

ESSAY

One Hundred Years On: a New Central Europe from the Ruins?

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The arrival of the 100-year anniversary of the collapse of Central and Eastern European empires at the end of WWI has generated increasing interest in history within societies of the Visegrad countries. While memories of the momentous changes of 1918 have already slipped beyond the boundaries of communicative memory, the significance of these events - carefully nurtured by national historiographies since they occurred - is conducive to a more intensive process of recollection and reappraisal in the coming year(s). Historians, the broader public and politicians will unavoidably engage with the memory of the end of the WWI and offer their own perhaps uninspired, perhaps idiosyncratic, and perhaps really innovative, novel views and interpretations of the events of the period.

There is no harm in such activities - building and fostering a sense of togetherness through identification with a common past is inherent to human communities as it binds group members and strengthens solidarity. As we still live - despite their much-prophesized demise - in a world where nations and nation-states matter, the anniversary of the beginning of the age of nation-states in Central and Eastern Europe was never going to pass unnoticed. On the contrary, initiatives already abound before the anniversary year, and the first foreseeable clashes between

interpretations of national politics of histories have taken place.

However, this is a clear signal that the coming years will not easily come to a conclusion that will reconcile nations and their memories with each other. It is unfortunately a banal, almost self-evident statement for anyone familiar with the historiography of the region. In the geographic zone (the "shatterzone") between the German and Russian Empires, the histories of the newly emerging nations were too often written with an eye fixed upon other national identities and perhaps more importantly national territories - leading to histories created in opposition to their neighbours, and backwardness explained through the relentless oppression suffered from rival nations. Simple rivalry and occasional violent conflict would not complicate matters, as they have been part of Central European history since the dawn of nations in Europe. The emergence of national movements within the Russian, Habsburg (and partly within the Ottoman and German) Empires was not just a process of ever more intense rivalry due to conflicting political goals, but also a process of finding a new balance for a region the imagined components of which - the much hoped for nation-states of Hungarians, Poles, Czechs (and Slovaks and Czechoslovaks), South Slavs and Romanians - were attempting to align themselves in order to evade the

repeated imposition of imperial rule from Berlin, Vienna or Saint Petersburg. Thus, the vision of a new order (realized in and immediately after 1918) was inseparable from ideas about the reconfiguration of the region into a more cohesive unit. Divergence and convergence were to be balanced, in order to establish a new international order, based on the reconciliation of national interests.

Once again, the failure of these attempts until the present is among the most banal realities of Central and Eastern European history. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that the history of the region is as much the history of this aim towards convergence as it is the more obvious process of divergence. The idea of convergence is not only limited to internationalist, liberal or cosmopolitan thinkers - paradoxical as it may sound, radical nationalists (like Josef Tiso) often dreamt of establishing a nationalist international, finding a way for the co-existence of every nation *after* each had sorted out their proper and authentic sphere and model of existence. Based on this dialectic, and with some deliberate exaggeration and provocation, it is feasible to say that nation-states in Central Europe exist(ed) to become a more unified Central Europe, and not solely for their own sake.

However, right at the moment when this new Central Europe of nation-states emerged, and exactly due to the way they came into being at the end of October 1918, this second objective was imperilled. Instead of a gradual transformation of empires (with a peaceful secession, federalisation, process of non-territorial autonomy) leading to the fulfilment of national aspirations, the new nation states were rooted inescapably in the horrors of war and violence, and the enthusiasm of national revolution was crucial in overcoming the war's socio-psychological effects. Victory was supposed to be the universal remedy for wartime sufferings, but the excruciating logic of politics dictated that winners needed losers, whose defeat makes victory more symbolic and unifying. Instead of establishing a new balance, central Europe descended into imbalance and the trajectories of nations, set out by their fate at the end of WWI, paralyzed efforts to regain balance and counter external forces – be it German, Soviet or French – that tried to upend the precarious peace.

Cultures of victory, cultures of defeat – the permanence of war?

One hundred years are seemingly not enough to change the profound differences in basic attitudes prevalent in Central Europe at the end of WWI. Taking only the examples of the V4 countries, at least three different and lasting perceptions of their independence emerged not long after the events. Official Hungarian views were straightforward and concerned the unacceptable nature of a peace treaty that was deemed too high a price to pay for independence. Independence turned out to be not so worthwhile if it meant the loss of great power or status. Hungary also experienced an intense social revolution in the transition and its rulers after 1920 wished to put this spirit back in the bottle. Hungarian revisionist propaganda, relentlessly bombarding citizens with the message of suffering due to the peace treaty, aimed to create a cultural trauma that could also obscure social injustice. While the country sought an alliance with Poland and time after time made attempts to divide the anti-Hungarian Little Entente (an alliance of the South Slav state, Romania and Czechoslovakia with the backing of France), its revisionist politics precluded any meaningful regional cooperation *before* territorial reconfiguration.

For Poland independence was a true victory, but very much complicated by geopolitics and internal divisions. For a moment the new state could have imagined itself as a significant power, due to the temporary weakness of its German and Soviet neighbours. But in the early thirties the old ghosts returned, and Polish leaders were ever more concerned with external threats from West and East. Meanwhile, internal strife was rife, not least because of the divisions in Polish politics during WWI. While initially it certainly seemed a clever strategy to have options for all possible outcomes (a more pro-Russian, Dmowski and his Endacja and a pro-Central powers faction, Pilsudski and his legions capitalizing on the changing fortunes of war), there was no reconciliation after 1918, nor after the successful war against Soviet-Russia. Polish politics also remained divided (exemplified by Pilsudski's putsch in 1926) regarding its role within Europe, often nurturing conflicting aims

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ranging from colonial phantasies to the Promethean dreams of subverting the Soviet-Union and liberating Ukraine, all of which came to an end with the bitter disappointment and return to a politics of division in 1939.

Czechoslovakia initially seemed to be poised for success. Spared from the extensive violence present in revolutionary and counterrevolutionary Hungary or in war-torn Poland, boosted in state-building efforts by a swift transfer of loyalty from the imperial bureaucracy to Czechoslovak, centralized statehood, its image as the sole bastion of liberal democratic ideas in Central Europe reinforced by the coup d'états and autocratic regimes established in the Balkans, Poland and Hungary, it embraced wholeheartedly – and for the outside world truly seemed to embody – the best of human progress. With Slovak nationalism in an initial phase its only problems seemed to be how to appease its German minorities, but with Weimar Germany seeking a new role in the international sphere, and with the inclusion of German parties in Czechoslovak governments, success in this regard seemed imminent.

But inhomogeneity would be the downfall of Czechoslovakia too, and Slovak nationalism, which was helped by an aggressive Nazi Germany and sought out as an ally by revisionist Hungary, became the death knell of a divided country. Slovak nationalists refused to accept the idea of a Czechoslovak nation, rejected the thought that they should be grateful to Czech politicians for their liberation, and promoted the idea of an independent Slovak nation-state – juxtaposed with the “colonizing” nations of Czechs and Hungarians. Not only defeat and its permanent cult in Hungary, but the insecurity of victory in Poland – otherwise subject to cultic remembrance practices – and the sense of ambiguity of being victorious without gaining a nation-state among Slovaks undermined efforts to bring stability into Central Europe.

As a prelude to WWII Central Europe again dissolved into an amorphous space where imperial and national geographies intersected, boundaries were relocated, and the most important of the post-WWI states were simply erased from the map. If there were to be a Central Europe

in Germany's New Europe, it would be nothing more than a colonial space for a European empire.

An even more radical reconfiguration was only hindered by German defeat and Soviet influence, followed by Soviet rule in reconstructed Czechoslovakia, relocated Poland and in Hungary, which was once again defeated as Germany's ally. From 1948 onwards Central Europe found a precarious balance between the regional and the national - conflicts were contained and the common goal of progress towards socialism united once rival countries in a uniform destiny. The ensuing decades brought about radical social changes with restructured economies, enhanced social mobility, a new cultural canon and nominally with an internationalist understanding of history. However, important tropes and themes of national histories persisted and internationalism often remained a thin veil over a barely amended nationalist historiography. The region emerged from its affair with state socialism with classic national historical memory dominant everywhere.

Geopolitics and the social dynamics of a change of regime set into motion once again the familiar dialectics we have seen since the beginnings of the age of nations. European integration became the common goal of Central Europe while the regional ideal - based on the commonalities of culture and social experience - was considered as a counterbalance to the incentives to compete individually for the rewards of EU accession. Regional initiatives, like the V4, tried to strike the right balance, and to demonstrate to a world mesmerized by the so-called “return of nationalism” fuelling the inhumane scenes of the Balkans, that Central Europe was different. Even rival nations could find a way to cooperate and overcome conflicts.

As these developments were inextricably bound to the dominance of liberal internationalism, and EU accession meant adherence to a European regime of memory too, the memory of the end of WWI seemed to be less of a bone of contention and more of an issue reserved for specialists, with their voluminous and boring books. Memory wars were still not uncommon in the region however. Czechs seemed to continue to buy unreservedly into their founding myth of being a bastion of progressive democracy, Polish politicians

have sought ways to posit their own sufferings from both totalitarian regimes as the central element of 20th century European history, many Slovaks hailed the first Slovak Republic, an uncritical Nazi ally and fascist state as the forerunner and legitimizer of the Slovak state established in 1993, and in Hungary Trianon – the dissolution of the state at the end of WWI – was gradually made responsible for all social ills around the new millennium. But as long as the EU was not doubted in these societies, it was possible to uphold at least a superficial social consensus regarding the relative insignificance of history to the present.

However, since the resurgence of nationalism, the growth of nationalist authoritarianism, and with political projects like Hungary's official attempt to unite all Hungarians through their sole nation-state, it is difficult to imagine the anniversary being marked calmly and in a reserved manner. Already the anniversary of the outbreak of the WWI brought to the fore the unresolved conflicts of national memories, reinforced an on-going "Olympics of Victimhood" and presaged a chaotic year of remembrance for 2018. The signs are ominous: debates in Slovakia whether Slovaks should have any stake in this anniversary, Romanian academics attacking a Hungarian research project as "a propaganda outlet of the Prime Minister's Office", Poles and Ukrainians threatening each other with political consequences if the other side dares to remember the armed struggle for Lviv/Lvov in 1918 differently. Suddenly the region resembles more how it looked in 1918 with the not insignificant difference that the cultures of victory so virulent after 1918 have been shaken and infused with cultures of defeat from the past hundred years of history in Central Europe.

Archaeologies of the immediate post-WWI era

But memory - especially social memory - is never identical to history. Leopold von Ranke's immortal question "Wie es eigentlich gewesen?" ("How did it actually happen?") will never be answered simply by going through the registers of individual, family or group memory. This is especially true for memories of how Central European

nation-states were established in the wake of WWI. However, contrary to what one may assume, it is not even possible to reconstruct historical events with the help of existing historiography. The simplified frameworks of national memory dominate historical memory so much that most historical works can be either understood as complying with its most important tenets (the primacy of national identity in the events, the division of the social world into an ethnic "us" and "them", the teleological view of 1918 as the logical and sole legitimate outcome of decades of national struggle at every level), or relegated to auxiliary status as texts which offer fine individual stories but do not challenge the given truth. This is what holds a politics of memory captive too, and what helps to distort the image of a short period that gradually changed life in Central Europe – but not just because of the emergence of nation-states.

Paradoxically, in this regard there was and is no difference between memories based on the experience of defeat or of victory. The transformations during the war are obscured, deemed insignificant, while the transition is always conditioned on the change of *national* sovereignty; social and economic changes are understood as results of nationalising policies. Migration, the fate of business, citizenship options, cultural choices and consumptions, developments in education, state administration and professional cultures are posited in the binary opposition between a nationalizing state and an individual who often appears lost and without agency - only suffering the consequences of choices made by others. The horrors of a mass war with mass violence and total mobilization efforts in the hinterland helped to (re)crystallize the idea of masses being homogeneous and driven by uniform will - and to extend this assumption beyond the social and chronological limits of revolutionary moments. Everything that followed was filtered through this lens of the nation and understood as an expression of its existence.

It is thus not surprising that contemporaries used to read the statistical data released as the result of "censuses" in 1920 (in Poland in 1921) as confirmation of this presumption. This was hardly a novelty, as since modern census taking began the results have been fields of contestation for statisticians and national activists. Most

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actors involved were convinced that national identity is an objective fact and as such statistics should measure it, while most of these actors also agreed that a simple testimony of an individual to his/her own nationality was not sufficient or reliable. While the international congress of statistics introduced the measurement of native tongue as an objective proxy for nationality in 1879, it failed to calm spirits. During the coming decades every census was a battlefield in itself, and the rhetoric wars suggested that the fate of each nation hinged on the sole issue of being represented in statistics as objectively as possible. People were won and won over, lost and regained (or retrieved) by their confession to a mother tongue and the land they inhabited, houses they owned, trades they practiced, their belongings and their whole lives became part of the nation and as such transferred from private ownership to the community. Statistics not only outlined the group and sorted out its members, it offered an illuminating light on their complexity - it was its most objective portrayal, and the only one that could legitimate political claims.

It is true that statistics one way or another reflect social changes and these societies emerging from the trauma of war struggled to grasp the changes they faced. For this reason every successor state hurried to conduct surveys, just as the fact-finding missions of the peace conference or the humanitarian organizations (most importantly the American Relief Administration) did. But while these often took the form of targeted attempts to measure epidemics, food supply, welfare provisions, natural resources etc. and served the goal of facilitating immediate interventions to relieve the population from various ills, a census had to offer a comprehensive picture of a society. In the atmosphere of the post-WWI developments in Eastern Europe, due to the uncertainty of borders because of civil wars and the dragging on of negotiations with Hungary, the new census became even more important for justifying the existence of all successor states.

But as Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia were in different positions and conditions, they had diverging aims with the census too. It is thus not surprising that both the Czechoslovak and Polish census takers included a new category for nationality without making a direct connection

to the mother tongue, while Hungary retained the traditional practice of inferring nationality from the language that the individual mastered the best. However, the most important deficiencies of these censuses did not concern these methodological choices. The statisticians faced almost insurmountable obstacles in representing the true situation of society due to upheaval caused by the war (and not just by the dissolution of Austria-Hungary). Poland was in a constant state of flux concerning its territorial extent, and it waged war against Soviet Russia. Czechoslovak and Hungarian boundaries were fixed, but the flux of society starting in 1914 had not finished yet. Tens of thousands of refugees from the war zone with Russia were still present in these countries, while population movements caused by the violence after the cessation of WW1 hostilities or the new post-war boundaries had just started. The fate of other tens of thousands missing during the war was not determined, adding to uncertainties, and all sorts of shortages meant increased movement between rural and urban environments. Furthermore, local societies mobilized in a social and /or national revolution often claimed agency and refused to adapt to the categories provided by census takers, be it their nationality or professional status. On the other hand, social groups threatened by a loss of social status could not easily accept the sobering realities reflected by statistics and clung to a symbolic belonging to a more prestigious group. Public officials and middle-class refugees in Hungary, or the Polish "intelligentsia" generously fed by the American Relief Administration all rejected to be assigned a new social status despite their destitution – they even got encouragement and some material help exactly because their loss of status was seen as the road leading to bolshevism. As a result it took years for society to settle and a new balance to crystalize.

The 1920 (in Poland 1921) census is therefore an incomplete survey of social changes and it often reflects - sometimes not with its data but with its absence - more the effects of war on society than the changes due to the emergence of the new nation states and their nationalizing efforts. It is not just a matter of convenience that historians and historical demographers mainly rely on the data taken from the next censuses, from 1930 and 1931. The tumultuous next decades also took their toll on this material.

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While in the Czech lands far from the main war zones in both world conflagrations a more complete documentation of the census survived easily, war torn Hungary or Poland was hardly a safe place to ensure their survival. But their significance for local societies differed greatly too. In Czechoslovakia the legacy of the so-called Lex Perek - part of the Moravian compromise of 1905 - made education in the mother tongue compulsory for all of those who confessed to the respective nationality in the census. Preserving census data on individuals was therefore a matter of everyday administration, indispensable proof in case of litigation, while Polish or Hungarian local administrations – the ones that managed the census taking and collected and summarized the data for the national statistical offices – made no use of such detailed material and eventually disposed of it as soon as was possible.

But the problems with these early censuses - which often render them less than useful for nationalist histories - could make them more valuable for efforts that aim to challenge the monopoly of national interpretations of post-

WWII Central Europe. In many respects they reflect more complex and dramatic shift within society, the real trauma of a society mobilized in its entirety for a lost cause and facing military defeat in its entirety. This shift of focus is also crucial for the emergence of an alternative understanding of the last hundred years of Central European history. The locus of this history, local society, was probably the most resilient alternative to both empire and nation-state. In this world the all-pervading logics of nationalism still encountered obstacles. Significant spheres of social life and institutional practices reflected alternative loyalties and solidarities, individual interactions remained grounded in trans-ethnic networks and structures, and people often tried to find ways to deflect the impact of state-driven nationalizing, while finding unexpected allies in the local agents of the state. Recovering the traces of these lost worlds is the first step to build a new Central Europe where local histories could reconcile rival national ones through highlighting their contingency and the limited role of ethnicity within local societies.



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