

Joshua A. Sanborn. *Imperial Apocalypse: The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire*. Oxford UP, 2014. xii, 290 pp. Maps. Sources for Maps. Works Cited. Index. \$49.95, cloth.

Professor Joshua A. Sanborn's excellent book does many things at once. It is a general history of the Russian Empire during World War I, and it covers major military engagements and social processes while emphasizing the connection between the two. Specialists on Ukraine will find the central argument of this book interesting, namely, that the war put into motion a process of decolonization that destroyed the empire. Sanborn does not arrive at this conclusion by way of the most obvious road of focusing on the national movements of the empire's peoples. On the contrary, he, rightly, argues that the imperial collapse enabled state building in the borderlands. However, he does stress the importance of keeping in mind that an "imperial challenge" from nationalists was in the picture before the empire started disintegrating. Here, World War I worked in favour of the patriotic activists by making ethnicity an important political factor, although the immediate effects of this conceptual innovation were sometimes disastrous for some nationalities.

Sanborn, instead of focusing on national movements, explains the fall of the Russian Empire as having occurred sequentially in stages—state failure, social disaster, and new state building. For him, the main cause of state collapse in the borderlands was the introduction of martial law in the front zone—this being the measure with which the Romanov empire "had laid the basis for its own self-destruction" (64). The generals' heavy-handed social engineering translated into the application of deportations and hostage-taking to Jews, Ukrainians, and Poles and into the forcible dislocation of an entire population through the implementation of a "scorched earth" policy. Sanborn shows that these violent official measures went hand in hand with the pogroms and looting undertaken by Russian soldiers on their own—with particular brutality during the retreat. Already in the fall of 1914, the military governor of Lviv was receiving "daily reports" about "robbery and violence" by Russian Cossack units (61). But these excesses paled in comparison to the so-called "Great Retreat" of 1915, when, with the burning oil fields of Drohobych in the background, the military attempted to drive out the entire population of the region rather than men of military age as stated in the original order. These forced refugees marched eastward in columns up to thirty kilometres long; in May 1915 alone, twenty-six thousand people per day crossed the pre-war border between the two empires (78). The soldiers' violent attacks on civilians were particularly atrocious during that period.

Sanborn argues that these developments fundamentally crippled the empire's political and social systems. They triggered two interlinked processes: the emergence of warlords and the destruction of the social fabric,

both of which defined the year 1917. Yet, one wonders if the connection here is as straightforward as the author seems to believe. There were no generals who turned into charismatic warlords prior to the collapse of the monarchy, and the continuity between the Russian military's martial law and peasant gang leaders of later years is far from obvious. Moreover, it is unclear just how the social disaster of 1915-16 made the revolution inevitable. Sanborn argues that the state's failure to provide security for its citizens and the "social pathologies" that developed during those two years were "critical for an understanding of the Russian Revolution." But the exact mechanism of influence is only described as "[t]he pangs of fear and the visceral sense of chaos and impending doom" that "provided the radical edginess" for transforming social protest into a violent rebellion (175). The country's descent into violence was indeed an important piece of the puzzle but not necessarily in the sense of its generating insecurity and psychological edginess that somehow translated into a revolution.

Historians of Ukraine will find many interesting pages in Sanborn's book. The author provides a competent discussion of Russian occupational policies in Eastern Galicia from 1914 to 1916, perhaps best defined as an inconsistent assimilationist drive that already demonstrated the military's propensity for more radical policies that could spark ministerial objections. The author, who worked in Ukrainian archives, highlights for the first time the disastrous social and economic consequences of the Brusilov Offensive in the summer of 1916. The Russian military forcibly conscripted for work brigades some thirty-five thousand Ukrainian peasants, often together with their horses and carts, thus depriving the countryside of working hands at harvest time. However, once the imperial officials realized that only twelve percent of the land would be tilled in the region, they propelled the matter of the impending famine all the way up to the tsar (141). Nicholas II, in one of his last decrees before his abdication, ordered the use of new recruits and military reservists for farming in the region, a measure that was likely never implemented. The story of this destruction of Ukrainian agriculture and its outcome got overwritten by the story of the Revolution; it still awaits the attention of Ukrainian economic historians.

Sanborn also sees in a favourable light the measures of the Ukrainian Central Rada in the summer of 1917, especially the creation of the General Secretariat, the government of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR): "Ukrainian leaders quickly, firmly, and correctly linked this explosion of violence not only to the collapse of the front but also to the collapse of the state" (222). Curiously for a monograph presenting the war as the starting point of decolonization in the Romanov domains, the author does not discuss the Ukrainization of the army in any detail. We do learn that the July 1917 compromise with the Provisional Government included giving Russian

generals the power to stop the Ukrainization of existing military units (215), but the start and moving forces of this grassroots process are not covered.

The author and the publisher are to be commended for sticking to the Ukrainian versions of place names in the book; there are, however, problematic exceptions to this trend—"Kiev" (e.g., 71) and "Kievan Rus'" (e.g., 10). At the same time, Sanborn is wrong in his assumption that "Ukrainian nationalism first took hold in the Habsburg domains" and then spilled over into the Russian Empire (11). It is also not true that "most" of Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko's troops during the first Bolshevik war on the UNR were ethnic Ukrainians (230), but some were. Finally, the "Hetman Polubat'ko [sic] Regiment" (222) was, in fact, named after Pavlo Polubotok.

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