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## Introduction

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War broke out in Europe in 1914 because of a deed carried out in the name of a people no one had previously heard of.

That June, after years of internecine turmoil and armed conflict in southeastern Europe, a Bosnian Serb named Gavrilo Princip shot and killed Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Habsburg throne, in Sarajevo. The assassin said he was acting to defend the interests of the *Yugoslavs*, or South Slavs, who were seeking independence from the Austro-Hungarian monarchy.

The ensuing conflict was not only “Great” but also total, with states, economies, and armies aiming to organize themselves and destroy one another in ever more effective ways. When the war ended in 1918, statesmen and revolutionary activists made a new Europe, drawing on the impulse that had taken hold of Gavrilo Princip and his friends: that peoples should govern themselves. Clothed in the words *national self-determination*, this impulse was raised as a high political standard by both Bolshevik leader Vladimir I. Lenin and US President Woodrow Wilson, denoting socialism for the first, liberal democracy for the second.

The United States now got into the business of democratization, but it also fostered the first stages in Eurasia of *decolonization*, replacing imperial states like Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire with dozens of supposed nation-states, several of which, like Czechoslovakia and Princip’s Yugoslavia, constituted revolutionary acts on the old map of Europe. Yet democratization turned out to be trickier than anyone imagined, and during the Depression of the early 1930s, words emerged to describe new movements led by haters of democracy: fascism, corporatism, Nazism, totalitarianism.

Late in the decade, Nazi aggression exploded into war on Czechoslovakia and Poland and began spawning more new vocabulary, some of which made its way into English (for example, *blitzkrieg*). Specialists know about the Nazi plan to resettle Eastern Europe with Germans and create an imperial space extending to Moscow and the Crimea, the infamous *Generalplan Ost*, and most grade school graduates know translations directly from the German for crimes committed along the way: “final solution,” “ethnic cleansing.”<sup>1</sup> The word “genocide” was originally formulated in Polish (*ludobójstwo*) to denote the new crime of massacring an entire people.

At war's end, the disruption continued, with "population exchanges" and re-settlements of "displaced persons," phrases no one alive in 1914 would have understood. New regimes arose called "people's democracies," featuring dictatorships of the proletariat that used five-year plans to end the uncertainties of capitalism. A new age had supposedly emerged of human equality. Yet roughly since 1947, this period in which millions suffered deprivations, internal surveillance, and prison camps, has been called the Cold War, a time when the world divided into two hostile camps and seemed to stand on the verge of real war.

In 1953 Joseph Stalin died, and a system named after him plunged into crisis. Young *reform Communists* sent the clock forward by going backward. They dusted off ideas from eighteenth-century liberal philosophy, like "division of powers" and the rights to vote and assemble and speak, and they attempted to implement them in a process known as the "Prague Spring" of 1968. Yet in the miserable summer that followed, Soviet tanks restored Communist orthodoxy, and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev announced an eponymous doctrine, according to which socialism could lead only to Communism, and any reform toward pluralism would trigger fraternal assistance by the socialist community of states.

Because both the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact believed the intervention had stabilized Soviet rule in Eastern Europe, the two sides negotiated measures to reduce the dangers of armed conflict during the era of détente. At the 1975 Helsinki Conference, they reaffirmed their commitment to a principle enunciated soon after World War II: human rights. Yet just two years later, Communist authorities in Prague arrested a rock band called Plastic People of the Universe solely because they did not like its message. That caused Czech dissident intellectuals, mostly former Communists, to remind the regime of the accord it had just signed. The document they circulated became known as Charter 77. One of them, the playwright Václav Havel, also coined an ideal for citizens faced with pressures of self-censorship that would have caused people in 1914 to scratch their heads: living in truth.

Historians explored everyday life under Communism more directly after 1989, when Brezhnev's doctrine was scrapped, along with an edifice dividing Germany's former capital called the "Berlin Wall," except for a half-kilometer strip meant to edify tourists. The supposedly evident bankruptcy of this repressive system caused some to talk of an "end of history," because all countries were destined for free-market liberalism.

Now Eastern Europe was connected not only to its own interrupted history but also to the West. As after World War I, ideas and advisors made landfall, often not knowing anything about the region and its complexities, including

native traditions of rights and democracy. This was a second wave of democratization, but like the first, it did not turn out as planned, spawning a batch of neologisms: Srebrenica, neopopulism, neoliberalism, and *illiberal democracy*, the last coined by Hungary's Viktor Orbán, an erstwhile grave digger of Communist authoritarianism who rescued himself from oblivion in democracy's free for all by becoming a nationalist authoritarian.

\* \* \*

What unites this dramatic and unsettling history is a band of countries that runs from the Baltic Sea down to the Adriatic and Black Seas, between the much larger, historically imperial Russia and Turkey in the east, and Prussian and Austrian Germany in the west. These small countries constitute East Central Europe, a space where more of the twentieth century happened—for good and for bad—than anywhere else on the planet.

If one seeks a simple explanation for the energies that caused this area to produce so much drama and so many new concepts, a glance at the map suggests nationalism: no other region has witnessed such frequent, radical, and violent changing of borders to make nations fit states.<sup>2</sup> Two maps, one from 1800, one from 2000, tell the basic story: a shift from simplicity to complexity, from one small and three large multinational powers to more than twenty national states.

The story was carried forward by the demands of East European nationalists to control territory, demands that triggered resistance, because they contested imperial power and the European order. Since the 1820s, the work of nationalists has brought independent states into being in three stages: the first in 1878, when the Congress of Berlin produced Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Montenegro; the second, in 1919, when revolution and peace making generated Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Poland; and most recently, in the 1990s, when Czechoslovakia broke peacefully into the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and Yugoslavia fragmented violently into Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, two entities in Bosnia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Kosovo. Hungary became *de facto* independent in 1867, when the Austrian Empire divided into Austria-Hungary; after 1920, it emerged much reduced from World War I, two-thirds of its territory going to its neighbors.

What can be debated is whether the degree of violence, especially in World War I, was necessary to break loose the nation-states that now constitute the map of Eastern Europe. Austria-Hungary was more resilient than critics gave it credit

for and only began unraveling in the final year of a war that had been costly beyond any expectations. And there was little relation between intention and outcome: World War I did not begin as a war of national liberation. Yet by 1917, as the causality lists soared and any relation between intention and outcome was lost, it was interpreted to be one. It was a war for democracy—for Wilson's national self-determination—and that helped spawn the new nation-states.

At the same time, without the cause Gavrilo Princip claimed to represent (that South Slavs should live in one state), there would have been no assassination, no Habsburg ultimatum to Serbia (which had trained Princip and supplied him with his pistol) in July 1914, and no war. Seen in rational terms, the Habsburgs' belief that Serbia, a state of three million, represented a challenge requiring a full-scale military assault launched from their state of fifty-two million, seems one of history's great overreactions. But Princip, the frail eighteen-year-old rejected from the Serb army for his small stature, embodied the challenge of an idea, the idea of ethnic nationalism, and the Habsburg monarchy had no response other than naked force.

\* \* \*

The Habsburgs were far from alone in believing that nationalism was a force that eluded rational discussion. At the height of the Munich crisis in 1938, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain called Czechoslovakia "far away lands of which we know nothing." Bohemia with its population of Germans and Czechs was supposedly governed by passions and not reason. In the 1990s, a well-read US president threw up his hands over the prospects of ending genocidal killing in southeastern Europe, portraying the peoples there as governed by "ancient hatreds"; until they "stopped killing each other, bad things will continue to happen."<sup>3</sup>

But nationalists are no more resistant to understanding than any other actors in history. They are guided by motives that are open to reconstruction and analysis. What seemed rational to one side of a nationality dispute usually seemed irrational to the other, and in fact their deeds confound any attempt to divide reason from unreason.<sup>4</sup>

Take Gavrilo Princip. On one hand, his act is easy to understand. When Austrian authorities apprehended him, he said he knew "what was happening in the villages." Thanks to education provided by the Austrian regime, which had ruled Bosnia since 1878, he knew that Austria had done little to alter traditional patterns in the countryside according to which poor Christian

sharecroppers—like his parents—worked on properties owned by Muslims and were condemned to second-class lives. He was one of nine children, but five of his siblings had died in infancy. His father worked several jobs, one of which was lugging heavy bundles of mail up and down mountains, even at an advanced age. For Princip, the shots he fired at the Archduke promised to end this social injustice.

Yet on the other hand, the next step in his thinking is less easy to fit into cold categories of self-interest. He and his friends took for granted that a South Slav state would miraculously do away with all injustice. It would be a place where his parents and other peasants would no longer be a despised underclass, but instead human beings, living no longer under the condescending eyes of imperial authorities, whether Turkish or Austro-German or Hungarian. They would be fully respected in a world of their own culture and language, a world where everyone knew the stories of ancient Serbian heroes that they loved. It was a place where justice would be national and social, because nation and society would be one; all would be secure and fulfilled, working not too much and not too little; a place whose color and contours stretched the imagination but was well worth dying for, because it promised rebirth for everyone.

The question is: where did the idea come from that salvation would flow from a state of the South Slavs? Such a thing had never existed in history.

\* \* \*

The answer lies in philosophy: German philosophy. In the early 1800s, when the grandparents of the Archduke's assassins were children living in Ottoman Bosnia, politically involved intellectuals in Germany and Eastern Europe shared a common predicament: they wanted a nation where they and others like them could live in justice, but they had no idea of what their nation's boundaries would be. The Germans knew what it was to live under the condescending gaze of a foreigner: French forces controlled most of the German lands from the early 1790s until 1813.

Yet before that, German intellectuals had lived in the shadow of French greatness for generations as veritable second-class Europeans. The pain was especially acute during obligatory study tours of Paris, where the young Germans from Stuttgart or Würzburg came to admire French fashions and ideas: only rarely was their curiosity reciprocated by their French hosts, for whom German music and literature were primitive and German statecraft was even worse. They parodied the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation as not holy or Roman

or an empire. It consisted of an endless array of free cities, principalities, bishoprics, and a few kingdoms but could summon no forces to defend itself. When Napoleon declared it defunct in 1806, hardly anyone noticed, at least not immediately.

A reaction set in beginning in the 1770s, with the Germans discovering traditions and qualities in their own world that made it possible to stand aside the French, the English, or any other great nation. Germans did not have a state, but they had something that was uniquely theirs: the German language. The French, distracted by enthusiasm for systems and universal principles, had failed to notice the unique beauty and importance of a people's tongue; in contrast to the idea of French *philosophes* that languages were interchangeable, each one being an endless variety of the same thing, German thinkers held that every language gave expression to a people's soul, placing it in direct relation to God.

In the early nineteenth century, a cult of German language and culture grew in the Thuringian city of Weimar that was associated with the poets who made their home there, above all Friedrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. But the cult's prophet was their friend Johann Gottfried Herder, a Protestant pastor, universal historian, and thinker about nationhood whose ideas became so popular among Germans that Goethe later said people forgot the origins of these ideas, assuming they constituted eternal wisdom.

After Napoleon's defeat in 1815, the university at Jena—an afternoon's walk from Weimar—became a hotbed for the new romantic nationalism among German students. Their ritualistic celebrations of the old German empire's supposed medieval glory—at the Wartburg castle and elsewhere—are the stuff of legend. Less known is that dozens of Slavic students from the Austrian Empire arrived at Jena in these years to learn Protestant theology from the university's luminaries, and many of them became disciples of the new nation cult as well. They came from humble circumstances, some from Bohemia but mostly from what we now call Slovakia, from farms not much different from that of Gavrilo Princip's parents, with many siblings, and landlords who spoke a different language than they did (usually Hungarian) and treated them and their parents as second-class human beings.

Herder himself came from a small German town in the far east, where Germany gradually became Poland, and he knew about the presence of Slavic speakers strewn across the map of central and Eastern Europe, many millions who, in his view, would be the strongest nation (or nations) in Europe if they could ever realize their existence in some kind of state.





MAP INTRO-1. East Central Europe, ca. 1818

So the young Slovak and Czech-speaking theologians shared the problem that also bothered their German friends in Jena and differed from anything that concerned French students at that time: where was their nation? Whether France was a kingdom or a republic, no one questioned where it was. It fell within borders that had shifted only slightly over the centuries and was an established fact on the map of Europe, questioned by no one. The same was true of England, Russia, or Spain. But what was the nation of the Germans in Central Europe or of the Slavs living in the Austrian Empire?

The answer seemed easier for Germans. It was the Holy Roman Empire. Yet that proved superficial on closer inspection. If a nation was made by language, what about the millions of German speakers who lived outside the old empire, like Herder's family in East Prussia? By what right should they be excluded? The answer given by the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte was that Germany was wherever the German tongue could be heard. The German national hymn later proclaimed that the nation stretched from the Maas to the Memel: rivers mainly in other countries.

But the problem for Slavic intellectuals was degrees greater: unlike the Germans, they were not even sure what their language was. At that point, there were no dictionaries of Czech or Slovak or the South Slavic languages. The Slavic speakers in Bohemia and Slovakia spoke a series of dialects, and there was no agreement even about simple words; over the centuries, many Germanisms had crept into daily usage, and no one could say whether the Slavic dialects of Northern Hungary and Bohemia were two or more languages or variants of one. If language made a people, yet the language had no name, who were the people?

One of those students from Northern Hungary, the poet Jan Kollár, had an irrepressible feeling of belonging to a great nation and was determined to find answers. Beyond the teachings of Herder, he learned two things in Jena. Just a few centuries earlier, Slavic speakers had dominated that very part of Germany, but they had gradually disappeared. Remnants of the language remained in the names of geographical features and towns—for instance, “Jena” and “Weimar” were Slavic words. A bit farther east, north of Dresden, in Lusatia, villages still had sprinklings of Slavic speakers who called themselves Sorbs. Because he understood the Sorbs, Kollár considered them parts of “his” people, yet he also saw they were remnants on the verge of extinction. If he and his friends did not act soon, people speaking Slavic languages in Northern Hungary and Bohemia might likewise die out by being absorbed into the dominant Hungarian and German cultures.

The other thing he learned was how diverse the German language was: when Swabians spoke their dialect, fellow students from Brandenburg could not understand them. Kollár discovered that the Slovak he spoke was closer to dialects spoken in Bohemia than these German dialects were to each other. If Germans from the Black Forest and the sands of Pomerania could be one nation, so could Slavic speakers from northern Hungary and Bohemia. There is much more to this story—told in the following chapters—but the word he and his friends gradually arrived at was “Czecho-Slav” to describe this people. By the early twentieth century, people were calling them “Czechoslovaks.”

When Kollár finished his studies and took a position as pastor to Slovak Lutherans in Pest (the eastern half of today’s Budapest), he made the acquaintance of a younger but similarly earnest, imaginative, and gifted theologian who came from the south of the Hungarian kingdom—from Zagreb, the capital of Croatia. This man, Ljudevit Gaj, was well acquainted with the thought of Herder and had become aware that people from Croatia could understand people living in Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia. In fact, there was no border in language going from what we now call Slovenia all the way to the Black Sea. He concluded that the individuals living in this great space were one people, but they had to be awakened to their identity. That became his personal calling. He called this people Illyrians; later generations, including Gavrilo Princip and his friends, called them Yugoslavs.

An influential book tells us that nations are imagined communities.<sup>5</sup> Here we have two men who liked to discuss deep questions on paths in the hills above the Danube in the 1830s, who imagined two nations that politicians in Paris, including Woodrow Wilson, brought to life as states in 1919. We also know that neither state survived the twentieth century. Humans imagine nations, but not all the nations that they imagine have the coherence to stay together. Like unstable chemical compounds, some come apart; occasionally they explode.

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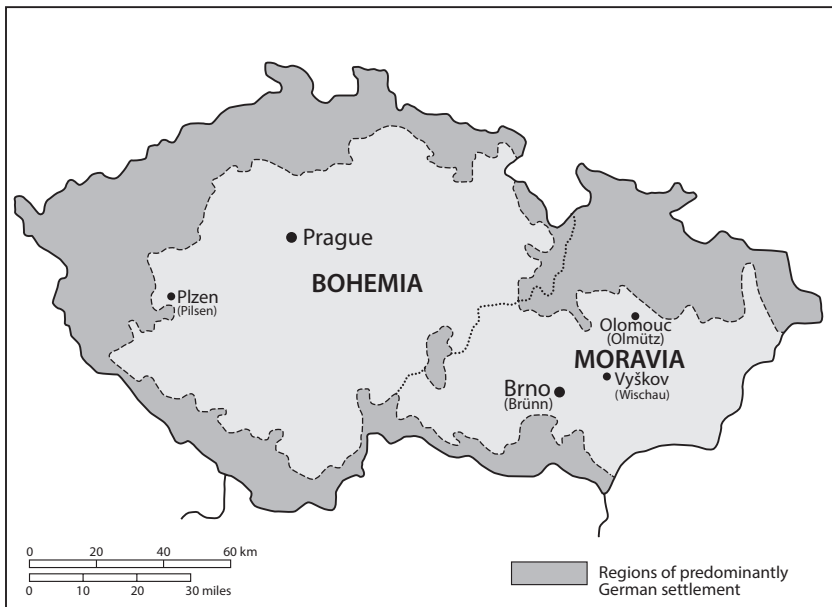
The East European states fashioned in Paris after World War I had problems that Wilson, a political scientist from Virginia, understood poorly. He and the peacemakers intended Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia to be national states—of the sorts that Princip or Kollár or Gaj dreamed of—but they wound up becoming miniature Habsburg empires, with numerous peoples within their boundaries. Before he arrived in France in December 1918, Wilson imagined that the “peoples” of Austria-Hungary might be easily separated. But by the time he left,

he despaired of the new peoples visiting him “every day,” demanding the very same real estate. His fault lay not in complete ignorance. As a young academic, he had written a detailed chapter on the Habsburg monarchy in a book on the world’s governments, and he had not anticipated a problem. Nor had any of the dozens of advisors who accompanied him to Paris. In fact, there had been only one sign in recent history of the ultimate problems of realizing the ideas of Kollár or Gaj. It had flared briefly during the revolutions of 1848, and in the enthusiasm for creating a new world in 1919, its lessons were ignored.

The early months of 1848 were the first time that Europeans living in the vast space from the Atlantic Ocean eastward up to the Russian and Ottoman lands could organize and speak freely in public. From late March, German- and Czech-speaking democrats in Bohemia worked together on a constitution. But after a few weeks, they noticed they had differing ideas about what country they hoped to live in: Bohemia had been the heart of the Holy Roman Empire (and then the German Confederation), and so Germans assumed it would at the heart of democratic Germany.<sup>6</sup> Yet Czechs considered Bohemia to be their homeland, and the word for Bohemia in their language strengthened the idea. It was *Čechy*, and the kingdom of Bohemia was the *Královec český*. The very ground beneath their feet was by nature Czech.

If for German patriots it seemed axiomatic that Germany was at least the territory of the Holy Roman Empire, for Czech patriots their nation was at least the Czech kingdom. Rather than become part of Germany, these patriots thought that Bohemia, the land of the Czechs, should become an autonomous province of the Austrian Empire. By the time a Habsburg general bombarded Prague in June 1848 to restore dynastic order, there had been no resolution of this dispute. No one could draw a line on the map of Bohemia separating the larger Czech from the smaller German population, but every organization that emerged became divided by ethnicity.

To the east, in the first days of freedom and uncertainty, the Austrian Emperor Ferdinand had accorded a constitution to Hungary’s nobility. He would be a constitutional monarch. Because the nobles were liberals, they went about making the kingdom into a uniform state: one and indivisible, just as France was. There would be one language and culture across the realm. The kingdom’s population, however, was mostly non-Magyar, and when Hungarian officials and soldiers entered Serb- and Romanian-dominated regions to the south and east, they met armed resistance. Within weeks, a civil war erupted that cost some forty thousand lives and witnessed the first mass ethnic cleansing in the history of modern East Central Europe. The Jewish-Hungarian-Austrian writer Max



MAP INTRO-2. Kingdom of Bohemia, ca. 1860

Schlesinger wrote: “No revolution of modern times—the great French Revolution not excepted—is blackened with such horrible atrocities.” An “old, long-restrained hate” had burst out among Serbs and Romanians, and Schlesinger compared their deeds to those of “Hurons and Makis of the American forests.”<sup>7</sup> Other observers recorded the defiling of corpses, the burning alive of women and children, the executing of prisoners, and other acts of wanton cruelty that became more gruesome with each telling.

Farther north, Central Europe’s great uniter and excluder, Otto von Bismarck, saw the usefulness of similar atrocity stories for focusing Germans’ hatred on Poles in the Prussian east. In the spring, a civil war had raged briefly between Germans and Poles in the mostly Polish areas of Poznania, but in the end, the Polish side was crushed. Bismarck, an arch-conservative discerned but one guilty party. Berlin’s “naive” democrats had let Polish rebels out of prison, he claimed, the result being that the Poles had gone back home to Poznania and formed bands that “ravaged the German inhabitants of a Prussian province with plunder and murder, slaughter and barbaric mutilation of women and children.”<sup>8</sup>

The failed revolutions of 1848/1849 thus gave evidence of the ambivalent functions of nationalism: in the beginning, it seemed a force for liberating

peoples from the rule of kings and princes in the name of self-government, but by the spring of 1849, the king of Prussia and the emperor of Austria were claiming to defend peoples from each other.

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Assisted by a Russian army, Austrian Emperor Francis Joseph restored order to multiethnic Bohemia and Hungary and attempted to rule alone. Within a decade, he had lost a war to France and was almost broke. He decided that he had to involve some representatives of society in joint rule, if only the aristocracy. That meant overtures to the Hungarian nobility, which was refusing to pay taxes. In 1867, the two sides worked out a compromise dividing the empire in two, Austria-Hungary. In their half, Magyar elites, mostly noble landowners, undertook their state-making project peacefully and gradually: attempting to make everyone, including Slovaks and Romanians, into Hungarians, chiefly through schooling. Yet they had little more than contempt for the ethnic Hungarian peasantry, who worked the lords' lands but had little of their own. The result was to plant the first seeds of fascism, a force that would haunt their children's generation. Fascism grew when ostensibly nationalist politicians of the center—usually liberals—neglected the social needs of the nation. But that outcome would become clear only a generation later.

The other half of the former Austrian Empire had no proper name; it was more than just Austria and included Bohemia, parts of today's Slovenia, Italy, and Poland. People came to call it Cisleithania, lands on Austria's side of the Leitha river. All that united these diverse lands was the crown and the government in Vienna, with its proud and professional bureaucracy. But due to mass agitation in growing towns, emperor and noble elite had to give way to demands for increased suffrage, and as they did, political parties proliferated along ethnic lines, including the Marxian Social Democrats. Parliament had been housed in a magnificent neoclassical structure since 1883, but within a decade, it could not be governed by a majority, chiefly because of the continuing inability of Germans and Czechs to agree on how to rule Bohemia. The German minority there feared that any compromise, especially one making Czech and German equal languages in the land, would be the first step to their own extinction as a people.

Bismarck had united Germany in 1871, leaving the Germans of Bohemia and Austria outside. In these lands, a political movement emerged that claimed to



defend them in both a national and social sense: the National Socialist German Workers Party, otherwise known as the Nazi Party. The pattern was the same as in Hungary: lower class Germans felt the mainstream national movement, represented by German liberals in Vienna, had nothing for them but contempt.

At the same time, the Czechs in Bohemia created numerous parties, of which none became fascist, not even a party calling itself “national socialist.” There the national movement maintained a sense not only of incorporating the desires of many Czech-speakers to use their own language—and be respected when doing so—but also of being a channel for upward social mobility. It built schools that permitted Czech-speakers to thrive in business, the trades, and scholarship using knowledge gained in their own language, and it provided savings banks where Czechs could save their money, free of German capital. In addition, the movement had a virtual philosopher king in Professor Tomáš G. Masaryk, who argued in Herder’s terms that the Czechs indeed had a mission to humankind. It was, he claimed, to be democratic and humane. Supporting him in this belief was his American wife Charlotte, of German Huguenot and Yankee background, who learned perfect Czech and became a Czech Social Democrat.

Like the Czech patriots of 1848, Masaryk believed that the Habsburg monarchy could serve the Czech cause, but only if broken into federal units, like a united states of Central Europe. Yet both German and Hungarian politicians, who in effect controlled the monarchy’s fortunes, refused to discuss such plans, because such a federation would diminish their relative power (in Bohemia and in Hungary). Soon after the Sarajevo assassination of 1914, Masaryk witnessed Austrian authorities arresting fellow Slavs who criticized war on Serbia and executing some of them. He escaped to Switzerland and then France, and set up a lobbying group to realize the dream of the early nationalists, calling it the “Czechoslovak committee.” At the same time, both Yugoslav émigrés and Polish émigrés were setting up their own committees in Paris, also agitating for independent states.

But it was Professor Masaryk who spread the message of Herder to Professor Wilson, disguising it in language that made sense to an American liberal. He helped Wilson think that just as Americans were a people, so were Czechoslovaks, and they deserved to break from their king—the Habsburg Francis Joseph—just as Americans had broken from theirs, and determine their fate freely in a constitution of their own making. The idea was also a poorly disguised utopia, claiming to solve more problems than political institutions usually do.



MAP INTRO-3. East Central Europe, 1921–1939



The self-governing Czechoslovaks would combine with other democratically governed peoples in a League of Nations and ensure lasting peace among nations, because peoples who ruled themselves had no interest in war.

Masaryk did not tell Wilson about the Germans in Bohemia (more than 2.5 million of them), nor did he not enlighten the US president about the differing understandings of “people” in the United States and in Czechoslovakia—and that if Czechoslovaks existed at all, it was as a people united by language and tribal identity. The lone academic authority on East Central Europe in the US delegation to Paris, the Czech-American Robert J. Kerner (Harvard PhD, 1914), had portrayed Czechoslovaks as a “scientific fact,” and the borders of Bohemia as sacrosanct, though slight adjustments would have permitted hundreds of thousands of Germans to live in Germany or Austria.

With that fact in mind, Bohemia’s Germans demonstrated for inclusion in Austria and Germany, until on March 4, 1919, Czech soldiers and gendarmes killed fifty-four and wounded another eighty-four while dispersing a rally in Reichenberg/Liberec.<sup>9</sup> Within a few months, leading Slovak politicians were asking whether in fact Czechoslovaks were a people. They found the attitude of Czech bureaucrats condescending—reminiscent of German feelings about Napoleon’s administrators a century earlier. The same was true of Croats who found the Serb administrators in Royal Yugoslavia to be overbearing, corrupt, and far from being “brothers.” By the mid-1920s, separatist movements had emerged among Slovaks and Croats that would have shocked Jan Kollár or Ljudevit Gaj: the same language—indeed, even the same dialect—was not enough to make a people.

Still, the East European predicament of being small peoples lodged between larger ones militated for cooperation. Yugoslavia protected the Croats from Hungary on one side and from Italy on the other; the “miniature Habsburg Empire” had this same virtue as the real thing. Thus, when a Montenegrin deputy shot Croat leader Stjepan Radić on the floor of the parliament in Belgrade in 1928, Yugoslav King Alexander—of the Serb ruling house—offered to let Croatia go. Before succumbing to his wounds, Radić rejected the idea. By itself Croatia was an impossibility. And further north, if many Slovaks felt alienated by their supposed Czech brethren, others worked to keep the Czechoslovak state functioning as a democracy in the 1930s. Czechoslovakia had halted the gradual Magyarization of Slovak-speakers by creating Slovak institutions, like the University of Bratislava.

But in contrast to Masaryk’s Czechoslovakia, the other supposedly self-ruling mini-nations succumbed to one form or another of authoritarianism. By 1938,

democratization was revealed as a fiasco (though the lessons were lost on policy makers in later decades). Still, Czechoslovakia proved that multiethnicity alone did not condemn democracy: it was the most complex state in the region. And contrary to the opinion of some Nobel laureates of our day, the region, left to its own devices, was not destined for fascism.<sup>10</sup> Fascism did emerge as a mass movement in Romania and Hungary, yet came to power nowhere; in most of the region—in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria—it remained a marginal phenomenon, never above a few percentage points of popularity. Eastern European fascism failed because it seemed at odds with being Polish, Serb, or Czech: to march in black uniforms and raise one's arm in a fascist salute in Warsaw or Prague brought to mind not national salvation and rebirth, but death and historical oblivion.

Yet if the countries of the region hated fascism, they did not hold together when threatened by fascism's most extreme form: Nazism. The reason can be sought in the consuming concern to redeem national territory, no matter how tiny. Throughout the interwar years Czechoslovakia and Poland failed to ally because of a microscopic piece of land where the population was 40 percent Polish: the Silesian district of Teschen/Těšín/Cieszyn. The Czechs had seized this area in 1919 because of a rail line linking Bohemia to Slovakia that went through it. Poland did not forget, and instead of standing by Czechoslovakia when Germany threatened in the fall of 1938, Warsaw used the occasion to send its troops across the border and assert Polish sovereignty.

The following year, despite this implicit alliance with Germany, Poland became the first state anywhere to say no to Hitler, bringing down on itself a hecatomb of conquest and occupation. Prior to that point, Hitler had courted Poland as an ally against the Soviet Union; he had made Poland's leaders—whom he admired for their anti-Communism—what he thought was a decent offer. They would become Germany's ally, permit Germany to build an extraterritorial highway connecting Pomerania to East Prussia, and render to Germany territory Poland did not even possess (the city of Danzig). Poland said no, because subordination to Germany would make a mockery of its claims to national sovereignty. Poles had lived under foreign rule from 1795 to 1918, and no Polish leader could dilute independence. Besides that, Polish elites counted on effective support of the countries that claimed to be its allies: Britain and France. Instead, those countries watched passively as Poland succumbed to attack from four sides in September 1939, by Hitler and his new ally, Stalin.

\* \* \*

What Hitler, the “Bohemian corporal” (he was actually Austrian) achieved through his war was to make northern parts of Eastern Europe much simpler. With the aid of local collaborators, his regime segregated and then killed the overwhelming majority of East European Jews.<sup>11</sup> But when the Red Army drove the Wehrmacht back to Vienna and Berlin in 1945, millions of Germans fled Eastern Europe as well, never to return. At the war’s conclusion, as a result of allied decisions, Polish and Czech authorities placed the remainder of Germans from Bohemia and eastern Germany in railway cars and deported them to a Germany that was much smaller than Bismarck’s Reich, let alone the Holy Roman Empire.

The most avid ethnic cleansers among the East Europeans were Polish and Czech Communists, and indeed, Communists everywhere proved enthusiastic nationalists. This is astounding for two reasons. First, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had little concern for national identity: workers had no fatherland. Nationhood was not a lasting site of human subjectivity but something ephemeral, which diminished in importance as capitalism advanced.<sup>12</sup> They had little but derision for East Europeans wanting to create their own nation-states. Engels called the small peoples to Germany’s east “relics.”<sup>13</sup> Czechs were destined to be “absorbed as integral portions into one or the other of those more powerful nations whose greater vitality enabled them to overcome greater obstacles.” Other “remnants of bygone Slavonian peoples” slotted for assimilation included Serbs, Croats, and Slovaks. In 1852, Engels blithely predicted that the next world war would cause entire reactionary peoples to “disappear from the face of the earth.”<sup>14</sup>

Second, when the world divided into two camps, appearances suggested that there was little room for East European nationalism. By 1949, every state in the region seemed to be a miniature USSR, with the same sort of ruling Communist Party, five-year plan, economy based on heavy industry, collectivized agriculture, and socialist realism. Few Poles or Hungarians, even within the Party, doubted that the annual pageant in red of May Day reflected doctrines and practices whose nerve center was in Moscow. For the first time, millions of East Europeans learned Russian, and many became as proficient in copying Soviet reality as they could. Hundreds of thousands became “self-Sovietizers,” even holding their cigarettes the Russian way, or dressing in the militaristic style of the Bolshevik party. The Yugoslav Communists, with red stars on their caps, went so far that the Soviets tried to hold them back.

But these states were not Soviet replicas, nor were they (unlike Ukraine, the Baltic states, and Belorussia) actual parts of the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup> Beyond the



MAP INTRO-4. East Central Europe, 1949–1990

façades of May Day processions in Warsaw in 1949, one saw banners in Polish, not Russian, and placards honoring Polish heroes. A few blocks from the parade route the Polish socialist state, governed by a Marxian party, was lovingly resurrecting old Warsaw, razed by the Nazis in 1944. This included rebuilding many of its churches, according to plans from the eighteenth century, with attention to the details of a saint's halo. Bookstores across the state socialist world stocked romantic authors like Jan Kollár, but also the Polish, Hungarian, or Romanian national bards Adam Mickiewicz, Sándor Petofi, and Vasile Alecsandri; the philologists Ljudevit Gaj and Vuk Karadžić; and the ethnographer Pavel Šafárik, who had studied theology with Kollár in Jena.<sup>16</sup> In Poland's west, the state fostered the destruction of all signs of the German past, including cemeteries, and proclaimed the new territories Polish to the core, though they had been German for centuries.

Though they imitated Stalin in slavish ways and built socialism before Moscow demanded it, Yugoslavia's Communists became the first to break with the USSR in 1948. They did so because Stalin demanded complete subordination of their national interests to those of his country. In a public speech, Josip Broz Tito reflected on his sudden heresy as a Marxist-Leninist: One can love the motherland of socialism, he said, but not love one's own country less. He did not mean Croatia or Serbia, Slovenia or Montenegro: Communist Yugoslavia was a second attempt to revive Ljudevit Gaj's old program, this time as national liberation for all peoples in Yugoslavia. Tito's Partisan movement had begun as a miniature Habsburg empire during the war, protecting Serbs, Jews, and others from fascist genocide, in the name of brotherhood and unity, a formula that succeeded until Tito's death in 1980.

If it had joined the newest version of the Habsburg Empire—the European Union (EU)—Yugoslavia might have survived. But fighting broke out in Croatia in 1991 before the EU had opened toward the east. Today Eastern Europe's leaders gain political capital by claiming that the EU, despite its generous funding of national infrastructures, education, and agriculture, somehow threatens their countries' existence. In June 2018, Hungarian president Viktor Orbán said that at stake in the election of an anti-EU candidate in Slovenia was the “survival of the Slovenian nation.”<sup>17</sup>

\* \* \*

The one certainty connecting these many periods from the early nineteenth century to the present has been this: as soon as patriots created national

languages, nationalism itself became the language of politics, and no one who wanted power could avoid speaking it, whether they called themselves liberal, fascist, or Communist. This central argument of this book sets it at odds with other recent work on the region. Specialists on Habsburg Europe have portrayed the region's path to nation-states as just one of several possible choices. But for the efforts of the nationalists, East Central Europe might have continued in multinational states with no boundaries between peoples and large populations that remained indifferent to nationalism. One eloquent advocate of this approach urges his readers to liberate themselves from the "unnecessary discursive prison that nationalists around us continue to re-create."<sup>18</sup>

This newer work is inspired by an ethical motive that is unimpeachable. The misdeeds and crimes of nation-states—from institutionalized chauvinism to ethnic cleansing and genocide—seem a logical consequence of the principles of ethnic exclusion on which they are built. Czechoslovakia was a state for the Czechoslovaks, Poland for the Poles, and so forth. Furthermore, we know that national identity is learned and not natural and that borders are lines drawn on soil by human beings and not by God. Because nations are communities that humans have imagined, historians have looked back to the imaginings of actors more benign than the nationalists: imperial authorities who wanted to contain (other peoples') nationalism; socialists; and above all, tens of thousands of individuals in Eastern Europe who opted for no nationality at all: called by census takers "nationally indifferent." Had things gone differently, humans might have imagined no national communities at all.<sup>19</sup>

This newer literature has made exceptional cases seem as if they might have become the rule. Officials registered national indifference in border areas, where one language group fades into another. In those areas—Upper Silesia, part of the Bohemian Forest, Carinthia, eastern Poland, Bosnia—people speaking two or more languages had the freedom to use one nationality or another, depending on opportunity. For instance, the small-town populations in Upper Silesia, between German areas extending for hundreds of miles to the west and Polish areas extending for hundreds of miles to the east, spoke a Polish dialect at home and learned German in schools. And when state officials came, some of them would claim not to know what their identity was: that gave them the greatest leverage.

But on the background of the entire region, extending from the Baltic down to the Adriatic, such people were numerically insignificant. In central Poland, much of Hungary, Romania, most of the Serb and Croat lands, Bulgaria, and

in large parts of Slovakia and Bohemia, the rule was for monolingual people to be sucked into the projects of nationalists and of nation-states, usually through schools teaching the standardized native language, but also through political mobilization and induction into national armies.<sup>20</sup> This is the pattern one sees beginning in the late eighteenth century with the slow emergence of nationalism, like the gradual movement of the sun across terrain, illuminating high ground, then valleys, and leaving few spots unexposed by the time its work is done. If the heat made nationalism thrive, it also caused alternatives to wither.

But there is a deeper conceptual problem connected to the insight that nations are constructed by humans. To paraphrase Karl Marx: humans make their own nations, but not just as they choose. They live in communities and speak languages that they help shape but have not manufactured. Nations never began as simple figments of imagination; instead, nationalists used building blocks of existing national chronicles and tales, interpreted to be sure, but never entirely invented. They made new words but built on existing syntaxes; they used ideas popular among rural folk about who they were, and about who their enemy was (usually an imperial power).<sup>21</sup> Some of the nations imagined by intellectuals never took root; Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia were just two cases. Habsburg Bosnia was another.

As people made nations, so nations made people. That is, nations formed the spaces in which people made decisions about what was valuable—indeed, what was worth living for. People could debate where they stood on the idea of nations, but they could not deny that the debate matters. Take one of our time's great controversies: whether Polish gentiles could have done more to rescue Jews during the Holocaust. Being a Polish national does not impose a particular view: some say Nazi terror made aid to Jews impossible, while others say greater solidarity with Jews would have saved lives despite the terror. But the force of this question permits no one who calls himself or herself Polish to say: "I don't care about the answer." In that sense, Poland is an undeniable reality and has been for a very long time, including many decades when it was not on any map.

The power of nationalist arguments to drive political imagination—indeed to create the space in which politics happens—is repeated in country after country, yet its importance is not fully apparent in studies that focus on border regions within limited time frames.<sup>22</sup> It was not apparent to the patriots themselves, who emphasized their personal role in "imagining" their communities into existence. In the 1870s, the Czech patriot František Palacký remarked that if a roof had collapsed on the room where he and his fellow patriots were



meeting a generation earlier, that would have been curtains for the nation. But during the same period in Zagreb or in Budapest, one found the same sort of patriotic activity among similar groups of zealots. Ukrainian patriots a generation later even told an analogous story: if the train they were traveling in had derailed, that would have been the end of the Ukrainian nation. At the opposite end of the Habsburg lands, Prague Zionists were applying Palacký's story to themselves.

The historian Pieter Judson has written that nationalism was “hard work,” but we see in all these cases that plenty of people were willing to do it. A train derailed might have stopped some nationalists, but many others quickly found a different way of moving forward. Nationalism emerged and grew in Bohemia in the 1770s among Czech speakers who understood that the German elite—dominant in culture, politics, and business—considered their language a language of rude peasants. When the Habsburg state closed Czech high schools in the 1780s to make Czech speakers into German speakers, that painful sense of condescension was transformed into a fear that Czechs as a people would disappear: such fear became a regional syndrome, visible in Serbia, Hungary, parts of Romania, and Poland. When Prussia, Austria, and Russia wiped Poland off the map in 1795, they agreed to “abolish everything which could revive the memory of the existence of the Kingdom of Poland.” Now that its “annihilation” had been effected, the kingdom's very name was to be suppressed “forever.”<sup>23</sup>

This wording was so evidently repugnant that it was kept secret, and for decades, imperial censorship acted to suppress public expression of concern. But as soon as it lifted, metaphors poured forth. In April 1848, Czech journalist Karel Havlíček Borovský wrote “wherever your speech, your nationality, does not dominate [*nepanuje*], you are oppressed, even in the freest of countries.” Because Czech speakers seemed to be the helpless subjects of foreign lords, he equated their lot to that of slaves in the United States. “Of what use to negroes,” he asked, “is even the most liberal administration. . . . If we want to be free as a people, we must first have nationality.” In these months, writers from Austria, Poland, Croatia, and Romania repeated precisely these words: without freedom for their nations, they could not be free as human beings.<sup>24</sup>

This ferocious language would have surprised Havlíček had he heard it a few years earlier. But a few years earlier, he had yet to taste the rancor of a public dispute carried out in a democracy. Particularly bitter was his quarrel with Bohemian German liberal Franz Schuselka, who as the name suggests, came from an originally Slavic family. Schuselka called Czechs wanting to use their language



in public “Czechomaniacs.” Austria’s Slavs had produced no literature of account, he wrote, and had no universities or even high schools; their destiny was to become German. Slavs had once settled core German lands around Berlin and Leipzig, going as far west as Hamburg, yet over generations, they had been absorbed into the “irresistible” German culture. “They Germanized,” Schuselka wrote, “because it is the moral duty of all human beings to improve and perfect themselves.”<sup>25</sup> Other German democrats depicted Czechs as helots, a slave people, destined to work in the fields and kitchens, the “ruins” of a nation, having no history and no future. Any Czech of substance would “naturally” become a German.<sup>26</sup>

After imperial troops crushed the democratic revolutions, Habsburg authorities reintroduced censorship, but Havlíček continued to cause trouble. In 1851, they sent him into exile in northern Italy and permitted him to return to Prague four years later, only to learn that his wife had just died. He succumbed to tuberculosis a year later in the same sheets his wife had died in. At a funeral attended by all the early patriots, Božena Němcová, the first great Czech novelist, placed a crown of thorns in his coffin.

Over the decades that followed, Czech public life expanded into numerous associations and parties, and no Czech politician could afford to ignore the pain caused by the condescension that Havlíček expressed in his dispute with Schuselka. German opponents did not let them. We hear the same outrage that tormented Havlíček in the Bohemian parliament of the 1890s, when German deputies said that Czechs remained a people of kitchen help and field hands. Politicians of that time and place did not run on a platform of “indifference”; non-national identity was not a conviction, let alone a passion: it failed to spur sacrifice or activism, and it failed to make history. Or to make the point in Habsburg terms: no Czech or German party ran as “imperial” or “Austrian.”<sup>27</sup> And when border identities between emerging nations grew in strength, as in Silesia, Bosnia, and Macedonia, they became new kinds of national identities. In other words, when nationally indifferent people became political, they became national, and they worried about what East Europeans worry about: oblivion.

Superficially, Eastern Europe’s nationalism may seem like nationalism everywhere: occasionally flaring to incandescent passion, but normally, in everyday life, just one aspect of people’s sense of self, and not the most important. Even in regions of mixed ethnicity where space has been hotly contested for generations, national identity is far from an everyday concern: people think of themselves in terms of age, or gender, or village, or profession. Yet nationalism remains a “crisis frame” of reference that politicians can appeal to when

opportune, for example, in the enduring economic crisis of the 1930s, when radio stations in Germany spewed hate-filled messages to Germans living in Czechoslovakia, or during the hyperinflation that wracked Serbia in the 1980s when the banker Slobodan Milošević discovered the nationalist in himself and rose to power by resurrecting fears that Serbs faced “extinction.”<sup>28</sup>

This crisis frame is not something one finds in Western European or Russian nationalism. During the worst days of World War II, few worried that the Dutch, French, or Russian peoples would become extinct. Yet this fear was very much alive among Serbs, Poles, Czechs, and East European Jews. The Polish-Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin drew from the wells of the region’s anxieties when he fashioned the word “genocide.” After the war, the region’s poets attributed to themselves special intuitions about history’s vicissitudes. Walking in Poland’s capital in 1944, Czesław Miłosz felt that the pavement and streets were like liquid and could escape the temporary form given in stone or asphalt.

The fear of oblivion persisted after the war. In 1967, the Czech author Milan Kundera endangered his ability to publish anything at all by condemning state censorship in public. He said that without novels and essays and poems—without language—there would be no Czechs, and to show he meant what he said, Kundera forbade authorities from altering even a minor mark of punctuation in what he wrote.<sup>29</sup> In 1977, he emigrated to Paris and ruminated gloomily about his country’s fate: Europe forgot that Czechs even existed. In defiance he rejected the term “Eastern Europe” as words signaling collusion in that ignominious act of forgetting and simply called the region “Central Europe.” After all, Prague is to the west of Vienna, and Poland and Hungary were connected to the west in a way that Russia was not.

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Today, many follow Kundera’s call, using the words “Central Europe” to avoid the stereotype of seeming to be a different and inferior Europe, one that is “backward” and given to nationalist passion. But there is a problem with calling the region “Central Europe.” Though Germany, as Václav Havel once said, has one leg in Central Europe, Germany does not belong to the region. The sensibility there is different. Even as he planned to destroy Germany’s infrastructure in 1945, Adolf Hitler did not imagine the German people would cease to exist. More to the point: no one ever needed to argue that Germany, however constituted politically, should exist. That sort of rhetorical compulsion was reserved for places like Czechia, Slovenia, or Macedonia. Their existence was not secure

unless someone made an argument and then devoted massive efforts to promoting it. No accomplishment of the Czech national movement—not a trade school, museum, library, theater, or university—was achieved without a struggle of words followed by deeds.

But Kundera's concern was not to describe a region; it was to defend its existence. His strategy was to say that Czechoslovakia, Poland, Croatia, or Hungary were qualitatively different from Russia. And he ascribed to them a higher virtue, a proximity to Western Europe that Russia would never reach, a host of positive legacies like liberalism, enlightenment, and division of powers (deriving from the investiture conflict). Central Europe constituted a region of the greatest difference over the smallest space, whereas Russia followed the opposite principle: the smallest difference over the greatest space.

This book ascribes no stereotypes to Eastern Europe beyond saying that it is an anti-imperial space of small peoples. In the corners of its political nightmares dwells this indistinct fear of being absorbed into larger powers. The anti-imperial struggle kept ethnic cultures alive, but it also promoted ideologies of exclusion that can become racist. The old empires, especially the Habsburg empire, inspire nostalgia, because they protected human rights and indeed nations and peoples better than did many nation-states that came later.

This book uses “Eastern Europe” interchangeably with “East Central Europe” to cut down verbiage, but also because both terms are understood to refer to a band of countries that were Soviet satellites not in control of their own destinies.<sup>30</sup> It denotes not so much a space on the map as shared experience, such that peoples from opposite ends of the region, despite all cultural or linguistic differences, employ a common narrative about the past. When he made his odd invocation of national survival, Viktor Orbán used words that would resonate not only in Hungary and Slovenia but also in Poland, the Czech Republic, or Serbia.

The former western republics of the Soviet Union—the Baltic states, Ukraine, and Belarus—are not included, because they formed a separate story throughout much of the period studied, subject to Sovietization that tested local cultures to a degree not seen in East Central Europe. For the same reason, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) is included: this small country shared the destiny of being controlled by a superpower without being absorbed into it.<sup>31</sup> But the GDR was also special. The East German regime eagerly took part in efforts to crush dissent in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Poland in 1980, home to small-time co-imperialists with enough hubris to tell the Motherland of socialism what socialism was really about.

The inclusion of the GDR underscores the fact that Germans cannot be thought to be outside East Central Europe, and not only because millions have lived in this space for centuries. The question of how Germany would form a nation-state after the Holy Roman Empire became defunct in 1806 has shaped the region's fortunes and misfortunes. Bismarck's supposed resolution of the question in the "second empire" of 1871 only exacerbated the German question by provoking a sense of abandonment among the Habsburg Germans, one in three of the total number. It was no coincidence that the original Nazi Party was founded in Bohemia in 1903. What happened when German nationalism entered Eastern European space in a time of imperial decline—first of the Holy Roman Empire, then of the Habsburg monarchy—was that it gradually moved from the old practice of absorbing Slavs into German culture to a new one of displacing them from a vast supposedly German space.

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What follows is not a simple heroic story of self-assertion: the anti-imperial struggle often made national movements imperialist, and the fight against oblivion involved complicity in driving others—during World War II, the region's Jews—into oblivion. Nationalism asserted itself beyond innumerable obstacles, from the wars of 1849 to the compromise between the Habsburgs and Hungary in 1867 and the sudden proliferation of new states in 1918. Up to and beyond 1945, it swallowed liberalism whole, sidetracked socialism, begat fascism, colonized Communism, and is currently doing things to democracy for which the word "populism" may be a weak placeholder waiting for some more chilling descriptor. If the region has produced indelible works of literature—the writings of Kundera and Miłosz are examples—that have given witness to suffering that is not *exclusive* to Eastern Europe, it still belongs to an experience that defies the imaginations of people in the West.

But anti-imperial East Central Europe is not an island. Much of global history has been concentrated here. If East Europeans have experienced modern times with special intensity, that is because they are part of our time and their stories are many people's stories, whether of democratization and decolonization, five-year plans and show trials, antifascist resistance or ethnic cleansing, civil society and illiberal democracy, all overshadowed by the fear of becoming *foreign in their own land*, traitors to their heritage. East Europeans are accused of being obsessed with the past, but that is because they have wanted to break from it. Occasionally, they have signaled paths to the future. Still, memory

ineluctably shapes the present, even for those who claim superior knowledge of history.<sup>32</sup>

Above all the Marxist-Leninists. Because they seemed to represent foreign interests, followers of Marx and Lenin became more obsessed with memory than anyone, reconstructing bombed-out cities in national shapes and colors, producing freight cars full of national plays and poetry, and lavishly celebrating national holidays, for example, the 1,000-year anniversary of the founding of the Polish state in 1966. Poland's Communists orchestrated a huge festival and promised to build 1,000 schools in rural areas deprived of modern education.

As it happened, this anniversary coincided with the introduction into Poland of Christendom in 966 AD, and Poland's Catholic hierarchy grasped its own national symbol, the Virgin Mary, proclaimed queen of Poland in 1652 by King Jan Kazimierz for protecting Polish forces in the besieged town of Częstochowa. In 1957, Polish Cardinal Primate Wyszyński ordered a substitute made of the "black Madonna" portrait held at the monastery Częstochowa, complete with original scorch marks. It was blessed in Rome and then carried by the faithful in pilgrimages around Poland, on a schedule that would make sure every Pole could see and venerate the portrait at least once in the coming decade.

By 1965 the state's patience had run out, and authorities ordered the copy taken back to join the original in Częstochowa. Locals joked that the Virgin had been kidnapped. Yet now, instead of carrying a portrait of the Black Madonna, Poles carried an empty frame where she used to be. Everyone knew what it signified. But what did Poles see when they looked at the blank canvas? They claimed to see something that was theirs only, a vital image of a people endangered for a millennium.

Extend this empty frame to the entire region, and you see this book's purpose: it displays Eastern Europe as a region with a particular sensitivity about identity, gained over generations, and because it was vested in local language, this identity was untranslatable and resisted direct communication. That is what ethnic nationalism is: having something of one's own that does not go beyond ostensible boundaries, be it the family hearth, the nation-state, or an empty picture frame.

This book is not an encyclopedia. It does not recount histories of fixed numbers of peoples. It is not about any particular people or peoples. Nor is it a geography of lands marked by boundaries in the landscape. Rather, it tells of the predicament that engendered that particular sensitivity, of living in a space between empires; of stories told about and by peoples who have lived there. The

common message is of absorbing existential threats and yet surviving. The point is not whether that perception is accurate but how it became a common mindset, one that comes alive with little prodding, beyond the fall of empires, whether Holy Roman, Habsburg, Ottoman, Nazi, or Soviet. The predicament seems eternal and necessary. In fact, it is historical and very modern, just over two centuries in the making.

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