into these complex and compelling themes.

Praha

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Kathryn Ciancia: On Civilization's Edge. A Polish Borderland in the Interwar World. Oxford University Press. New York 2020. 343 S., Ill. ISBN 978-0-19-006745-8. (£ 77,-)

Beata Halicka: Borderlands Biography. Z. Anthony Kruszewski in Wartime Europe and Postwar America. Aus dem Poln. von Paul McNamara. Brill Schöningh. Paderborn 2021. XXII, 391 S., Ill. ISBN 978-3-657-79183-5. (€ 105,-)

Die *borderlands*, die Grenzgebiete in Ostmitteleuropa, die im Laufe der Geschichte mehrfach ihre territoriale Zugehörigkeit wechselten, multipel imperial und/oder national überformt wurden, und aufgrund irredentistischer Begehrlichkeiten besonders im Fadenkreuz der benachbarten Mächte standen, interessieren die Geschichtsschreibung zu dieser Region schon über längere Zeit. Ereignisgeschichtliche Arbeiten zur Gewaltgeschichte¹ der Grenzgebiete gehören inzwischen ebenso zum Kern der ostmitteleuropäischen Geschichtsschreibung wie die nach wie vor intensive Forschung zur Erinnerungsgeschichte.

Mit den beiden hier zu besprechenden Monografien von Kathryn Ciancia und Beata Halicka liegen zwei neue Beiträge zu den *borderlands* und Polen vor, wenngleich sie sehr unterschiedliche Fokusse haben. C. nimmt in ihrer Monografie, die auf ihrer Dissertation an der Stanford University basiert, die Grenzgebiete im östlichen Polen in den Fokus, insbesondere die Provinz Wolhynien während der Zwischenkriegszeit. Diese Region war zuvor – nach den Teilungen Polen-Litauens – Bestandteil des Russländischen Reiches gewesen. Der nach 1918 zum wiedergegründeten Polen zugeschlagene (und vor russischem militärischem Zugriff verteidigte) westliche Teil stand im Mittelpunkt polnischer Integrationsbemühungen. C. untersucht die Integrationspolitiken des multiethnischen Grenzgebiets als nationalpolnische zivilisatorische Projekte. Dies erscheint sinnvoll, denn bezüglich der Infrastruktur, Landwirtschaftstechnik und Alphabetisierungsquote sahen die polnischen Expert:innen großen Nachholbedarf – im Einklang mit dem zeitgenössischen Diskurs, der Entwicklungsstände der europäischen Regionen intensiv bewertete. Damit fügt die Vf. dem Forschungsstand zur Geschichte europäischer Zivilisierungsgedanken und -politiken einen weiteren Baustein hinzu, indem sie aufzeigt, dass Polen – selbst Projektionsfläche des Westens – im Inneren ähnliche Diskurse pflegte.

Die Arbeit ist in sieben Kapitel gegliedert, teils chronologisch, teils thematisch sortiert. Sie beginnt mit den frühen Jahren, als das Konzept eines demokratischen und souveränen

1 Vgl. z. B.: OMER BARTOV, ERIC D. WEITZ (Hrsg.): *Shatterzone of Empires. Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands*, Bloomington 2013.