

Borislav Chernev. *Twilight of Empire: The Brest-Litovsk Conference and the Remaking of East-Central Europe, 1917-1918*. U of Toronto P, 2017. xx, 308 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Glossary. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$77.00, cloth.

Europe's so-called short twentieth century had its share of hallmarks. Arguably, none were more important than the Great War of 1914-18, which saw, among many other things, the collapse of no less than four empires and, subsequently, a major redrawing of the map of Europe. A preamble to this exercise, multi-layered and protracted by definition, took place at Brest-Litovsk in late 1917 and early 1918 and involved the victorious Central Powers and a defeated Soviet Russia. John W. Wheeler-Bennett, in his classic study of this event—*Brest-Litovsk: The Forgotten Peace, March 1918*—published in 1938, presents Brest-Litovsk as a Carthaginian peace—a diktat—imposed by the ruthless German military on their Russian foes. Borislav Chernev, without denying the merits of such an interpretation, shifts the centre of gravity here away from Erich Ludendorff and his associates. He considers first and foremost the many implications of peacemaking across east-central Europe, with an emphasis on the correlation of diplomatic negotiations and domestic developments.

Once the Bolsheviks were in power following their successful coup, they issued a Decree on Peace, on 8 November 1917, which demanded an end to hostilities in all theatres of war and proposed an immediate general peace without indemnities or annexations. This proposal remained unanswered, and the Bolsheviks found themselves confronted with the harsh reality of having to negotiate an armistice—with an enemy that occupied a good portion of the former Russian Empire—and, subsequently, a peace treaty. In early December 1917, when plenipotentiaries from both sides met at the half-burnt fortress of Brest-Litovsk, the exchanges of views quickly revealed the fundamental incompatibility of the goals of each side in relation to the others. While Vladimir Lenin's Bolshevik Russia, driven by ideological imperatives, called for a world proletarian revolution—one that he and Leon Trotsky, among others, deemed indispensable to the very survival of the Soviet experiment—Germany, anxious to eliminate as quickly as possible its Eastern Front in preparation for a final offensive in the west, formulated an Ostpolitik aimed at keeping for itself the lands occupied in 1915. It would be hard to imagine more vastly different *Weltanschauungen*: revolutionary tactics crossing swords with imperial cabinet diplomacy! The seemingly unbridgeable gulf between the positions of Soviet Russia and the Central Powers regarding the nature and implementation of the concept of national self-determination in the disputed and multi-ethnic borderlands explained the lack of progress in the negotiations. While the Bolsheviks insisted on the

withdrawal of German troops in the lead-up to referendums on the future status of the occupied western borderlands, the Central Powers argued that referendums were not necessary since those territories had already declared their independence from Russia and asked for Austro-German protection. The Bolsheviks, with Trotsky's eloquence in evidence, delayed proceedings in the hope that a revolution would break out in east-central Europe and, if successful, would render further negotiations superfluous. It seemed in mid-January 1918 that such an approach might bear fruit.

At the very beginning of the war, the Allies had imposed a blockade on the Central Powers that progressively hurt their economies. In the case of the Dual Monarchy, for example, that painful reality was illustrated by the progressive unravelling of the economic complementarity between Austria and Hungary; the food riots in the capital, Vienna, in May 1916; a strike movement that involved between forty thousand and sixty thousand Viennese workers in May 1917; war weariness; and the demand for peace. The last straw was the governmental decision, announced on 14 January 1918 in the midst of a particularly harsh winter, to reduce the daily flour ration by half. Workers at the Daimler Motor Works in Wiener Neustadt, who were more radical than their counterparts elsewhere, stopped working on 16 January 1918. The strikers demanded more bread and the rapid conclusion of a non-annexationist peace. As the strike movement spread outside of Vienna, it involved over seven hundred thousand workers. Although a genuine revolutionary situation engulfed Austria, the scenario of February 1917 in Russia did not repeat itself. Indeed, the authorities managed to stem the tide of revolution before the end of the month. How did they do it? First, the Habsburg government apparatus and, more importantly, the army did not disintegrate amid the chaos (actually, additional troops from the Eastern Front were dispatched to the hinterland). Also, the Austro-Hungarian delegation in Brest-Litovsk moved closer toward peace with Ukraine and shipments and requisitions of food were received from Romania, Germany, "Poland," and Hungary. Finally, the leaders of the Austrian Social-Democratic Party were able to outflank a radical minority that, inspired by the Bolshevik model, pushed for a seizure of power. By revealing the close correlation between domestic disturbances and peacemaking, the January Strike exemplified a shift toward greater popular participation in domestic politics and foreign policy.

The fourth chapter of the book, entitled "The Brest-Litovsk System and Modern Ukrainian Statehood" (120-57), should appeal to readers of *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* in particular. The Central Powers, in an attempt to break the diplomatic impasse and procure badly needed food supplies, turned to the recently arrived representatives of the Ukrainian People's Republic. This political decision had many repercussions: it resulted

in the signing of the first peace treaty of the Great War, on 9 February 1918; it accelerated the process of imperial collapse and nation-state formation in east-central Europe; it played a significant role in the early stages of modern Ukrainian statehood; and it provided the framework for the Ukrainization policies that were carried out, in quite a volatile political climate, by a succession of Ukrainian governments between the spring and winter of 1918. Although Bulgaria was the least important member of the Quadruple Alliance, it, like Italy, Romania, and Greece, had entered the war in order to achieve certain well-defined objectives; indeed, its leaders aspired to establish the country's regional hegemony in the Balkans. This dream of Great Power status, pursued under the guise of national unification and shared by King Ferdinand I, the Vasil Radoslavov government, and many members of the educated society, did not materialize. Not only did Bulgaria antagonize its Ottoman ally over Thrace, it also failed to establish close ties with the Ukrainians and the Russians. All that was left was an unhealthy sense of victimization.

The German High Command, frustrated by a scenario where wide-ranging polemics were wrongly prevailing over common sense, urged its diplomats to issue an ultimatum to their opponent in order to clarify the situation. They did so, and since they did not receive a positive answer in return, hostilities were resumed on 18 February. The Bolsheviks did not have an army to stop the German advance, and they debated whether to accept the inevitable and sign a peace treaty with the Central Powers, fight a revolutionary war, or follow Trotsky's idiosyncratic suggestion of "no war, no peace." Lenin, not without great difficulty, managed to convince a majority of Bolshevik party members to adopt his position; as a result, the peace was finally signed on 3 March 1918. Chernev ends his last chapter (183-220) with a description of the main clauses of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, rightly concluding that the conditions imposed on the vanquished were draconian. More debatable is the author's bold assertion, both unproven and unprovable, that "the Bolsheviks could have secured far more lenient terms at Brest-Litovsk, had they refrained from at least some of their revolutionary antics and exhibited a genuine desire to make the best of a bad situation" (214). The Brest-Litovsk settlement—which is somewhat controversially described as "a peace of decolonization" (is this really an adequate expression to describe a peace treaty that saw German imperialism replacing Russian imperialism? [215])—fell short of establishing a stable peace during its existence, largely because the situation on the ground remained quite tense and the Bolsheviks had no intention of faithfully observing its provisions. In a nutshell, Ostpolitik and imperial dynasticism, on the one hand, and world revolution, on the other, proved, in a context of intense mutual distrust, to be not only entirely incompatible but also impossible to

reconcile. It was no surprise, then, that the Soviet government renounced the treaty on 13 November 1918.

Chernev is quite right to describe the Brest-Litovsk conference as an event that cast light on the complex nature of coalition warfare and that deeply influenced Soviet foreign policy, the main characteristic of which was the alternation of formal negotiations with ideological warfare. Only Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika introduced a different modus operandi. However, Chernev's coupling of Brest-Litovsk with "the early stages of the age of ideological warfare" (221) will not convince every reader. Nor will his assertion that "Brest-Litovsk saw the advent of the critical concept of self-determination" (5). Were the wars of the French revolutionary period and of the Napoleonic era not ideological wars? And did the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires, both multinational polities located in the very heart of east-central Europe, not experience on multiple occasions during the so-called long nineteenth century the potential lethality of nationalism? These two examples illustrate the main weakness of this book—the author's tendency, at times, to overemphasize the significance of the Brest-Litovsk conference.

The book *Twilight of Empire* is the work of a young, linguistically gifted, and quite promising historian. It is a well-researched and well-written monograph, which began as a doctoral dissertation at the American University in Washington, DC. It will appeal to specialists in the fields of international relations, World War I, east-central Europe, and early Soviet Russia. While it is contentious in some of its conclusions, it nevertheless constitutes a solid addition to the historiography of those troubled times and places.

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Work Cited

Wheeler-Bennett, John W. *Brest-Litovsk: The Forgotten Peace, March 1918*. Macmillan, 1938.