

The Impact of the First World War and the Polish-Soviet War on the “Culture of Suffering” in Post-1914 Polish fiction

Using Jeffrey C. Alexander’s theory of *cultural trauma*, this article focuses on the three major types of narratives of suffering which appeared in Polish fiction, after Poland regained political independence in 1918, outside the strong myth-creating narrative of the Polish Legions’ role in the war for independence. It argues that Polish post-1918 fiction developed these three major paths in the face of suffering inflicted on Polish lands, during WWI and Polish-Soviet War. These paths were to: 1) continue the narrative of Polish suffering within the framework of heroic, and selfless, sacrifice for Poland that has been well established since Romanticism; 2) present suffering as the universal fate of humanity outside the notion of national identity, due to the monstrosity of modern bureaucratic systems wherein human beings are treated as objects; and 3) present suffering as the result of modern warfare, but told outside of “patriotic phraseology” – thus suggesting a growing need as to finding a solution to national conflicts outside narrowly defined identities.

Wars, revolutions, or uprisings bring higher than normal levels of suffering not just among the soldiers but also among civilian population that is often the violence’s main victim. It is thus not surprising that discussions about the meaning of individual and collective suffering, its role in cultural, historical and spiritual life represent a common feature of literature focusing on any war. Modern representations of suffering are sometimes epitomized by representations of the Holocaust (Shoah)¹ yet fiction based on the traumatic experiences of the First World War was shocking in its own right when it first reflected “the inhumanity of technologized killing, poison gas and shell shock”.²

I would like to thank Professor Bożena Shallcross for her insightful comments during my work on this article.

¹ Katarzyna Chmielewska, ‘Literackość jako przeszkoda. Literackość jako możliwość wypowiedzenia’, in *Stosowaność i forma. Jak opowiadać o Zagładzie*, (Kraków: Universitas, 2005), pp. 21-33.

² Gerd Bayer, ‘Trauma and the Literature of War’, in J. Roger Kurtz (ed.), *Trauma and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 216.

The article focuses on representations of collective suffering in Polish post-1914 literature and investigates its conceptual framing through an analysis of three popular novels of the era by means of Jeffrey C. Alexander's theory of *cultural trauma*.³ In particular, it examines how the novels by Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, Józef Wittlin and Stanisław Rembek were informed both by the trauma of the war and its positive political outcome - the reestablishment of an independent Poland. If lack of independence was the source of the cultural trauma, did the regaining of political independence alter the meaning of Polish suffering? Was the sacrificial understanding of Poland's collective suffering firmly established in Polish culture since Romanticism, still present? The article also investigates whether the novels focused only on the suffering of Poles or explored its impact on other ethnic groups thus "defining their solidary relationships" and allowing the Poles to "share the suffering of others".⁴

One reason why the trauma of the war could be represented differently in Western or Polish cultures stems from the long-standard narrative in France and Britain that the impact of the war was negative. Christopher Hitchens, for example, insisted that "the carnage [...] led to the greatest fall of monarchies in history, [it] also widened and deepened the class chasms and led to the spewing-up of Nazism from the wreckage of defeated Germany."⁵ Or, as a military historian, John Keegan, put it succinctly: "The First World War was a tragic and unnecessary conflict".⁶

Not so for the nations of Eastern Europe. The creation of new states across Central Europe was celebrated by, for example, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks and many of the South Slavs but not Ukrainians. Moreover, in Polish literature the First World War is only one part of a longer period of bloodshed and suffering that were intertwined and only ended in 1921. In the first period of the fighting from 1914, around two million Poles fought in the armies of the three empires where they resided.⁷ A second period

³ Jeffrey Alexander, 'Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma', in J. C. Alexander, R. Eyerman, B. Giesen, N. J. Smelser, P. Szompka, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁴ Alexander, 'Toward...', p. 1.

⁵ Christopher Hitchens, "The Pity of War. Is leading one's own troops to slaughter ever justified?", *The Atlantic*, Nov. 2009, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/11/the-pity-of-war/307703/> [accessed Sep. 12, 2019]

⁶ John Keegan, *The First World War*, (London: Hutchinson 1999), p. 3. Other historians point out that World War I was not only 'stupid' or 'utterly avoidable' but that it also lacked any major ideological disagreement between the fighting powers. See: Bryan Frydenborg, 'The Urgent Lessons of World War I', Dec. 12, 2018, <https://mwi.usma.edu/urgent-lessons-world-war/> [accessed Sep. 10, 2019]

⁷ Lonnie R. Johnson, *Central Europe. Enemies, Neighbors, Friends*, (New York: Oxford University Press 1996), p. 183.

of fighting was ushered in by Russia's Bolshevik revolution that directly affected lands with a large Polish population, some of which became the eastern parts of independent Poland. The final period of the fighting was between the newly independent Poland and her rival neighbours to the east, notably Lithuania, Ukrainian nationalists, and the Soviet Union.⁸

The decisive battle in this final period of fighting was Poland's victory at the battle of Warsaw commanded by Józef Piłsudski (12-25 August 1920) that stopped the expansion of Bolshevism into Western Europe. Yet, it was not a subject of major historical study in either Polish or English until 1972⁹ even though it is regarded by some historians as one of the most influential battles of European history.¹⁰ Moreover, despite its victorious outcome, as Ewa Ochman has argued, the battle remained within the Polish "continuum of suffering".¹¹ No major novel has also been devoted to the victory itself although some texts emerged such as Adam Grzymała-Siedlecki's collection of reportages *The Miracle of Wistula* (*Cud Wisły*, 1921), essays by Karol Irzykowski (*W odzyskanym Białymstoku*) and Zeromski's short story (*Na probostwie w Wyszkuwie*, 1920) based on an authentic event.¹² In the story three Polish and Lithuanian Bolsheviks, (Feliks Kohn, Julian Marchlewski and Feliks Dzierżyński, the director of the CHEKA whom Zeromski describes as "smeared with blood from head to toe"), managed to escape just before Polish army captures the Soviet soldiers.¹³ There were also highly popular and widely reproduced paintings such as *The Miracle on the Vistula River* (*Cud nad Wisłą*, 1930) by Jerzy Kossak and a 1921 silent film under the same title directed by Ryszard Bolesławski.¹⁴

⁸Norman Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star. The Polish-Soviet War, 1919-1920*, (London: Orbis Books 1983).

⁹Norman Davies first published his study *White Eagle, Red Star. The Polish-Soviet War* in 1972.

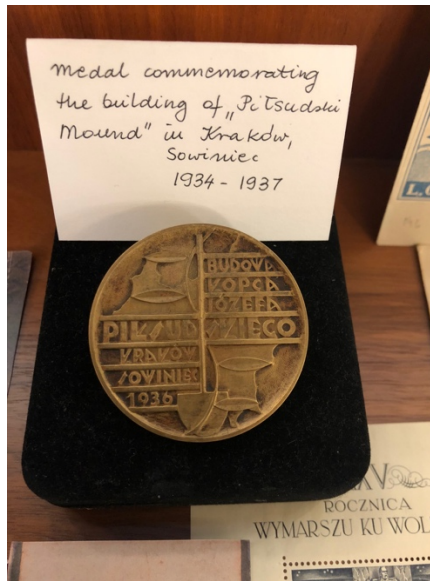
¹⁰Ronald G. Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*, 2nd. ed., (Oxford University Press 2011), p. 106; Edgar Vincent D'Abernon claims the Warsaw Battle to be one of the eighteen decisive battles of the world: Edgar Vincent D'Abernon, *The Eighteenth Decisive Battle of the World*, (Westport: Hyperion Press, 1977). (first published 1921). Similarly, Richard Overy includes Battle of Warsaw in his book *A History of War in 100 Battles*, (London: William Collins 2014).

¹¹Ewa Ochman, 'Why is Poland Unable to Celebrate Victories? "The Miracle on the Vistula," a Century Later', *The Polish Review* 2(2019), 104-120, p. 104.

¹²Stefan Zabierowski. Żeromski "Na probostwie w Wyszkuwie": (próba lektury), in *Alfabet Paszka: Berent, stylistyka (i okolice)*, Żeromski, eds. W: J. Jakóbczyk, K. Kralkowska-Gątkowska, M. Piekara, (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2010), pp. 235-259.

¹³He was the director of the All-Russia Extraordinary Commission to Combat Counter-revolution and Sabotage, CHEKA, known for summary executions often without a trial. Their short stay in the city of Wyszkuw near Warsaw had sought to establish a "Polish Soviet republic" with the help of invading Red Army. See also Mirosława Puchalska and Zofia Stafanowska (eds), *Śladami bitwy warszawskiej: Stefan Żeromski, Karol Irzykowski, Adam Grzymała-Siedlecki*, (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1990), p. 25.

¹⁴Only fragments of the film survive today: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TcHliPR1bRQ> [accessed Oct. 15, 2019]



Medal commemorating *Piłsudski's Mound* constructed between 1934 and 1937 in Kraków. From the exhibition on 100 years of Poland's independence *The Polish Fight for Independence 1914-1918: A Story of a Polish Family*, UCL SSEES, curated by K. Zechenter, Nov. 2019.

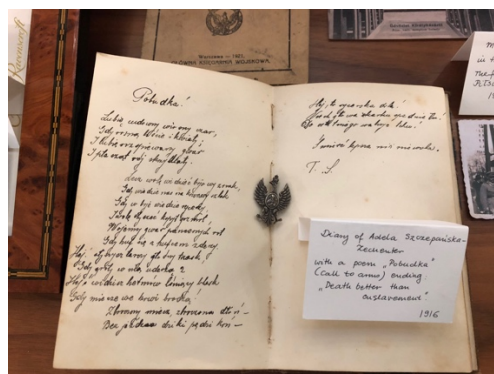
In contrast, however, to these limited works on the battle of Warsaw, Polish war literature was simply enormous.¹⁵ Unlike Western literature, however, Polish fictional accounts of the war are not well known with the exception of Józef Wittlin's novel, *Salt of the Earth* (1935) praised by Thomas Mann¹⁶ that was translated into nine languages within two years. Both, the well-established writers (W. S. Reymont, Władysław Orkan, Józef Weyssenhoff) and younger generation of writers (Andrzej Strug, Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski or Eugeniusz Małaczewski) helped to forge myths of heroic struggle, yet they also addressed the fate of civilians, and explored the theme of Christian forgiveness.¹⁷ The myth-creating approach was especially visible in poetry after 1917 when the Polish Legions became, it is claimed, "the most educated and sophisticated army in the history of warfare: 40 percent were members

¹⁵ Irena Maciejewska, 'Proza polska lat 1914-1918 wobec wojny światowej', *Pamiętnik Literacki*, 1(1981), pp. 39-80; Andrzej Z. Makowiecki, 'Literatura wobec niepodległości', in eds. A. Gabryś, M. Szewczuk, *Salon Niepodległości*, (Warszawa: PWN, 2008), pp. 97-122.

¹⁶ Thomas Mann said that the novels belongs to 'one of the small number of contemporary works which extend into the sphere of the mythical and epical' as quoted in <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/598238/salt-of-the-earth-by-jozef-wittlin/9781782274704/>

¹⁷ Jerzy Kwiatkowski, *Dziesięciolecie międzywojenne*. Wielka Historia Literatury Polskiej, (Warsaw: PWN, 2002), p. 209.

of intelligentsia.¹⁸ Its exalted patriotism that was also a part of some post-war fiction (for instance in works by Bandrowski, Strug or Małaczewski) had its roots in the Romantic depiction of suffering – a feature that Wittlin has found irritating.¹⁹



Wiersz Teofila Lenartowicza *Pobudka* in a diary by Adela Szczepańska-Zechenter from 1916 with the ending “Death better than enslavement.” From the exhibition on 100 years of Poland’s independence *The Polish Fight for Independence 1914-1918: A Story of a Polish Family*, UCL SSEES, curated by K. Zechenter, Nov. 2019.

Although literature of the era produced multiple novels and autobiographical works as well as huge amounts of poetry employing “romantic associations, signs and symbols”²⁰, the article focuses on three novels that were, and still are, considered masterpieces of the Polish interwar literature,²¹ namely Zofia Kossak-Szczucka’s (1889-1968) memoirs *Conflagration (Pożoga, 1922)*, Józef Wittlin’s (1896-1976) only novel, *The Salt of the Earth (Sól ziemi, 1935)*; and Stanisław Rembek’s (1901-1985) novel, *On the Battlefield (W polu, 1937)*. They can be read as three distinct interpretations of the topos of struggle within the narrative of the value of suffering in the struggle for independence that evolved from “the martyrological understanding of Polish history: Poland as a victim of the cruelty of history and

¹⁸ Mieczysław B. Biskupski, *Independence Day: Myth, Symbol, and the Creation of Modern Poland*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 11.

¹⁹ Józef Wittlin, *Eseje rozproszone*. Ed. P. Kądziała, (Warszawa: Twój Styl, 1995), p. 233.

²⁰ Andrzej Makowiecki, *Literatura wobec niepodległości*, [In:] *Salon Niepodległości*, A. Gabryś, M. Szewczyk (eds.), (Warszawa: PWN 2008), p. 107.

²¹ Wittlin’s novel had four editions between 1935 and 1939 and it was translated into German, Russian, Danish and Czech the year it was published. A year later it was translated into English, French, Italian, Swedish and Hungarian.

Polish patriots as sacrificial sufferers.”²² These three perceptions were, first, that the Borderlands were culturally and historically Polish lands that should remain an essential part of independent Poland even if it involved Polish further suffering (Kossak-Szczucka); secondly, that from a pacifist perspective much of humanity had suffered from the war, not only the Poles (Wittlin); and thirdly, a harsh, realistic and ‘brutalist’ depiction of war within a context of increasingly complex and antagonistic national identities but outside “patriotic phraseology” of suffering (Rembek).²³



Objects commemorating Ignacy Jan Paderewski, a famous pianist and composer, the first Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of independent Poland (January 1919 – December 1919). Among items: Robinson & Leadbeater Parian porcelain bust of Paderewski, photo of his official residence in Warsaw, a cartoon in *Punch*, Paderewski’s visiting card and a commemorative badge of the armoured train, *Paderewski*, that was used during Polish-Soviet war in 1919 and then in 1939 before being blown up by Poles so it will not get to German hands. From the exhibition on hundred years of Poland’s independence *The Polish Fight for Independence 1914-1918: A Story of a Polish Family*, UCL SSEES, Nov. 2019.

The novels, despite their ideological and aesthetic differences, share significant similarities. Firstly, their authors were active participants during the military conflicts and witnessed the consequent suffering first-hand. As a high-school student Wittlin joined the Eastern (Polish) Legion but was later

²² Biskupski, *Independence Day*, p. 3.

²³ Marian Stępień, ‘Inwalida pierwszej wojny światowej (O Józefie Wittlinie)’, in Eugenia Loch and Krzysztof Stepnik (eds), *Pierwsza wojna światowa w literaturze polskiej i obcej. Wybrane zagadnienia* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 1999), p. 181.

drafted into Austro-Hungarian army as an Austrian subject. Rembek, also as a high school student, took part in both the fighting of the First World War and the subsequent Polish-Soviet war, (and even the Second World War in 1939) while Kossak-Szczucka actively defended her estate in Volhynia (now Ukraine) and personally witnessed some of the massacres of the Polish and Jewish population. All of these novels were very well received. Wittlin's account, for example, was nominated for Nobel Prize in 1939²⁴, honoured by the leading literary journal *Wiadomości Literackie*, and in 1943 it received the prize of the American Academy of Arts and Letters as well as the National Institute of Arts and Letters.²⁵ Rembek received the Lewenthal Prize and the Prize of Adam Asnyk of the city of Kalisz for his novel that both Czesław Miłosz, (and Maria Dabrowska), claimed to be "the best book on fighting."²⁶ Kossak's novel was widely praised and influenced the majority of subsequent memoirs about the events in the Borderlands.

After 1945, however, the novels were suppressed for political reasons by the Communist government which means that they were excluded from the Polish literary canon until the fall of communism in Poland in 1989. The first publication of Rembek's *On the Battlefield* after the Second World War occurred in Paris in 1958 thanks to the influential Polish émigré institution, Instytut Literacki. Some copies were smuggled into Communist Poland but the book was not mentioned in the official Polish press in contrast to the positive reviews it received in the Western press.²⁷ *The Salt of the Earth* was not prohibited by the Communist government, unlike *Conflagration* or *On the Battlefield*,²⁸ yet the book was neither reprinted nor officially discussed until 1979. It is thus not surprising that it was far better known outside Poland even though a volume of Wittlin's poetry was published in Communist Poland.²⁹ Moreover, the authors themselves were absent from the post-1945 literary life in Poland: Wittlin lived in the United States of America until his death in 1976³⁰ Kossak-Szczucka only

²⁴ See J. D. Beresford, 'Novel of the Week: Salt of the Earth by Joseph Wittlin', *Times Literary Supplement*, June 3, 1939, p. 325.

²⁵ John Cournois, "A Prize Winning Novel from Poland, *New York Times*, Oct. 5, 1941, p. 8: See also <https://artsandletters.org/awards/>

²⁶ Czesław Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 423.

²⁷ Roman Smal-Stocki, "Review of *W polu* by Stanisław Rembek", *Books Abroad*, 2(1959), p. 237.

²⁸ Weronika Girys-Czagowiec, 'Stanisław Rembek - pisarz niechciany', in Grażyna and Jacek Gzella (eds), *'Nie należy dopuszczać do publikacji'. Cenzura w PRL*, (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2013), pp. 30-37.

²⁹ Ewa Wiegandt, „Wstęp”, in Józef Wittlin, *Sól ziemi*, (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1991), p. XLVII.

³⁰ Wittlin was in France when WWII broke out but he was forced out of Poland earlier by anti-Semitic campaign against him, J. Tuwim and J. Słonimski: *Tymon Terlecki, Józef Wittlin. Listy 1944-1976*, ed. Nina Taylor-Terlecka, (Warsaw: Więź, 2014), pp. 91-94.

returned from exile in Britain in 1957 while Rembek was ostracized and reduced to poverty during the remainder of his life in Warsaw.³¹

Although the three novels do not focus exclusively on suffering, they employ various representations of suffering that have been an essential part of Polish art and literature since Romanticism, specifically when representing the trauma of Poland's loss of independence. As I have argued elsewhere, suffering became conceptualised in Polish culture as an intrinsic part of Polish identity after the failure of the uprising against Russian rule in 1830-31 although the connection between politics and Catholicism, with its own stress on the importance of suffering (both collective and individual), can be traced back even further to the influence of the Jesuit orator, Piotr Skarga already in 1610.³² The strengthening of Skarga's conceptualisation of the necessity of suffering with the much older conviction of Poland within the tradition of *antemurale Christianitatis* led to the conviction of Polish Romantics that it was precisely the suffering of 'innocent' Poland that transformed Poland into a secular Christ-like figure that would bring salvation and freedom to all the oppressed peoples of Europe, not just the Poles.³³ Thus, 'messianic suffering'³⁴ was seen as purposeful, vital and necessary by the most influential nineteenth-century Polish poet, Adam Mickiewicz and later poets who became the major "carrier group" that "broadcast symbolic representations" of the trauma of the loss of independence.³⁵ Yet, with each lost uprising or a war, the narratives of national struggle inspired by earlier representations of suffering had to address the changing political situation. It has to be stressed, however, in words of Marci Shore, that 'patriots of a bygone Poland had never resigned themselves to statelessness'.³⁶

Kossak's novel largely focuses on the fate of Poles in the eastern Borderlands and expresses the collective tragedy, especially that of Polish landed nobility and intelligentsia, because the Borderlands were left outside the boundaries of the interwar Polish state and thus without any protection

³¹ His novel, *Wyrok na Franciszka Kłosa* was published in 1947 but ignored by the press as it discussed the difficult issue of collaboration of a Pole who becomes a policeman helping Germans in occupied Poland, and is later executed as a traitor by Polish Underground Court.

³² Katarzyna Zechenter, 'The Need to Suffer: The Case of Poland', *The Polish Review* 2(2019), pp. 7-23, p. 11.

³³ Andrzej Walicki, *Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism: The Case of Poland*, (Oxford: Clarendon 1982), pp. 238-242.

³⁴ Zechenter, 'The Need to Suffer', p. 14.

³⁵ Alexander, 'Toward a Theory', p. 11.

³⁶ Marci Shore, *Caviar and Ashes: A Warsaw Generation's Life and Death in Marxism, 1918-1968*, (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 2.

for Polish population. Her novel presents the wait for the arrival of Polish army and the creation of the Polish state among growing unrest, struggles and pogroms of the Polish and Jewish populations from March 1917 to August 1919. Initially, Kossak presents the current territory of Ukraine as a happy, peaceful and rich land where, she writes, there was ‘enough bread for everybody.’³⁷ The economic superiority of the Polish population is presented as natural, just and obvious as the result of Kossak’s colonising gaze that constitutes one of the dominant elements of biographical literature written by Poles from the region in which “the word Pole means a being of higher culture and of an unbroken spirit”³⁸.

Kossak’s idyllic representation of the Borderlands and the peaceful and happy coexistence between Poles and Ukrainians (Ruthenians³⁹) does not differ from works by other authors, the majority of them women, who published their memoirs in the twenties and thirties, often inspired by Kossak’s account⁴⁰. In short, Kossak upholds the well-established myth of the Borderlands as a rich and beautiful land that stood open and empty (the myth of *terra nullius*), waiting and needing development and Polish civilisation (*mission civilisatrice*) found in Polish literature of the second half of the nineteenth century with its stress on Polish “civic duty” towards the native population⁴¹ along with the “myth of its own [Polish] power”.⁴²

Indeed, as Daniel Beauvois points out, the myth of the Borderlands began centuries earlier, at the end of the fifteenth century, with the frequent Tatar and Turkish invasions into these lands which meant that many Polish warriors died there and were immortalized in later art and literature (including popular paintings by Kossak’s grandfather, Juliusz, and her uncle, Wojciech) as pure and devoted

³⁷ Kossak, *Pożoga*, p. 11. [All translations by Katarzyna Zechenter]

³⁸ Stanisław Estreicher, *Introduction* to the first edition [In:] Maria Dunin-Kozicka, *Burza od wschodu, Wspomnienia z Kijowszczyzny 1918-1920*, (Warszawa: Dom Książki Polskiej 1929), p. XIII. See, in this regard, Izabela Wolikowska’s *Bolsheviks in a Polish Manor House (Bolszewicy w polskim dworze, 1921)*, Maria Dunin-Kozicka’s *The Storm from the East (Burza od wschodu, 1921)*, Elżbieta Dorożyńska’s *The Last Stand: Diary of Life in a Podolia Village 1917-1921 (Na ostatniej placówce: dziennik z życia wsi podolskiej w latach 1917-1921)*, Jadwiga Januskiewiczowa’s *In the Deluge of Blood and Tears: The Memoirs of a Hostage (W potopie krwi i łez: wspomnienia zakładniczki)*, or works by Melchior Wańkowicz, Waław Podhorski, Leon Lipkowski, and Karol Wędziagolski’s diary: *Pamiętniki: wojna i rewolucja, bolszewicki przewrót, kontrrewolucja, warszawski epilog*.

³⁹ Kossak-Szczucka uses both terms, Ukrainians and Ruthenians, in her memoir.

⁴⁰ According to Beauvois, women “ruled” in Polish manor houses, seeing the native population both as uncivilised yet good but with the culture demanding of them to be benefactors and helpers of the villagers: Daniel Beauvois, *Walka o ziemię: szlachta polska na Ukrainie prawobrzeżnej pomiędzy caratem a ludem ukraińskim 1863- 1914*, transl. K. Rutkowski, (Sejny: Fundacja Pogranicze, 1996), p. 239.

⁴¹ Stanisław Fita, *Etyka obowiązku w myśli programowej i literaturze*, in *Humanitas i christianitas w kulturze polskiej*, Mirosława Hanusiewicz-Lavallee ed., *Humanizm, Idee, Nurty i Paradygmaty Humanistyczne w Kulturze Polskiej*, Vol. 4, (Warszawa: Neriton 2009), p. 453.

⁴² Jan Sowa, *Inna Rzeczpospolita jest możliwa! Widma przeszłości, wizje przyszłości*. (Warsaw: WAB, 2015), p. 75.

Polish heroes of *antemurale Christianitatis*.⁴³ Although the borderlands were populated by different ethnic groups, the native Ukrainian peasants were seen through narratives of Polish superiority in the lands “between Europe and Asia, between civilisation and barbarism.”⁴⁴ Undoubtedly Henryk Sienkiewicz’s phenomenally popular *Trilogy* (1884-1888), especially *With Fire and Sword*, bolstered this myth with his depiction of the 1648 Cossack uprising. The Ukrainian rebels under Bohdan Khmelnytsky’s leadership are presented mostly as drunken and cruel barbarians, reinforcing the narrative of Poland’s “civilising mission” in these regions.⁴⁵ Sienkiewicz, Maria Rodziewicz and later writers such as Franciszek Rawita-Gawroński upheld the idealised representation of “the knightly past of Poles from the Borderlands.”⁴⁶ Kossak’s representation, although it does not differ significantly from this established narrative of Polish superiority, nevertheless does stress the positive characteristic of Ruthenians especially their “exceptional intellectual ability” and “deep sense of justice.”

What makes Kossak’s book unique is her understanding of the underlying social causes of the problems in Borderlands, namely the lack of land for the ‘native’ Ruthenian population who had been enserfed by the Polish or Polonized Ruthenian nobility since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. She clearly understands how the Borderlands are viewed by independent Poland openly calling the lands ‘colonies’⁴⁷ which she argues are commercially desirable because they bring “the greatest riches and treasures” full of “human element, energy and health” to their mother countries.⁴⁸ Yet, she does not develop this argument, ending her novel emphasising the Polishness of those regions that was won by Polish suffering and devotion over the centuries. Beauvois points out that the term „colonisation” was almost never used in this context due to the fact that the Polish presence in the eastern borderlands began with the mission of protecting Christianity from the Mongols and Tatars when death and suffering were commonplace.⁴⁹

⁴³ Daniel Beauvois, ‘Kiedy kres Kresów?’ in Iza Chruślińska and Piotr Tyma (eds), *Wiele twarzy Ukrainy*. (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2005), p. 271.

⁴⁴ Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 15.

⁴⁵ Christoph Mick, ‘Colonialism in the Polish eastern borderlands 1919–1939’ in R. Healy, E. Dal Lago (eds), *The shadow of colonialism on Europe’s modern past*, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series, (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2014), pp. 126-141.

⁴⁶ Daniel Beauvois, *Trójka ukraiński. Szlachta, carat i lud na Wołyniu, Podolu i Kijowszczyźnie 1793-1914*, transl. K. Rutkowski, (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2018), p. 685.

⁴⁷ Kossak, *Pożoga*, p. 202

⁴⁸ Kossak, *Pożoga*, pp. 202-203.

⁴⁹ Beauvois, *Walka o ziemię*, p. 240.

The strict social hierarchy and Polish cultural superiority which constituted an influential element of the Borderlands narrative in Polish literature was partially the result of its earlier appeal to the Ruthenian elite. This elite was relatively small at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵⁰ Although the national identity of Ukrainians at the turn of the century had an anti-Polish element, Kossak emphasizes her ‘love for the Ukrainian people who in a barbaric way tried to eradicate Polish activity there’ as Stanisław Estreicher put it⁵¹ thus placing Polish activities in these territories within the Christian tradition of “suffering, sacrifices and persecution”⁵². In Kossak’s novel this is visible mainly through enumerating the torture of women and girls who did not fight but accepted their suffering, such as the countess Chodkiewicz and her daughters,⁵³ or Miss Mroczkowska.⁵⁴ The context of Christian resignation to violence is present in many other works as well, for instance in the priest Walerian Meysztowicz’s memoirs where he describes the torture of his young cousin, Zosia from the Chodkiewicz family in Młynów, who run to a chapel to save the holy sacrament from desecration by taking communion (eating the sacrament) rather than hiding and saving herself first. ‘She was tortured horribly together with her mother by iron, by fire’ after being raped writes Maysztowicz.⁵⁵ Catholicism played a constructive role in establishing the social superiority of Poles in these regions. The Polish nobility, the Polish intelligentsia as well as the landless Polish workers were Catholics because as Kossak argues, “in the word Catholic there was everything that was broader and brighter that could be salvaged.”⁵⁶ For Kossak, just as for the majority of Poles from these regions, the persecution of the Catholic Church that had actively helped to develop the identification of the peasants with the Polish national community⁵⁷ was essentially the persecution of Poland.

Kossak’s orientalisising gaze is strengthened by her “moving the frontiers of barbarism” further east, to the eastern border of the Borderlands by referring to the earlier Mongol’s and Tatar invasions

⁵⁰ Andrew Wilson, *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation*, (New Haven: Yale University Press 2002), p. 102.

⁵¹ Stanisław Estreicher, Introduction to the first edition [In:] Maria Dunin-Kozicka, *Burza od wschodu, Wspomnienia z Kijowszczyzny 1918-1920*, (Warszawa: Dom Książki Polskiej), 1929, p. XI.

⁵² Estreicher, Introduction, p. XII.

⁵³ Kossak, *Pożoga*, pp. 121, 125, 139,

⁵⁴ Kossak, *Pożoga*, pp. 79, 36, 81, 171.

⁵⁵ Walerian Meysztowicz, ks., *Gawędy o czasach i ludziach*, (Londyn: Polska Fundacja Kulturalna 1983), p. 100.

⁵⁶ Kossak, *Pożoga*, p. 8.

⁵⁷ Daria Nałęcz, ‘Płaszcz Konrada’, in A. Gabrys and M. Szewczuk (eds), *Salon Niepodległości*, (Warsaw: PWN, 2008), p. 77.

that included looting, destruction and *jassyry* – taking away with the attackers girls and women to serve as sexual slaves. Kossak believes that those practices poisoned the native goodness of the Ruthenian people, although she primarily blames the Bolsheviks. She presents them as men who enjoy killing,⁵⁸ are wilder “than animals”, corrupted, utterly demoralised although sometimes aware of their own downfall. They encourage the merciless killing of not only Poles, but also Ukrainian peasants who work in Polish houses, Greek Orthodox clergy, and Jews.⁵⁹

At the same time, Kossak condemns Ukrainian attempts to create an independent Ukraine although she looks forward to Symon Petliura, the Commander of the Ukrainian Army taking over in the hope that he would restore some semblance of order after the Bolsheviks have left. Yet, the subsequent robbing, looting and extorting of money from Poles and Jews, as well the growing number of pogroms against Jews, the most tragic of which takes place in Ploskiorov, turns her against Petliura. Kossak thus presents the suffering of the native population as result of the corrosive influence of Russian ‘agitators’ and communists.⁶⁰ Similarly, although she sees the suffering of Poles faced with the complete destruction of their houses and their keepsakes such as photographs and precious books as a utter eradication of Polish memory in those lands⁶¹, she presents this additional cruelty not as an innate Ukrainian characteristic but rather as the result of ‘the Tatars’ past’ in these lands.⁶²

Kossak concludes her book with an expression of love for Ukraine in a style that consciously recalls Adam Mickiewicz’s famous opening of *Pan Tadeusz*, (1834), the most iconic of all Polish works⁶³ in which he expressed longing for his own lost homeland. In her conclusion, Kossak refers to Ukraine as a ‘beloved yet ungrateful’ Polish homeland, loved despite its “persecutions”⁶⁴ again emphasising not only her belief that the historical Polishness and Christianity of these regions should be preserved in an independent Poland but also that preserving these lands for Poland requires suffering due to persecutions.

⁵⁸Kossak, *Pożoga*, p. 142.

⁵⁹Kossak, *Pożoga*, p. 142.

⁶⁰Kossak, *Pożoga*, p. 152.

⁶¹ Adam D. Rotfeld, Anatoly V. Torkunov, *White Spots—Black Spots: Difficult Matters in Polish-Russian Relations, 1918–2008*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015).

⁶²Kossak, p. 7, p. 47.

⁶³ Kate Whitefield, “Pan Tadeusz Poem: Why is Google paying tribute to the epic Polish masterpiece today?” On June 28, 2019 Google honoured the 185th anniversary of the publication of *Pan Tadeusz* that ‘captured the spirit of Poland’.

⁶⁴ Kossak, *Pożoga*, p. 203.

Unlike Kossak's memoir, Wittlin's novel is not focused on Poland and definitely not on Polish suffering but instead on the suffering and dehumanisation of ordinary human beings as "objects" needed by modern bureaucratic machines of state power. He began *Salt of the Earth* in 1925 but published it ten years later: it was to be the first volume of his never finished trilogy as the third volume was lost during the Second World War. The novel had its roots in Wittlin's interest in pacifism during the First World War and his friendships with Italian and Russian POWs.⁶⁵ From the very beginning, Wittlin and Joseph Roth⁶⁶ who volunteered to join the Austro-Hungarian army⁶⁷, saw themselves as "pacifists who believed that war was no more than a crime of those who have power against those who have none."⁶⁸ Wittlin developed this approach in his earlier poetry, especially *Hymns* (*Hymny*, 1920) and elaborated it further in an essay "War, Peace and the Soul of a Poet" (*Wojna, pokój i dusza poety*, 1925) and finally in 1929 when he wrote *Ze wspomnień byłego pacyfisty* (*Memoirs of a Former Pacifist*). In this work he argued that pacifism was a superficial philosophy as it could not be applied during peace time, only during a war as it represents a desperate desire for peace (resulting from the pain and suffering caused by war), rather than a coherent philosophy.

Pacifism as an idea was present in Polish literature even earlier, for example, in poetry of Jan Kasprówicz, Karol Irzykowski or Leopold Staff⁶⁹, but for Wittlin pacifism became a paradox and impossible to reconcile with Poland's understanding of patriotism in the post-1918 political reality, and especially with Polish focus on past suffering in the name of independent Poland. On 1 November 1918 Ukrainians placed their flags over the city hall in Lwów (Львів in Ukrainian) and declared the city the capital of the West Ukrainian People's Republic. This began the Polish-Ukrainian war which lasted until May 1919 with Lwów remaining within the borders of the newly independent Poland. The Poles commemorated the struggle as 'The Defence of Lwów' (*Obrona Lwowa*). They stressed the Polish past of the city, the long struggle of the Polish inhabitants of Lwów to preserve its Polish culture, and asserted that the city was 'defended' from its enemies and not seized, all of which was in sharp contrast

⁶⁵ 'Doświadczenie wielkiej wojny – Józef Wittlin', in Irena Maciejewska, (ed.), *Poeci dwudziestolecia wojennego*, (Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna, 1982), Vol. 2, p. 481.

⁶⁶ Wittlin devoted two essays to Roth's "Flucht ohne Ende and Georg von der Vring Soldat Suhren" 1928. See also: Marian Stępień, *Inwalida pierwszej wojny światowej*, [In:] *Pierwsza wojna światowa w literaturze polskiej i obcej. Wybrane zagadnienia*, E. Łoch, K. Stępień (eds.), (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 1999), p. 181.

⁶⁷ Hermann Kesten and Ludwik Krzyżanowski, "Joseph Wittlin", *The Polish Review*, 1 (1978), pp. 69-71.

⁶⁸ Józef Wittlin, *Pisma pośmiertne i inne esesje*, J. Zielinski [ed.], (Warsaw: Biblioteka Więzi, 1991), p. 260.

with the Ukrainians' own emphasis on the military aspect of their struggle with the Poles in what they neutrally termed *The Battle for L'viv* (*Битва за Львів*). In Poland the defence of the city was immortalised not just in literature, popular songs but also in visual art, as in Wojciech Kossak's painting, *The Eaglets or the Defence of the Cemetery* (*Orleńta – obrona cmentarza*, 1926) about Polish children who took part in fighting during that time. Since at least the 1860s postcards of patriotic paintings or patriotic events had influenced popular opinion because 'national mythology is not only located in texts or in oral tradition, but also embedded in visual images.'⁶⁹ Copies of various Kossak's paintings, such as *The Eaglets* or *A Girl Scout and the Ulan* hung in many Polish houses just like copies of the romantic patriotic paintings of his father, Julius, "hung in every Polish manor house"⁷⁰ reminding the viewer of the continuous sacrifices and suffering of the Poles in the past.

The question of the division of the borderlands, epitomised by the question of whether Lwów should belong to the Poles or Ukrainians in 1918, abruptly exposed the major problem of pacifism because disputed borders had to be decided during peacetime, not wartime. It was not a question of demographics, with Poles constituting the clear majority of the city's inhabitants, but rather an ideological question about different understandings of patriotism, obligation to one's past and the desired political future and identity of a city claimed by Poles and Ukrainians.⁷¹ As the result, three peoples suffered greatly because after 1 November 'hatred as a flip side of love in the struggle for Lwów turned into three wide rivers of Polish, Ukrainian and Jewish blood' as pacifism was unable to find a workable solution to the attachment to places claimed by different national groups⁷² with pacifism becoming the direct casualty of patriotism. Or as Wittlin again put it, 'our sentimental patriotism was in too serious conflict with our pacifism. We should have established a hierarchy of values. It did not work out. There was an absolute balance in our conflicted feelings: we could neither resign from our attachment to Polish Lwów for the sake of pacifism, nor subordinate our pacifism to our Polish

⁶⁹ Geneviève Zubrzycki, "History and the National Sensorium: Making Sense of Polish Mythology", *Qualitative Sociology*, 34 (2011), p. 24.

⁷⁰ Beauvois, 'Kiedy kres Kresów?', p. 271.

⁷¹ "In 1900 Lemberg/Lwów/L'viv had around 160,000 inhabitants: 49.4 percent were Poles, 26.5 percent were Jews and 19.9 percent were Ruthenians/Ukrainians"; International Encyclopedia of World War One <https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/lvivlemberg>

⁷² Józef Wittlin, *Ze wspomnień byłego pacyfisty* [In:] *Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku. Pisma*, (Paryż: Instytut Literacki 1963), p. 74.

identity.⁷³ Unable to find a peaceful solution, he turned to poetry concluding that ‘emotional pacifism’ results from the exhaustion of war but as a philosophy, pacifism is essentially unable to find answers to conflicts which stem from the feeling of identity, possessing and owning.⁷⁴ Wittlin writes with bitterness that ‘it is not known what deprived us more: war or peace.’⁷⁵ For him the solution was to be found in early Christianity of St Francis of Assisi⁷⁶ and his decision to possess nothing as possessing ultimately leads to conflict,⁷⁷ and not in current politics.

Wittlin began work on his novel after the war around 1925 and published it ten years later; Poland’s independence liberated him from the primacy of “national” themes as was the case with many poets or writers having their ‘patriotic burden lifted’.⁷⁸ Lwów was now located in independent Poland after the Polish-Soviet war. As a humanist, Wittlin, however, wanted to “cognitively identify the existence and source of human suffering”⁷⁹ that he witnessed during the war. By making his character unaware or rather completely indifferent to his half-Polishness (Piotr was born out of wedlock, his father unknown hence Piotr’s last name Niewiadomski); with no understanding of the concept of national identity, illiterate, hard-working and “backward” peasant living poor life in Carpathian mountains, Wittlin assures that his novel is placed outside Polish context of the war.

He also places Piotr not far from the position of a “holy fool”⁸⁰ removing him even further from the specificity of the Polish context, and indirectly exposing the innate absurdity of the modern world where countries that do not differ ideologically from each other engage in mutual and highly destructive wars.⁸¹ As Wittlin’s novel is set at the very beginning of the war before military action took place, the soldiers do not suffer on the battlefields yet. They are, however, still victims of the merciless military machine as demonstrated by Les Nechochodiuk, whom the regimental Sergeant-Major Bachmatiuk,

⁷³ Wittlin, *Ze wspomnień*, p. 73.

⁷⁴ Wittlin, *Ze wspomnień*, p. 72.

⁷⁵ Wittlin, *Ze wspomnień*, p. 79.

⁷⁶ Wittlin, who came from a Jewish family, officially converted to Catholicism in New York only in 1953 and accepted the name Franciszek Maria (Francis Mary) but has been interested in Catholicism for a long time: Joanna Rzepa, *Literary and Theological Modernity*, PhD dissertation, U. of Warwick 2015, p. 280 and 278. He was also repulsed by the anti-Semitic criticism by Catholic Poles against himself, Julian Tuwim and Antoni Słonimski: *Etapy Jozefa Wittlina*, eds. Wojciech Ligęza, Wojciech S. Wrocław, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ 2013), p. 206.

⁷⁷ Wittlin, *Ze wspomnień*, p. 77.

⁷⁸ Marci Shore, *Caviar*, p. 3.

⁷⁹ Alexander, *Toward a Theory*, p. 1.

⁸⁰ Marie-Odile Thirouinová, Postava „idiota“ ve středoevropském románu 20. století: Josef Švejk a Piotr Niewiadomski, *Česká literatura* Vol. 59, No. 6 (prosinec 2011), pp. 812-826.

⁸¹ Marian Stępień, *Wśród emigrantów*, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2007), p. 174.

presented as the impeccable embodiment of the military machine, punishes until Les dies thus making his death and earlier suffering utterly absurd.

The dehumanising power of modernity is in Wittlin's novel presented through an industrial approach to suffering as bodies needed by the state are measured, weighted and cleaned, forced to behave in an identical manner just like the bodies of animals that are prepared for human consumption. Wittlin thus forms a hierarchy where "the meat of the men has to be fed with the meat of the animals."⁸² All races become equal in the process, a Hutsul, a Jew, a Pole or an Ukrainian as they are equally exposed during the process with their forced nakedness rendering them defenceless and constituting a form of 'rape' by the state.⁸³ In this respect, Wittlin's realisation that the factory-like approach to humans is an essential aspect of modernity can be read as a foretelling of the horror of modern warfare and specifically of the Holocaust (Shoah) which, as Zygmunt Bauman has observed, was the direct product of modernity through the power of "routine bureaucratic procedures."⁸⁴

Rembek's novel represents yet a different approach to the traditional representations of struggle and suffering in Polish culture such as Kossak's. Unlike Wittlin, Rembek set his story in the middle of another war for Poland's independence. It is probably easiest to notice Rembek's pioneering approach through comparison to Jerzy Kossak's painting *The Miracle at the Vistula River* (1930). Although the painting depicts a different battle of the same war, yet the cultural setting remains identical to the traditional representations of Polishness as a struggle between good and evil as in Jan Matejko's iconic paintings. True, Kossak shows a modern military plane, a military reflector, machine guns and a woman soldier yet the central focus on the figure of Virgin Mary and the seventeenth century hussars in the clouds now supporting a modern Polish struggle, thus situates the battle of Warsaw of 1921 within Polish romantic and Christian historiosophy.

Rembek, similarly to Wittlin, moves away from defining his characters through their national identity. His depictions are not only brutal and focused on the nauseating or revolting aspects of fighting (such as the sickening smell of warm blood and old sweat, the over present dust and dirt, the smell of

⁸² Wittlin, *Sól ziemi*, p. 84.

⁸³ Krzysztof Biedrzycki, 'Udręczenie ciała w Soli ziemi Józefa Wittlina', in Wojciech Ligeza and Wojciech S. Wocław (eds.), *Etapy Józefa Wittlina*, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2013), p. 55.

⁸⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 17.

rotting corpses caught in the barbed wire or the disgust of soldiers touching bloated bodies) yet this is not connected to any specific group of people. Rembek's depictions are not designed to shock through the described brutality but instead to show the actual emotions of alternately cowardly and brave Polish soldiers as well as the psychological effects of technologically advanced warfare. Soviet artillery barrage (*ogień huraganowy*) and machine guns that terrifies the exhausted soldiers becomes a recurrent motive as it is repeated at the end of several chapters.

The descriptions of the unprecedented advance in technology and, consequently, the killing and maiming of the soldiers in Rembek's novels serve not only to analyse the degree of psychological damage among the soldiers exposed to this brutality, but also to emphasise their lack of ideological or patriotic convictions especially visible in their conversations or in their sinking morale. They argue with and disobey their commanding officers, fight amongst each other, accuse officers of exploiting them, talk about the social injustices of post-1918 Poland, dislike each other simply because they come from different regions of Poland or even desert to the Soviet side because they consider post-1918 Poland to be discriminatory. To a high degree, such a representation of a disintegrating Polish battalion is, in general, a rarity among the representations of national struggle in Polish culture. Tadeusz Konwicki's representation of a disintegrating guerrilla unit in *Rojsty (Marshes, 1956)* was another one written after the World War II but published only in 1956. . Both works expose the clash between the ideal of a Polish warrior or a soldier that had been created centuries before and remained firmly embedded in Polish culture and the war reality.⁸⁵ At the same time, the soldiers fighting on the Polish side, are presented in Rembek's novel as within a long chain of non-stop defeats, and retreats in which the entire battalion is wiped out. Some critics read this as an anticipation of the lost 1939 campaign.⁸⁶

Jeffrey Alexander has argued that societies manipulate the understanding of those who suffer and why they suffer because suffering is closely connected with the responsibility for inflicting it. Thus, societies can either accept or reject the suffering of others and by accepting it, are able to gain greater reflexivity thus expanding "the circle of we."⁸⁷ Kossak's main focus is undoubtedly on Poles and their

⁸⁵ Katarzyna Zechenter, *The Fiction of Tadeusz Konwicki: Coming to Terms with Post-War Polish History and Politics*, (Lewiston: Mellen Press 2007), pp. 33-45.

⁸⁶ Critics often remark on the 'atypicality' of Rembek's representation: Jerzy Kwiatkowski, *Dwudziestolecie międzywojenne. Wielka Historia Literatury Polskiej*, (Warszawa PWN 2002), p. 321.

⁸⁷ Alexander, *Toward a Theory*, p. 1.

suffering: specifically the suffering of the Polish landed nobility, Polish intellectuals as well as what he terms the Polish ‘Borderland’s proletariat’ that is the poorer ranks of the nobility.⁸⁸ However, the suffering she describes include not only the Poles, but also Jews killed by Ukrainians in multiple pogroms in places she lists as ‘Lityń, Kupiel, Ostropol, Lubara, Kuzmin’,⁸⁹ and the notorious pogrom in Ploskuriv. She also describes Ukrainian peasants killed by a unit of the Polish army as revenge for their raping and killing of a Polish girl. She points out that the killing of the Ukrainians responsible for the killing did not represent any form of justice only “one act of hatred that was responded to with another act of hatred, that will, no doubt, lead to the third act of hatred.”⁹⁰ She does not hesitate to call the Polish soldiers ‘beasts’ for what they have done. However, Kossak’s discussion of traumas in these regions overwhelmingly focuses on the suffering of the Polish population and allows her to essentially dismiss this particular incident as an aberration and not a norm. As such, she does not question the paradigm of Polish suffering in the name of Poland.

Kossak is more sympathetic towards the suffering of the Jews in the region, especially while describing the magnitude of the pogrom in Proskuriv (Płoskirow in Polish, Пpockypiv in Ukrainian) that took place on 15 Feb. 1919 and was carried out by soldiers of the Ukrainian People’s Republic when more than 1500⁹¹ Jews were slaughtered within a few hours. Her description of the atrocities is highly accurate and based on eyewitnesses accounts when she writes that the pogrom was done without ‘even one bullet’ as the soldiers were ordered to save ammunition.⁹² The compassionate language of the paragraph emphasises the tragedy of the victims (‘terrible misery’;) and the cruelty and savagery of the murderers who killed “tiny babies” and did not spare pregnant women who were cut open or girls whose breasts were cut off. Yet, acknowledging the horrible suffering of the Jews in the region does not change her main focus on Polish suffering and her earlier accounts of Jewish support for Soviet Bolsheviks who routinely robbed and executed Poles.

⁸⁸ Kossak is clearly aware of the economic antagonism between Polish landed and landless Polish nobility. See also Beauvois, *Trójkat ukraiński*, pp. 10-15.

⁸⁹ Kossak, *Požoga*, p. 90.

⁹⁰ Kossak, *Požoga*, p. 97.

⁹¹ The number of victims differ somewhat depending on the source.

⁹² Kossak’s description is accurate: she writes, for instance, that the pogrom was systematic, that Jews were killed not by bullets but rather they were “cut, slaughtered or stubbed” by Ukrainian soldiers. That was corroborated by witnesses: David Alan Chapin, Ben Weinstock, *The Road from Letichev: The History and Culture of a Forgotten Jewish Community in Eastern Europe*, Vol. 2, (Lincoln NE: Iuniverse 2000), pp. 506-508.

In her novel, Kossak presented Jews as supporters of Communism and thus enemies of the Poles as well as a separate and antagonistic race although she softened her position ten years later after the encyclical of Pope Pius XI of 14 March 1937 which condemned racism.⁹³ Nonetheless, during World War Two, Kossak felt that as a Catholic she should help to save Jews from German Nazi extermination despite still perceiving them as “enemies”⁹⁴ of Poland yet she co-founded the Provisional Committee to Aid Jews in 1942 (codenamed Żegota) and paid for it with being sent to Auschwitz Concentration Camp. This tangle of strong negativity towards Jews and sensitivity towards their suffering was, and still remains, a controversial issue in Polish culture.⁹⁵ Kossak’s negative collective representation of the Jews as supporters of Communism in her first novel strongly suggest that it was Kossak’s idealisation of Poland as a blameless victim of enemies of the past and present that prevented her from including Jews into the same circle of suffering as the Poles in the Borderlands. Consequently, the Jews in her novel ‘suffer alone’.⁹⁶ In other words, despite her clear sympathy towards the Jewish victims of pogroms, Kossak does not include Polish Jews into Polishness.

As emphasised earlier, both Wittlin and Rembek avoid focusing on nationality or collective suffering of the Poles. As a pacifist, Wittlin argues in his novel that the weight of horrors of “militarism” and war obscured ‘the heroic, idealistic aspects of war, and insisted so strongly on the futility of war, that men are fast coming to believe that ‘peace at any price’ is the best motto for a nation.’⁹⁷ Wittlin thus appears to follow typical arguments against pacifism such as that of a British diplomat, Philip Marshall Brown, who in 1915 rejected pacifism concluding that if diplomacy cannot find a solution “then war alone can decide questions of this character”.⁹⁸ In his novel, however, Wittlin omits the complexities of the clash between pacifism and patriotism altogether making suffering independent from one’s conviction and thus emphasising its universal context.

⁹³Carla Tonini, *Czas nienawiści i czas troski. Zofia Kossak-Szczucka – antysemitka, która ratowała Żydów*, Teresa and Wojciech Jekiel, transl., (Warszawa, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny 2007), p. 89.

⁹⁴Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, ‘Protest: “We do not stop thinking of them as political, economic and ideological enemies of Poland.”’ in Andrzej Krzysztof Kunert, *Polacy – Żydzi 1939–1945. Wybór źródeł*, (Warsaw: Rytm Oficyna Wydawnicza, 2001), p. 213.

⁹⁵Jan Błoński, *Biedni Polacy patrzy na getto*, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1994), p. 38.

⁹⁶Alexander, ‘*Toward a Theory*’, p. 1.

⁹⁷Philip Marshall Brown, The Dangers of Pacifism, *The North American Review*, 716 (July 1915), pp. 63-64.

⁹⁸Brown, The Dangers of Pacifism, p. 61.

Rembek, however, recognises and discusses the complexity and entanglement of national feelings and points to the tragedy of the Polish-Ukrainian conflict since both people have identical feelings towards the land that they perceive as theirs. In his novel, Rembek introduces Bazyli Sołyszko, an Ukrainian born in Czestochowa whose father was a Tsarist policeman so cruel towards the Poles that he was eventually assassinated by some Polish underground organisation. Consequently, Bazyli hates the Poles, and especially their joy at regaining independence in 1918 that underscores the tragedy of the Ukrainian population who were also oppressed by the Soviet Union. Bazyli, however, recognises that only an independent Poland might eventually help to create an independent Ukrainian state so he joins the Polish side during the Polish-Soviet war. Lieutenant Paprosiński in turn recognises and forgives Sołyszko's feelings of hatred towards the Poles because he observed the same feelings of hatred among Poles before Poland regained its independence.⁹⁹

Such a negative understanding of the consequences of suffering as an aspect of cultural trauma was revolutionary in Polish culture because of the Polish focus on the importance and the innate virtue of Polish suffering since the Romantic era. Rembek's implication that Ukrainians could also share in this suffering was, therefore, completely omitted in criticism devoted to Rembek's work or work on post-1914 literature. Mirosław Lalak, the author of Rembek's monograph, prefers, for instance, to read Paprosiński's understanding of Sołyszko within the context of Kant's anthropology¹⁰⁰ or even as a formal element of Rembek's prose that often builds his characters through contrast thus adding the element of dramatization that sharpens 'existential dilemmas' of his characters.¹⁰¹ It was Maria Janion seventy years later who was the first Polish scholar to analyse this aspect of Polish culture and the negative consequences of the repetition of "trivialized Romantic paradigms"¹⁰² thus exposing the 'shallowness yet durability of the rhetoric of suffering.'¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Stanisław Rembek, *W polu*. (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1958), p. 42.

¹⁰⁰ Mirosław Lalak, *Między historią a biografią. O prozie Stanisława Rembeka*, Rozprawy i Studia 90, (Szczecin: Uniwersytet Szczeciński, 1991), p. 126.

¹⁰¹ Lalak, *Między historią a biografią*, pp. 127-130.

¹⁰² Maria Janion, 'Farewell to Poland? The uprising of a nation', *Baltic Worlds*, 4 (2011), p. 4.

¹⁰³ Zechenter, *The Need to Suffer*, p. 22.



A longer poem by Władysław Syrokomla “Captain Fiddle-Faddle and Captain Karabela Sword” used in 1921 to teach soldiers to read in Polish. Above a photo and a postcard sent to Bochnia from Polish Legion. From the exhibition on 100 years of Poland’s independence *The Polish Fight for Independence 1914-1918: A Story of a Polish Family*, UCL SSEES, curated by K. Zechenter, Nov. 2019.

This article has focused on the three major frameworks to reconfigure the role of Polish suffering in post-1914 fiction. Firstly, on the continuation of the narrative of Polish suffering within the framework of literature of heroic and selfless fighters for Poland that has been well established since Romanticism, and popular with readers raised on Sienkiewicz. Kossak’s book thus extolls what she perceives as the “timeless truth” of the Polishness of the Borderlands without an attempt to understand other claims to these lands by employing a “colonising” gaze to represent anything other than Polish suffering in these regions. It would take another twenty years and another tragic war that included a further Polish-Ukrainian conflict for Giedroyc’s émigré journal *Kultura* to disarm this ‘explosive’ Polish-Ukrainian history by understanding the Ukrainian position.¹⁰⁴ The second approach, pacifism, as represented in Wittlin’s only novel resulted in a masterpiece about the futility and monstrosity of systems, both military and bureaucratic, that turn living and feeling human beings into a cannon fodder. This approach to war and suffering did not, however, lead to a new path in Polish literature as the main character lives outside the notion of national identity cognitively unable to recognise himself as an individual. The third path, that of Stanisław Rembek’s narrative of suffering as the result of modern

¹⁰⁴ ‘Pierwszeństwo wyciągniętej dłoni, Jerzy Giedroyc i polsko-ukraińskie upiory przeszłości. Zamiast wywiadu’ in Iza Chruślińska, Piotr Tyma (eds), *Wiele twarzy Ukrainy*. (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2005), p. 259.

warfare and told outside “patriotic phraseology” suggests a growing understanding of the need to find a solution outside narrowly defined identities and was highly innovative in post-1918 fiction.

The period of bloodshed after 1914 did not create a unifying master narrative in Polish fiction as had been the case with Polish Romanticism. In some respects, however, it strengthened the possibility of still presenting suffering as a Polish virtue as Kossak’s book was followed by many more memories from that region, although numerous writers have been highly critical of Polish colonialism just to mention Leopold Buczkowski, Stanisław Cat-Mackiewicz and Maria Dąbrowska.¹⁰⁵ Pacifism also did not turn out – could not turn out - to be a viable option as just four years after Wittlin published his book, the entire language of European culture had to alter to address the suffering during the Second World War.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Wanda Supa, Kategorie ‘krzywdy’ i ‘winy’ w literackiej pamięci o Kresach w literaturze polskiej i ukraińskiej’, in *W kręgu problemów antropologii literatury: antropologia codzienności*, ed. W. Supa, (Białystok: Uniwersytet w Białymstoku 2013), p. 31.

¹⁰⁶ Alexander, ‘Toward a Theory’, p. 22.