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THE DECAYING EMPIRE AND THE HUMAN DILEMMAS:

THE LAST WAR OF AUSTRIA-HUNGARY IN POLISH CINE- MATOGRAPHY FROM 1918 ONWARDS

Piotr Szlanta

Introduction

As a result of the First World War, after 123 years, Poland reappeared on the political map of Europe. It was the fulfillment of the dream of generations who, in the long nineteenth century, fought for the rebuilding of a sovereign, independent Polish state.¹ During the dramatic years of the Great War, deep structural changes irreversibly transformed Polish society in Galicia and Silesia. Costly military defeats of the Austro-Hungarian troops resulted in a months-long occupation of the largest part of Galicia by Russian troops. Subsequently, many circumstances and political developments undermined the emotional ties of Poland and the Danube Monarchy, weakening the Polish loyalty to this empire: Political repression after the liberation practically abolished the autonomy status of Galicia by proclaiming direct

1 Cf., for example, Piotr Szlanta, "Poland," in *1914–1918-online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel et al (Berlin: Freie Universität, 2014), DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10255>.

military rule in 1915. The dependency on the powerful German Empire prevailed. Provision problems and failures of the state organs increased. Unfavorable agreements regarding Poland made by Ukrainians and the Central Powers against the backdrop of the Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations exacerbated the situation, together with the loss of prestige of the Habsburg dynasty. The Poles started to orientate themselves more toward the building of their own national state and the uniting of all Polish territories, rather than identifying with the Austro-Hungarian imperial interests.²

Interwar Legion Films

It is obvious that, after 1918, dramatic events aroused the interest of Polish cinematography, which was strongly supported by government circles. During the interwar period, films concentrated on the war experience of Polish Legions, who fought at the side of the Central Power against Russian armies from 1914 to 1917. The fighting route of this army, small in comparison to the “millions-strong” armies of belligerents, was intensively used by the political elite of a newborn Polish state as a grounding myth of the so-called Second Republic (1918–1939), especially after the coup d'état staged by Józef Piłsudski and his followers in May 1926. Another key issue was the Polish/Soviet War of 1920–21. More movies on the war were shot in the 1970s and

2 Cf. Jerzy Z. Pająk, *Od autonomii do niepodległości: Kształtowanie się postaw politycznych i narodowych społeczeństwa Galicji w warunkach Wielkiej Wojny 1914–1918* (Kielce: Wydawn, 2012); Piotr Szlanta, “‘Najgorsze bestie to są Honwedy’: Ewolucja stosunku polskich mieszkańców Galicji do monarchii habsburskiej podczas I wojny światowej,” in *Galicyskie Spotkania*, ed. Urszula Jakubowska (Zabrze: inforteditions, 2011); Ludwik Mrocza, *Galicji rozstanie z Austrią: Zarys monograficzny* (Kraków: Wydawn, 1990).

1980s. Nevertheless, there was a very narrow margin within the production of Polish war movies.

The First World War's stories were present in the Polish cinematography in the interwar period. Many movies were shot in Poland, set in the reality of the Piłsudski's legionnaires, for example: *Maraton Polski* (1927, directed by Wiktor Biegański), *Dzikie Pola* (1932, directed by Józef Lejtes), and *Rok 1914* (1932, directed by Henryk Szaro); or the Polish-Soviet war, for example: *Dla Ciebie Polsko* (1920, directed by Antoni Bednarczyk), *Cud nad Wisłą* (1921, directed by Ryszard Bolesławski), *Tajemnice medalionu* (1922, directed by Edward Puchalski), *Mogiła Nieznanego Żołnierza* (1927, directed by Ryszard Ordyński), and *Z dnia na dzień* (1929, directed by Józef Lejtes). Their screenplays presented predominantly typical, banal, pseudo-romantic stories, full of pathos, with a readiness for self-sacrifice for the sake of the fatherland and love, promoting the legion's myth. The movies mentioned above did not reach a high artistic level. Partly these productions were co-financed by the state.³

The most successful of them, in all probability, turned out to be a comedy *Dodek na froncie* (*Dodek at the front line*, 1936, directed by Michał Waszyński), which tells the story of a Polish soldier from Cracow, a smart aleck former footballer Dodek Wędzonka

3 Ewa Mazierska, "Between Parochialism and Universalism: World War One in Polish Cinematography," in *The First World War and Popular Cinema 1914 to the Present*, ed. Michael Paris (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 194–204; Łukasz A. Plessnar, *100 filmów wojennych* (Krakow: Rabid, 2002), 123; Władysław Banaszkiewicz and Witold Witczak, *Historia filmu polskiego*, vol.1, 1895–1929 (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1966), 126, 159–160, and 196–197; Barbara Artymys, Leszek Artymys, and Wiesław Stradomski, *Historia filmu polskiego*, vol. 2, 1930–1939 (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1988), 257–261.

serving in the Austro-Hungarian army, who during a patrol service accidentally finds himself in a Russian uniform and is regarded by Russians as one of their own officers, freed from Austro-Hungarian captivity. The action of the movie is mostly played out in the headquarters of the Russian staff, where Dodek is taken, located in the Polish manor house in the village of Majewo. Beyond a love affair, the action of the movie is focused on the Russian officers, presented as stupid (for a long time they did not recognize that Dodek belonged to the enemy), cowardly, unprofessional (they could not even properly read a military map), arrogant, servile toward their superiors, and having thieving instincts. Concerning Austro-Hungary, at the beginning of the movie, Dodek, played by Adolf Dymśa, one of the most popular Polish actors in the interwar period, bluntly declares in the trenches that he is not highly motivated to fight in the ranks of the imperial forces and that he is waiting for transfer to the Polish Legion. His direct superior shares the same dream. In the final scene, a group of Polish legionnaires attacks and takes over the manor house holding the entire Russian staff. Among the successful conquerors is the superior of Dodek, who, in the meantime, has managed to join the Legions. As the audience could guess, Dodek finally leaves the Austro-Hungarian army and joins the Polish Legions, where he will be successful fighting for the re-establishment of the Polish state.⁴

Embodiments of the Empire's Downfall

After the Second World War, for many decades, the First World War experience almost disappeared from the scene. The unprecedented scale of the tragedies of the Second World War eclipsed

4 On the Polish Legions, cf.: Jarosław Centek, "Polish Legions," in *1914–1918-online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel et al (Berlin: Freie Universität, 2014), DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10337>.

the commemoration of the First World War. In comparison with the First World War, the Second World War, with its tremendous human and material losses, occupation terror, Holocaust, the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, mass migration, re-shaping of borders, and subjection to the Soviet Union, held a much larger place in the historical consciousness of Poles. After 1945, cinematography found itself under the control and serving almost exclusively to the official communist ideology. Even after the limiting of state control over culture, as a result of the de-Stalinization process which started in Poland in 1956, the events between 1914 and 1918 did not find much interest among Polish filmmakers, producers, and audiences.⁵

In 1979, the movie *Lekcja Martwego Języka* (*Lesson of dead language*) was produced and directed by Janusz Majewski. The main character of this psychological drama, which is set in the last weeks of the Great War, is a young, well-educated, elegant Austrian dragoon officer, Alfred Kiekeritz, terminally ill with tuberculosis, who serves in the small, multinational town of Turka, lying in the Carpathian valley in Eastern Galicia, inhabited by Poles, Jews, Ukrainians, Roma, and Austrian officials. As a commandant of the post in the communication zone, he has not much more to do than to control traffic at the railway station and to supervise a small group of Russian POWs whose main occupation is to clean a former battlefield. Aside from symptoms of intensification of his illness, namely high fever, coughing fits, and the growing weakness of his organs, he suffers from boredom and the primitivism of the people surrounding him. He fills his free time by collecting art pieces, which he sends to his mother in Graz. Knowing that his own end is fast approaching, Kiekeritz is unhealthily fascinated by the phenomenon of death—by killing as well as by dying. Especially while sleeping, he is faced with dramatic

5 Ewa Mazierska, "Between Parochialism and Universalism," 204–214.

occurrences during his service on the frontline, when his dragoons took part in fighting with Bolsheviks in Ukraine, also killing Jewish civilians and executing POWs. Despite his fragility and humanity (he treats his subordinates well and even orders a funeral for the rest of the bodies of Russian soldiers found at the former battlefield), Kikeritz looks for an opportunity to kill somebody; nearing the last hours of his life, despite his service on the front, he has not personally shot anybody. Finally, while hunting in the surrounding forest, he accidentally comes across an escaped Russian POW and kills him. Only a few hours later, the capitulation and the end of war coincide with the death of Kikeritz. Thus, Kikeritz's dying is taking place simultaneously with the process of the failing of the state: "Decay of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy is prejudged [...] in Majewski's film, finally, with the Great War of White Men, and the nineteenth century coming to an end. Manhood will never come back to the state of youthful faith in ideals, even if these ideals are incontestable," wrote one of the film critics.⁶ In his last words, Kikeritz declares that death is not fascinating but only nonsensical. Far away from heroism and pathos, the message of *Lekcja Martwego Języka* is one of pacifism. War changes human nature even with regard to the good, well-educated, sensitive man; it produces only victims. The movie gives spectators the possibility to interpret on their own the presented occurrences and humane attitudes during the war, which in Majewski's eyes is completely deprived of heroism and pathos.⁷

6 Lekcja martwego języka, in *Głos Wielkopolski*, Nov. 8, 1996.

7 See also: Maria Malatyńska, "Piękni i Martwi," *Życie Literackie*, Oct. 14, 1979); Cezary Wiśniewski, "Śmierć porucznika Kikeritza," *Sztandar Młodych*, Oct. 19, 1979); Anna Tatarkiewicz, "Requiem dla rycerza," *Kultura*, Oct. 28, 1978; Czesław Dondziłło, "Cierpienia dające rozkosz," *Film*, Oct. 14, 1979); Mirosław Winiarczyk, "Studium umierania i kryzys kultury," *Ekran*, Oct. 14, 1979); Aleksander Ledóchowski, "Diana z Efezu," *Kultura*, Oct. 28, 1979.

Without any doubt, the most influential movie presenting the Austro-Hungarian army is still *C.K. Dezerterzy* (*King's and emperors' deserters*), a comedy also directed by Janusz Majewski and released in 1986. The scenario was based on a novel of Kazimierz Sejda of the same title. It tells the story of a multinational sentry company, stationed in a remote garrison, located hundreds of kilometers off the frontline, in Sátoraljaújhely, Hungary. All of its soldiers and officers just want to live a quiet life, far away from the dangers of war, until war's end. This calm atmosphere is suddenly broken by the coming of an ambitious, brutal, nationalistic, careerist Oberleutnant von Nogaj. Soon after his arrival, there erupted a conflict between him and his chief superior, Hauptmann Wagner, an intellectualist indifferent to the fate of the Empire and result of the war, who enjoys reading books and smoking cigarettes. Wagner hates and condemns the brutal methods of training used by Nogaj, who endeavors by any means to introduce to the company a new order, strengthening the discipline and morale of its soldiers, and who wants just to maintain the existing status quo convenient for him. Nogaj is hated by his subordinates, who try to take revenge and make his life as miserable as possible among others by disgracing him in the eyes of the visiting general. An informal leader of soldiers, a shrewd Polish corporal, Jan Kania Kaniowski, surrounds himself with a group of comrades who try to survive in good physical and mental condition, wanting to enjoy life as much as possible under war conditions. As summarized by one critic: "Everybody pretends [...] not to see the degeneration and absurdity of the system, which is still functioning by the power of inertia, though it evokes only contempt and derision, and is not even worth being hated. The fact that they [the soldiers] hang around on their positions proves only the existence of their instinct for self-preservation: the breakdown of the state machinery is still a danger. [...] The fall of the Habsburg

Monarchy was preceded by a long period of decay of structures, ideas, mechanisms, by long painful mechanisms that did not fit in the world.”⁸

In the second part of this movie, after burning military archives, soldiers of the company escape en-masse from the barracks and travel through the country, pursued by military police. Finally, after many strange and funny adventures, they are caught and put on trial. But during the session of the military court, which without any doubt would sentence the deserters to death, the garrison gets the message that war has ended. The news delights all soldiers (without exception of Nogay). *C.K. Dezerterzy* is rather more about the universal absurdity of war, presenting different human attitudes toward war cruelties and the survival strategy of soldiers, than about showing Austro-Hungary.⁹ The film presents the growing tensions between different nationalities in the army (especially Germans and Slavs), conservatism of high officers, and the prevailing longing for peace. It is quite often projected on TV and used even in commercials.¹⁰

The fall of value systems

Contrary to the message of *Lekcja Martwego Języka* and *C.K. Dezerterzy* is the beginning scene of the 1988 psychological drama Łuk Erosa (*Bow of Eros*), based on a novel Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski published in 1919, and directed by Jerzy Domaradzki.

8 Maciej Pawlicki, “C.K. Dezerterzy”, *Tygodnik Kulturalny*, Oct. 14, 1986.

9 Elżbieta Dolińska, “Kania i maszkarony,” *Film* Sept. 21, 1986; Jan Marx, “Koszary i zamatusz,” *Kultura*, Nov. 19, 1986; Adam Horoszczak, “Na pół gwizdka,” *Ekran*, Aug. 31, 1986; Stefan Jurkiewicz, “C.K. wieża Babel,” *Mówią wieki*, no. 3 (1998): 47–48; Stanisław Wyszomirski, “Dalecy krewni Szwejka,” *Expres Wieczorny*, Aug. 22–24, 1986.

10 See for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZkpLZXI45rw>.

We see in the first scene a farewell of mobilized soldiers departing from Cracow's main railway station. A crowd in a joyful atmosphere, with patriotic music and alcohol, and cheers for the soldiers, who, when they are leaving for the front, see the war merely as a short-term male adventure. They are not conscious of the real face of modern war, hoping for a quick return to their home after defeating their enemies, a seemingly easy task. One main character, the young and pretty woman Maria Michnowska, mother of a small boy Feluś, says goodbye to her husband Zdzisław, an academic teacher at Jagiellonian University. More common sense and emotional distance toward war is portrayed only by Maria's maid Nastka and a military doctor, an old veteran of the January Uprising of 1863 and its bloody suppression by Russians. Soon the war reveals its real face: A front line is established near Cracow, evoking thoughts of evacuation among the populace. Michnowska engages in patriotic activities (sewing underwear and collecting money for the legions) but feels alone and disoriented in this unexpected situation ("Sometimes one does not know what for to live"). One of the friends of her husband, after paying a bribe for his release from the frontline service, informs her that Zdzisław is missing in action. That shocking information—and courtship of one of her friends—forces Maria to leave Cracow and move to the home of her mother, a retired teacher in a small town. There, in Maria's arms, dies a young, wounded legionnaire, a fiancé of Maria's friend. After returning to Cracow, she surprisingly finds that during her absence her apartment has been seized by her maid Nastka, who has arranged a public house there. Threatened by Nastka with intervention of her influential clients from the military police (*gendarmerie*), Maria decides to move in with a family she knows. She has lost hope for the return of her husband and suffers from loneliness and growing financial problems. Maria engages in a sexual relationship with one

of her husband's friends, a married professor named Ciągiewicz. After being exploited and abandoned by her lover, Maria seduces Adam, a young son of her host, introducing him to love affairs. But when she becomes pregnant by him, Adam abandons her. From that point, alone and despairing, Maria, who aborts her child and loses all illusions, is now unfettered from moral scruples. Sad and tired, she starts intentionally to use her body to manipulate men and earn money. She ends up as a prostitute in the brothel managed by her former maid. There, during a revue performance and striptease, her husband, who surprisingly has survived the war, tries to shoot her. But in the final scene, they reconcile with each other.

The movie depicts the fall of the pre-war morality and value system. The "bankruptcy of ideas, slogans, faith, and fatherland" is presented bluntly, during a sumptuous reception in a casino, by the perverted and egotistical Ciągiewicz. People shocked by war atrocities just try, by any means—moral and immoral—to survive and, at least for a while, to forget about the war's brutal reality. "I'm not unhappy, that's already something," declares indecent Janina, one of Maria's friends, who, as a nurse in a military hospital, enjoys contact with many young males and wishes not to remember about her fallen fiancé. For a small group, (high officers, businessmen, madams), the war provides a chance to become, rapidly, very rich and live on a very high material level. The traditional social hierarchy no longer exist. Symbolically, a pledged count's palace is sold for a brothel to a madam, coming from the lower classes. Her new husband, a professor, accepts this way of life as a means for survival. The film *Łuk Erosa* is also an accusation against the male world. Men trigger the war. "We women suffer, men are cowards! Is it allowed to kill?" quarrels Maria with a doctor who refuses to abort her child. "We have to decide for ourselves, we are able to show off our talents," says

Janina to Maria. Thus, despite its tragic dimensions, the war offers new opportunities to women and broke male domination. In Łuk Erosa, high politics are not present, in contradiction to the novel from which the scenario of the film was written. In the novel, war realities in Galicia are mentioned, and, among other aspects, the anti-Jewish pogroms carried out by Cossacks.¹¹

The action of the film *Austeria* (1983, directed by Jerzy Kawalerowicz) takes place in an almost exclusively Jewish milieu. As in all films presented in this article, this one is also based on a novel, published in 1966 and written by Andrzej Strykowski. The action of this psychological drama is centered around the first day and night of the First World War. In an inn named "Austeria," close to the Austro-Russian border, lives an old inn owner, the main character named Tag, with his daughter-in-law, a grandchild, and a Ukrainian servant, Jewdocha. After the outbreak of the war, a group of various war refugees look for shelter in Tag's rooms, among them many Jewish Chassids with their Tzadik, as well as conservative Jews. Expecting the coming of the Messiah, the Chassids seem to be completely unaware of the mortal danger nearby, that Cossacks could enter the inn at any moment. This mortal danger is visibly confirmed by a skirmish between Cossacks and Hungarian Hussars that takes place in front of the building, with a rattle of gunshots and the setting fire to a nearby town. Fatalistic, rationalistic, and skeptical, Tag tries to keep

11 Sławomir Wyszomirski, "Eros trafił we wdzięki Maryśki," *Ekspres wieczorny*, Jan. 22–24, 1988; Jerzy Peltz, "Kaden przyprawiony na różowo," *Kultura*, Feb. 17, 1988; Joanna Wawerska, "Pogranicze polskiego filmu," *Stolica*, Apr. 10, 1988; Marek Sadowski, "Wyzwolenie Maryśki," *Rzeczpospolita*, Jan. 9–10, 1988; Krzysztof Kreutzinger, "Maria i Maryśka," *Film*, Mar. 13, 1988; Maria Brzostowiecka, "Pocztówka ze starego Krakowa," *Ekran*, no. 12 (1988).

common sense and calm during these hours full of uncertainty and growing fear. As a humanist and good man, he feels responsible for his unexpected guests and refuses to leave with his family, rejecting an offer of shelter given by his old friend from childhood, a Catholic clergyman ("How can one leave people in one's own home?" Tag asks his friend, rhetorically). In his home, there is also a Hungarian cavalryman who has lost contact with his own unit. Tag also takes care of the funeral of a teenage Jewish girl accidentally killed by a stray bullet. Some Jews hope for the success of the Austro-Hungarian army and praise Emperor Franz Joseph I for his pro-Jewish stance. Together with his close friend, the aforementioned Catholic priest, and despite the mortal danger of this mission, Tag, who has started to lose his faith, voluntarily decides to go to a burning town where Cossacks have taken a young boy, with the aim of begging Russian occupants not to execute him. The characters of the film are torn between different emotions: "It's a time of fear and political arguments, despair and reckless light-heartedness, arguing with God and reconciling with each other, a time of love and death, a time of anticipation and unconsciousness" was written in one of the reviews.¹²

In the last scene of the movie, dancing and worshiping Jews undress and, in religious elation, naked, enter the river, where they meet their death, killed by artillery fire. Bodies of innocent victims resemble a mixture of blood and water. This image is symbolic of the Holocaust, which in the next world war almost completely annihilates Jewish life in this part of Europe. Strykowski himself was a Holocaust survivor. In *Austeria*, the old traditional order, rules of social life, and morality are failing rapidly and are

12 Małgorzata Dipont, "Przepadła cywilizacja," *Życie Warszawy*, Apr. 15, 1983.

irreparably damaged.¹³ “It’s just a first death and you have already grown accustomed to it?” Tag admonishes a group of Jews quarreling over the body of the young Jewish girl.¹⁴

Recent Developments

The end of the communistic rule failed to bring about substantial change in the Polish perception of Austro-Hungary during the First World War. Of course, one could observe a slight rise in interest in the First World War from the Polish public, but that

13 Maria Malatyńska, “Żydowski fresk,” *Życie Literackie*, Apr. 24, 1983; Ewa Staśki, “Austeria-świat, który zginął,” *Film*, Apr. 26, 1991; “Taniec rozstrzelanych chochołów,” *Rzeczypospolita*, Dec. 13, 1982; Adam Horoszczak, “Tonący kontynent Austrii,” *Ekran*, May 1, 1983; Oskar Sobański, “Karcza na polskich rozstajach,” *Film*, May 29, 1983; Tadeusz Solbolewski, “Austeria,” *Tygodnik Powszechny*, Jan. 23, 1983, Krzysztof Demidowicz, “Austeria,” *Film*, Apr. 21, 1991.

14 For more on the war experience of Galician Jews during the First World War, see for example: Szymon An-ski [Salomon Rappoport], *Tragedia Żydów galicyjskich w czasie I wojny światowej: Wrażenia i refleksje z podróży po kraju* (Przemyśl: Południowo-Wschodni Instytut Naukowy, 2010); Piotr Wróbel, “The Jews of Galicia under Austrian-Polish Rule 1869–1918,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 25 (1994): 133–135; Peter Holquist, “The Role of Personality in the First (1914–1915) Russian Occupation of Galicia and Bukovina,” in *Anti-Jewish Violence: Rethinking the Pogrom in East European History*, ed. Jonathan Dekel-Chen, D. Gaunt, Natan M. Meir, and Israel Bartal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 52–74; Marsha L. Rozenblit, *Reconstructing a National Identity: The Jews of Habsburg Austria during World War I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Piotr Szlanta, “Doświadczenie wojenne Żydów galicyjskich: Zarys problematyki,” in *Żydzi i Polacy w okresie walk o niepodległość 1914–1920*, ed. H. Węgrzynek (Warsaw: Polin, 2015), 65–76.

interest concentrated on the military activity (*czyn zbrojny*) of the Polish voluntary units (*Legiony Polskie*) that fought on the Austro-Hungarian side against Russia. Historians, journalists, and movie directors were no longer bound to the Marxist interpretation of the past. First of all, 11 November was re-established as a state holiday, with the central form of celebration being the changing of the honor guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Warsaw and an accompanying military parade. In 1995–1998, two monuments of Piłsudski were erected in Warsaw, one of them opposite the Tomb. The memory of the Great War period has, in Poland, strong regional components. In the Great Poland region, local authorities and inhabitants are proud of the so-called Great Poland Uprising, which broke out against the Germans in December 1918. In Upper Silesia, the memory of the Silesian Uprisings, from the years 1919–1921, remains dominant, and in South-Eastern Poland especially the memory of Piłsudski's legions and the hostilities with Ukrainians over L'viv (Lwów) and Eastern Galicia is cultivated. Generally, in public opinion, the memory of the War is still overshadowed by the fights for the establishing of the borders of a reborn Poland, which lasted between 1918 and 1921, climaxing in the Polish-Soviet War. That period is well reflected in popular culture. One of the Polish film productions from recent years, *Bitwa Warszawska 1920* (*The battle of Warsaw 1920*, 2011, directed by Jerzy Hoffman), depicts the successful resistance to the Red Army at the outskirts of the Polish capital, the so-called “miracle on the Vistula River.”

Some film plots referring to Austro-Hungary in the years 1914–1918 could be found only in a few documentary movies. The authors of *Wymarsz*¹⁵ (*Departure*, 1988, directed by Wincenty Ronisz) admitted that among the powers that at the

15 *Wymarsz*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DyKzikEHmHI>.

end of eighteenth century partitioned the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Austro-Hungary ensured to Poles the best conditions for the development of their national life (giving political autonomy, freedom to establish political parties, permission to use the Polish language in administration, judiciary, and educational systems, and to commemorating the Polish national holidays such as the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the battle of Grunwald/Tannenberg, held in Cracow in 1910). However, at the beginning of the war, despite the fact that emperor Franz Joseph I enjoyed—especially among peasants—sympathy and trust, the Austrian central government offered to Poles only mobilization cards. “Trust and sympathy ended in bitter disappointment,” commented a narrator. During the war, Austria seemed to be a minor contributor to the policy of the Central powers toward the Polish question. Thus, it had to yield to the powerful Germany being “hostile to the Poles.” The Austro-Hungarian forces are presented in *Wymarsz* as weak and poorly commanded, constantly in need of the support of Germany. During the Brusilov offensive, in June 1916, the stout resistance of the Polish legionaries helped the Habsburg forces to stabilize the frontline after a retreat. The final blow against the pro-Austrian circles was triggered by the treaty between the central Powers and the newly born Ukrainian People’s Republic concluded in February 1918. In Polish public opinion, this treaty was regarded as a betrayal to the Polish cause, as the next partition of Poland, due to the incorporation of the “Chełm-land” (Chłemszczyzna) into the Ukrainian state.

The audience of *Straszna Wojna*¹⁶ (*Horrible war*, 2014, directed by Rafał Geremek) learned that from the very beginning of the hostilities the Austro-Hungarian army fought pretty poorly, and, after several costly defeats, had to retreat, in late 1914, almost to

16 *Straszna wojna*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MShw8herqc4>.

the city gates of Cracow in the western part of Galicia. In March 1915, after a few months of siege, the biggest and the most modern fortress of the Danube Monarchy, namely Przemyśl, capitulated and was taken by the victorious Russians. During the so-called Brusilov offensive, the Habsburg soldiers, in contrast to the Polish legionaries, gave up their positions en masse and surrendered or escaped in a state of panic. After some frontline changes and after the Russian occupation, many towns and villages lay in ashes at the end of the war. For example, on 2 May 1915, Gorlice, a town in western Galicia closely linked with the memory of a successful counter-offensive of the Central Power's troops, was almost wiped off the map. Ninety percent of its buildings were destroyed and burned out. The memory of these tragic days is still vivid among contemporary inhabitants of Gorlice and is an important element of its local identity.

Generally, both documentaries and movies stress the fratricidal character of the Great War for Poles and present a history of the Habsburg monarchy strictly from the Polish national point of view, occupying only a marginal place in the Polish consciousness.

Summary

The last war of the Habsburg empire is rarely represented in Polish feature films and TV series. It has never raised a great interest in Polish public opinion. In this small quantity of movies, the depiction of the Habsburg Empire is quite negative, seen as decaying and gradually vanishing from the political map of Europe. Many of the above-mentioned movies are film versions of novels. Most of them were shot in the 1980s. The authors of these novels, however, concentrated more on the psychological analysis of persons involved in war than on presenting the picture of the Danube Monarchy. The films dealing with the war and depicting the last years of the Danube Monarchy examine the psychological

impact of war on the human beings and on society as a whole and, regardless of their genre (comedy, drama), they are united in a final conclusion that the phenomenon of war is more a crime against humanity than a method of solving international conflicts. The only outcome of war is physical, material, geographical, and human loss. Plots with a more heroic vision of war, delivered in great numbers by the Polish cinematography, depicted the tragic and dramatic occurrences of the years 1939–1945. The films about this era exceeded, considerably, the quantity of those presenting the first Great War. Only in vain can one look in the Polish movies for traces of sentiments towards Austro-Hungary, sentiments that actually still exist as part of the regional identity and historical heritage of southeastern Poland.¹⁷

17 Cf.: Renata Hołda, *“Dobry” władca: Studium antropologiczne o Franciszku Józefie I* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2008); Ewa Wiegandt, *Austria Felix, czyli o micie Galicji w polskiej prozie współczesnej* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 1997); Alois Wodan, *Mit Austrii w literaturze polskiej* (Kraków: MCK, 2002); Adam Kożuchowski, *Pośmiertne dzieje Austro-Węgier: Obraz monarchii habsburskiej w piśmiennictwie międzywojennym* (Warsaw: MCK, 2009).