

## Reinventing Central Europe

Steven Beller  
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We are, as Karl Kraus would have put it, living in great times. Some would say we are living in near apocalyptic, or even messianic times. A certain pseudo-Hegelian exaggeration would have it that we are at the "end of history". A less abstruse metaphor asserts that we are experiencing in the events that have transformed the Soviet Union and its satellites in the Eastern Bloc the "return of history". Something "historic" has undoubtedly happened, despite all the hyperbole (and hype). Quite how it has affected our history, our view of the Past, and what it says about that history is, on the other hand, a most complex subject, and one about which we shall not be clear for a long time to come.

There are, nevertheless, a few things which the historian can bring to the present discussions about the fate of "Central", "East-Central", or "Eastern" Europe, or whatever else one might call the lands between "Western" Europe and the former Soviet Union, which might serve to at least clarify the sort of problems which the area's past might pose to the chaotic present.

For a start, anyone adequately versed in the history of this region would find it hard to accept that nationalism poses no real threat to the ultimate triumph of "liberal democracy" as envisioned by those persuaded by the "end of history" thesis. I am sure most of us would like to see "liberal democracy" triumph throughout the world, but its victory is, I fear, far from assured, and certainly will not be guaranteed by arrogant, quasi (because anti) -Marxist pronouncements on the inevitability of its enthronement as the purpose of men's endeavors.

Similarly, even if it is a more modest and more helpful aid to thought, the concept of the "return of history" has its own problems, for it is quite clear, and is becoming clearer by

the day, that history cannot return to Central Europe as such, because it never went away. The history of the last half century has been disastrous, undoubtedly, and perhaps best forgotten in many respects (what purpose is served by current attempts to weasel out everyone who was ever on a list of clients of the secret police in Czechoslovakia?). Yet it happened, and is very much part of the problem in the current situation.

Attempts to erase totally the communist past have uncanny echoes of that very communist past. As was pointed out to me in Cracow in the summer of 1991, should the memorial to the Soviet "liberators" of the city at the end of the Second World War be demolished as a symbol of Soviet, communist oppression? Or should it be preserved as a commemoration of a real liberation, and a rare occasion of Russian-Polish co-operation? After all, Soviet troops did die thinking that they really were liberating the Polish city. Should their real sacrifice against the Nazis be blown up simply to erase the sins of their commanders and party chiefs? Central Europe is full of these half-successful attempts to abolish an unwelcome past (of the Germans in Bohemia, for instance) and the principle of Hegelian fate should have suggested by now that acceptance of the past is a preferable alternative.

The fact that many aspects of the past's influence have to be acknowledged is painfully clear in the frantic attempts to resurrect free-market economies in the region. Strangely enough, experience has shown that the trade arrangements developed under Comecon could not be totally shattered without an enormous amount of economic pain, much more, though they will not admit it, than the economists originally thought. They were dealing (were they not?) with a virtual tabula rasa. Why, therefore, bother with the socio-economic context? If everyone is a rational actor, then they will act in their own best interests, and the economy will function on its own. The idea that forty years of communism might dim the will to behave in one's own best interests, might have shrunken the entrepreneurial instinct, and created a culture of dependency, and that everything would for a long time to come still depend on managers and "experts" raised under the communist system, was not, I fear, fully taken on board.

This is just another way of saying that history never stops, and that to talk of a "return of history" only has sense if one is talking about a particular kind of history, and here it has been quite plain that what is seen as having "returned" is the history which the nationalities of Central Europe want to see, the story of the nation when all was right with the world. In some cases this means going back a long way. The "return of history" can thus be embodied in the printing of Slovene bank notes - with a picture of a Roman pillar, on which the chiefs of Slovene tribesmen were crowned in the early Middle Ages, and which is now situated in Carinthia, in Austria. Usually, however, the phrase betokens a picking up of the historical thread from some time in or around 1939, before, in other words, the world of the Central European nationalities collapsed, and all were forced to take the wrong turn of communism.

When this implicit appeal to a time when all things were better, and the Central European states were going-concerns simply steamrollered by the German-Soviet conflict, is put under closer inspection, it becomes clear that Central Europe's "return of history"

illustrates only too well the difference between the reality of the past, and the perception of that past which we call history. The reality is that Central Europe between the wars was in many respects as much a basket-case as it subsequently became, and that, ironically, one of the main obstacles to a reasonable settlement of the region was the very "history" which each nation propagated, and fell victim to, in its search for national identity. To view this inter-war period nostalgically is to perpetuate precisely the self-enslavement to historical wishful thinking and national self-deception which played such a tragic role in the fate of inter-war Central Europe. From this perspective communism was only the last wrong turn of many.

Every Central European nation, without exception, suffered from an inability to rise above its perception of its own past, its history. The "historic" states, Austria, Hungary and Poland, possessed histories which they found it impossible to manage properly. They were, one might say, over-burdened with their Past.

The Hungarians never could reconcile themselves to the loss of two-thirds of the territory of the "historic" Kingdom of the Magyars, even though the overwhelming majority of the populations of those regions were not Magyar-speakers and were, at the time, very happy to escape what had been a most oppressive Magyar regime. The great reluctance, bordering on irrational obstinacy, to accept the loss of the historic borders of the kingdom severely hampered the efforts of Hungarian foreign policy makers to develop a realistic approach to the inter-war international scene. It is bad enough coming to terms with your neighbors when you have just fought a devastating war with them. It is next to impossible when you still claim a large if not preponderant part of their territory, and are far from having given up hope of regaining it.

That the Hungarians kept up this attitude throughout the inter-war period, and let themselves be seduced by the lure of regaining "their" territory into an alliance with Nazi Germany which ultimately led to disaster, and that even to this day, almost incredibly for some Western observers, the national disaster of Trianon is remembered officially (one of the most notable events in post-1989 Hungarian politics was the moment of silence in the parliament on the anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Trianon) can only really be understood in the context of the particular way the Magyars saw their past. Magyar history, and more importantly the justification for Magyar power and independence, was tied in Magyar public opinion with a specific kingdom, whose borders had been historically set since the Middle Ages, far longer, indeed, than those of France had been. That non-Magyars lived within those borders weighed as little in the minds of most Hungarian patriots as did the fact that a large proportion of French citizens spoke some language other than French well into the nineteenth century. Reality (political, linguistic and ethnic) might state one thing, but history stated quite another when it came to the borders of Hungary, and the result, though predictably disastrous, was only too understandable given these historical considerations.

The rump state of German Austria showed the burdens of its history by its very name. In "Austria" lay the heritage of the imperial past, which hung as heavily on the new republic as the neo-Baroque architecture of the new wing of the Hofburg did on Michaelerplatz.

Vienna might be up to that heritage, but not the rest of the rump, Alpine state, or at least that was the way it was seen at the time. In "German", however, lay another historical identity, another past, that of the Austrian Germans of 1848, when there had been the chance, if fleeting, to join with the other Germans in the Reich to form a "big" Germany. This past had been finally halted in the crisis of 1866-1871, by force of Prussian arms, but it seemed perfectly sensible in 1918 that with the demise of the imperial past, this other history should be re-started, and the Austrian Germans rejoin Germany.

The frustration of the plans for Anschluss in 1918-19 left "German Austria" between two identities, an ambivalence which it never really mastered in the inter-war period. The majority of its political leadership would have preferred to join Weimar Germany, because their history told them they were Germans. This having been refused, they attempted to create an Austrian identity which their history told them was not real, without the supra-national, dynastic sanction of the Habsburg Monarchy. The sense of artificiality which this created left Austrians ever prone to suggestions of union with Germany. Even the Christian Socials, who were the strongest proponents of Austrian political independence from largely Protestant Germany, were ambivalent and far from immune on the matter. Their description of Austria was not as a totally different nation, but rather as the "other" German state, one might almost say the "good" German state. This was plainly an idea which left itself wide open to exploitation by those who wished to see all "Germanies" unite in the one fatherland, an argument which, as we have seen in the case of East Germany, retains an enormous emotional appeal.

The other "historic" nation in the region was Poland. In this case, unlike the two cases above, the inter-war period began as a time of great national rebirth. Poland had not been a truly independent state since 1795, or even before that. The partitions from 1772 onward had seen a once powerful state dismembered, humiliated and destroyed, its culture and national identity suppressed by at times brutal Russian and Prussian overlords. (Austrian rule in Galicia was, by comparison, very pro-Polish, a circumstance which perhaps explains the nostalgic affinity felt by many Southern Poles today for Austria and Vienna.) Now, from 1917, and with full confidence from the victory over the Red Army in 1920, Poland reappeared on the map as a large and potentially influential country with borders including all major Polish populations, and quite a few non-Polish ones as well. And there lies the main problem which the Poles had in dealing with their history.

There were two basic ways of viewing Poland's past, and hence its present. On the one hand there was what can be termed the Pilsudski version, the tradition of Poland as an independent state, encompassing many non-Polish minorities, and, including them as part of that state. In this version the Polish past was of a tolerant, inclusive and pluralistic state, where minorities were a part of the Polish national (state) identity.

On the other hand, there was the Dmowskian version of Polish identity, which based itself much more on the valiant struggle fought by Poles at home and in exile to preserve their specifically Polish national, even ethnic, culture. The re-establishment of Poland in the inter-war period was thus seen from this perspective not so much as a triumph of

politics as a victory - and vindication - of the Polish national spirit, and Poland, therefore, was not to be a state for all its citizens so much as a Poland for the Poles, for the nation. This Dmowskian brand was thus exclusionist in its instincts, despite the fact that the Polish state had actually been set up to include a large number of minorities, on the Pilsudskian model. Again, the clash between two versions of history, and the reality which agreed totally with neither, created a continuous tension in Polish politics which hampered the creation of a viable state.

If the "historic" nations had problems after 1918, the "nonhistoric" nations' difficulties were, if anything, worse. The state created for the South Slavs, Yugoslavia, never overcame the ethnic divisions, which stretched far back into the past, and were maintained by the histories of the respective nationalities. The South Slavs are still battling with the consequences, as well as with themselves. The other state created in the post-war settlement, and the only completely new state-creation of Versailles, was Czechoslovakia. This was by far the most successful state in the region during the inter-war period, the one state in the region which stayed true to the liberal and democratic ideals of its founders and Western sponsors. It might seem perverse, therefore, to use this example as my main illustration of the malignant influence of history in inter-war Central Europe. Precisely because it came nearest to Western norms and standards of success, however, Czechoslovakia serves as the best test case, for if Czechoslovakia had problems with history, then it is safe to assume that the other states had even worse problems. And it certainly did have problems with its history.

The claim that the Czechs were one of the "peoples without history" was itself, of course, a hotly contested issue, and a classification with which the Czechs could feel justly aggrieved. The Czechs had once possessed a history and culture of which they could be proud. Bohemia had been a center of learning, with the Charles University, and it had been the land of Hussitism, the fifteenth century religious movement which has been seen as the prelude to the Protestant Reformation. This latter fact played especially well in certain English circles, where the Czechs could be seen, when it suited English interests, as a sea of crypto-Protestants in a sea of reactionary, German Catholics; the defenders of "soul freedom" against the Habsburg, Counter Reformation oppressor.

The problem for the Czechs was that this glorious past of independent, or quasi-independent Bohemia, had been crushed at the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620, and, in the ensuing campaign of Catholicization, repression and confiscation by Ferdinand II and his Jesuits, replaced by a new history, a history of subordination to the Church, to the new, largely imported aristocracy, and to the Habsburgs in Vienna. Since 1620, it could thus be argued, the Czechs had become a people without history, for only very late had they acquired a literature for their language, an absolute necessity in a Europe where only cultures with serious literatures could be regarded as significant. It could also be argued that the history of early twentieth-century Czechs was as much that of the period since 1620 as it was of the period before. That is to say, Czechs were as much a product of the period of oppression as of relative independence. Moreover, even assuming that the Czechs could recapture their history, disinter it from under the couple of centuries of Habsburg, Catholic and German layers of acquired habit and tradition,

there remained the awkward fact that the literature, culture, power, and above all history of their German neighbors, whether within Bohemia or in the surrounding lands, was always going to overshadow Czech endeavors.

The ways in which many Czech leaders tried to get around these difficulties tell us much about the problems of dealing with history in Central Europe. Given that the Czechs did have a past to which they could appeal, it was natural that they did so. Just as the Hungarians had appealed, ultimately with success, to the historic rights accorded them in the lands of the crown of St. Stephen, so the Czechs appealed, but without the same success, to the rights accorded them under the Crown of St. Wenceslas. The argument of "state right" was a continuous presence, if fluctuating in intensity, in Czech political rhetoric before 1918.

When, however, the past was not of so much use to the Czech cause, history could be corrected or enhanced accordingly. Take the Manuscripts Affair of the 1880s, for instance. Manuscripts purporting to show Czech as possessing one of the most ancient literatures in Europe, hence challenging German claims as to Czech's relative lack of antiquity, and giving a major boost to Czech national pride in the early nineteenth century, when they had been "discovered", were found to be forgeries. One might have expected the Czech leadership to have welcomed this detection of fraud among the ranks of the nationalist pantheon. Instead of this, the main players in the detection of the fakes, including Thomas Masaryk, were vilified and attacked by most nationalist leaders for intentionally undermining the nationalist cause. Loyalty to the nation should come before concepts such as historical truth. It seemed better to invent a usable past, than to investigate the real one.

A similar spirit imbued a comic episode in the Czech-German conflict which occurred in Prague during Franz Joseph's state visit of 1901. The mayor of Prague refused to attend the state banquet, unless he could wear the Czech formal attire, the czamara, rather than Frack - white tie - which seems to have been a symbol of teutonic oppression in his eyes. This was a golden opportunity for those staunch defenders of the German Liberal position in Austria, the editorial staff of the *Neue Freie Presse*, who, in an editorial ripped the Czech's position to threads - by showing how his appeal to Czech history and tradition, against "German" oppression, was a catalogue of historical fallacy and what we would call invented traditions.<sup>(1)</sup>

For a start, they pointed out that white tie was not German, but the proper attire of international society. If anything it had been a French creation, and had been adopted as the proper international dress because of the (English) gentleman's desire not to stand out. In that sense it had been called a "tool of democratic equality"; it was, in fact, a symbol of progress. Furthermore, if the mayor of Prague had known the history of his own lands better, he would have known that a red form of tails had been the dress of the old Bohemian nobility. In contrast, the czamara as formal attire, had no real historical or traditional pedigree behind it whatsoever. It had been invented by an innkeeper, Peter Fastei, less than half a century before, just as the Czechs had invented their ancient literature (the Manuscripts Affair), and was thus "without history". The use of this

artificial surrogate as a means to force-feed Czech national opinion was seen as "an exaggeration of national Romanticism", a disservice to the Czech cause, and evidence of the retrograde and even "childish" nature of so much of Czech nationalism.

The inability of the Czechs to resist abusing the past in order to gain their nationalist ends had been shockingly illustrated only a year before, in the notorious Hilsner Affair.<sup>(2)</sup> Here, yet again, leading Czech politicians had been prepared to lead on a gullible Czech populace by exploiting their folk superstitions, specifically the blood libel, or ritual murder accusation, whereby Jews were said to use the blood of Christian children to bake their matzah bread at Passover. A Jew, Leopold Hilsner, has been accused of "murder with others" of a young Czech girl in the village of Polna. The Czech national press had used the case, and the accusation of ritual murder which lay behind it, to stir up hostility against the too Germanophile Bohemian Jews, thus intimidating the Jews and reinforcing Czech national identity. It was one of the least pleasant episodes in the history of the Czech national movement.

The man who came to the defense of truth, in this instance as in the Manuscripts Affair, who indeed made the defense of truth in the interests of the Czech nation into almost a life mission, was Thomas Masaryk. It was Masaryk's efforts during the First World War which did so much to bring about the Czechoslovak state in the first place, and it was his influence after 1918, as president in the Hradschin, that accounts for a large part of the relative success of Czechoslovakia, as a state and a democratic experiment in the inter-war period. If anyone tried to avoid the pitfalls of a too close adhesion to history, one might have thought that it would have been Masaryk. Yet even Masaryk, great figure that he was, suffered, if in a much subtler way, from an inability to keep reality and history properly in balance. He, also, was unable to escape inventing his own version of the Czech past, and fell victim to acting according to historical concepts which were in conflict with the actual situation - as well as the actual past - and hindered far more than they helped. Perhaps he was trying to use the Past as a source of myth-making, but if so, the results were not, ultimately, worth it.

The central problem was Masaryk's view of Czech history as having gained its meaning already before the White Mountain, during the Hussite Reformation. In his philosophical version of history, following in the footsteps of Palacky, Hussitism had produced the concepts of humanism and democracy, the meaning of Czech national identity, which had been conveyed by such as Comenius to become the core of the Czech national revival of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was this core of humanism and democracy which Masaryk saw himself as continuing and promoting as the fundamental principles of the Czechoslovak state. A less charitable way of putting this, employed by Pekar, Masaryk's opponent in the debate on the nature and meaning of Czech history, was to say that Masaryk had constructed his version of Czech history by "starting with himself and then seeking himself in the tradition of the past".<sup>(3)</sup>

This classically Whig methodology meant that Masaryk left himself open to all sorts of criticisms by Pekar, the professional historian. Some of this was doubtless politically, even personally, motivated. Yet the core argument that Masaryk was distorting Czech

history, or rather the history of the Bohemian lands, is difficult to dispel, and it clearly had repercussions on Masaryk's handling of Czechoslovak politics, and hence on the history of inter-war Czechoslovakia and Central Europe generally.

By viewing Czech history as a process whereby the liberal and democratic, culturally Protestant, Czech people, had finally come into their own, and were now able to realize their national principles (freedom, democracy and truth) in their own state, Masaryk necessarily saw the Czech part of the population as having a leading, indeed dominant role in the Czechoslovak state. His concept of the state was not a narrowly linguistic concept of a state for Czech speakers, rather it resembled the British and French models, whereby the "national" culture held the center and subordinated the other cultures to it. There was thus a missionary quality about the Czech attitude to the Slovak populace, who would be civilized by their Czech brethren. Similarly, although the great majority of the Czechs were Catholic, Masaryk was determined to see the "Protestant" values of Czech history impose themselves on the populace. This Masarykian dispensation was bound to antagonize Slovaks and Catholics alike.

The major problem faced by the Czechoslovak state, however, was how to handle its wealthy, powerful and potentially very discontented German population. Here again, Masaryk's version of history, despite his abundant goodwill and sensitivity, proved part of the problem and not the solution. Masaryk was insistent on wanting to come to a positive arrangement with the Bohemian Germans, but only on his terms, and those terms were framed by a view of history which was designed to antagonize the Germans.<sup>(4)</sup>

There had been Germans in the border areas of Bohemia for centuries. There had probably been German tribes in the region before the Czech tribes had even got there, and Germans had been invited to settle by the Bohemian kings as townsmen and traders at least half a millennium before 1900. They had been part and parcel of Bohemian history, whether Masaryk and the Czechs liked it or not, and certain areas of Bohemia had been almost completely German in the pre-1914 Monarchy. Masaryk, in the flush of victory, perhaps, claimed to see things differently. In a notorious speech in December 1918, he described the Bohemian Germans as "colonists" and "emigrants" and added that the land they inhabited was "our area and remains ours".<sup>(5)</sup> One had to have a view of Czech history verging on the metaphysical (which Masaryk in effect had) to see things this way, because it ignored five hundred years of history. More than that, it was a view of history, which, though it pleased the Czech nationalists, was bound to alienate the Germans.

No matter how hard Masaryk tried to make them partners in the state, (and he did for a time appear to succeed), Germans always had this evidence that they were regarded as second-class citizens even by the philosopher-president. Masaryk could redeem himself by going to the German theater, but the Germans, even those sympathetic, never forgot that they were regarded as "colonists" and "emigrants" in a state to which the vast majority of them did not want to belong in the first place. And it was this Czech-German tension which ultimately tore Masaryk's state apart, despite its liberalism and democracy. No amount of Czecho-Whig history could resolve this problem of treating a multi-national state on national lines. Indeed, even if it did not cause it, Masaryk's wishful



reading of Czech history can be said to have exacerbated this central problem of inter-war Czechoslovak history.

Creating a view of one's past which is at variance with what actually happened is a process not confined to inter-war Central Europe. The idea of the Whig interpretation of history itself plainly points to the fictions inherent in much of British history, and in recent years study of the "invention of tradition" has become a major, and most intriguing, cottage industry within the historical profession. There does seem to be a large difference between the histories of the Western European nation-states on the one hand, and the histories of Central European nations which we have been studying above. Put simply: the histories of France, Britain, Italy and Germany (with some qualification) work, they convince, whereas those of the Central European nations are much less convincing, much shakier in the claims they make on our credulity. The reason for this, I suspect, is that, no matter how much is invented, a British or French historian can look back on centuries of continuity of a "national" state. Even an Italian or German historian can look back on a century of a nationally unified state, and many centuries of "national" cultural history before that, in language areas where one dominant language group held sway (even if the vast majority of the populace spoke some unintelligible dialect of that language).

In Central Europe that was not the case in the inter-war period. Either there were states whose history had come to a halt, or whose history had only now to be either disinterred or invented anew. What was lacking in each state was authority, the authority of continuous tradition. For centuries that authority had been wielded by the Habsburg dynasty, whether as emperors or kings, Central European history had been Habsburg history, and with the passing of the dynasty went the main mold whereby Central Europeans had understood their past. One might scoff at those creators of the "Habsburg myth", then and now, for their nostalgic evocation of a Monarchy which in practice was a most imperfect medium by which to govern the region, but they do have a point in seeing the passing of the Monarchy as leaving a huge chasm in the continuity of Central Europe's past, and hence in Central European identity.

Nationalism was the means chosen, in the inter-war period, to fill this gap, or replace it by a completely different set of bridges between the inhabitants of the region. The problems with history were a sign that this new network of bridges did not work, and it is not too difficult to see why. Central Europe was simply not set up, in 1918, to receive this national matrix. The peoples of the region were distributed in a crazy quilt of mixed communities in which any national territorial divisions would be "approximate" at best. Moreover, centuries of supra-national, dynastic rule had left the national groups intertwined with each other in their economic, social, cultural and political relations which a national interpretation of the Past could never have accurately reflected.

Moreover, many of the most important aspects of life in the Habsburg Monarchy were supra-national in their very being, and not reducible to national categories as such. One such group was the German-speaking bureaucracy and bourgeoisie which existed across much of the Monarchy, had indeed been that Monarchy's main agents, and whose fate in

the inter-war period was at the root of many of the region's problems (most notably those in Czechoslovakia).

Another group which fitted only with difficulty into the new regime was that of Central European Jewry, for which the Monarchy had provided a safeguard to the perils of exclusivist nationalism, at least in theory. Certainly, the existence of the Monarchy had allowed Jews to see themselves as members of a state, beyond having to completely identify with a nation (although many had done so). Even in the Monarchy, Jews had had a hard time of it establishing recognition of their interests as a culturally identifiable group: Yiddish was never classified as a "national" language in the Austrian census. Yet at least the Monarchy had allowed Jews an identity as full and equal citizens, as Austrians or Hungarians, regarding their history as Central European Jews as part of the history of the Dual Monarchy.

In the new, nationally determined Central Europe of the interwar period, which cut across all the inter-national links which had bound the region's Jewish communities together, it was much more difficult to see the Jews as part of the nations' history, and the net effect was that they were excluded from those national histories. Even in Czechoslovakia, which had the most liberal policies towards the Jews, the very acknowledgment of the Jews' right to have their own national identity as Jews was based largely on Masaryk's attraction to the Zionist argument that Jews were not assimilable, were different, and so did not really belong in Central Europe. Within the nationally charged atmosphere of the inter-war years, even recognition of Jews' separate history and interests, which could be seen as positive in a truly supranational state, worked to make them outsiders in the national states. It was within this context that their exclusion from national history, and hence from the history of the region in general (because the supra-national level of history was no longer allowed), meant that they could then be excluded from the region in all-too real practice.

In Western Europe the argument that history is the history of nations is very difficult to counter, because the nation-state worked, and history reflects that success. Transposing this argument to Central Europe has been a much less successful enterprise, however, and the very failure of inter-war Central Europeans to deal with their history, as detailed above, shows us that history is not necessarily comprehensible in national terms. Central European experience tells us that history is not simply national memory, but if that is true, then the question remains of how Central European history is, indeed, to be studied and organized. That in turn depends on how we understand the term "Central Europe".

When we talk about Central Europe we are, of course, making a political and cultural claim as to the false nature of the period of the Soviet occupation, during which Central Europe became East-Central Europe, or even a part of Eastern Europe.<sup>(6)</sup> As I hope was made plain above, East Central Europe's heritage will remain in Central Europe longer than we might like, and can not be simply ignored, but it will no longer do (indeed it was never adequate) to describe the region's characteristics or heritage. Equally, few Central Europeans will welcome the revival of German (as opposed to Austrian) ideas of "Mitteleuropa" as a German-dominated "prosperity zone", no matter how much this

appears the ineluctable outcome of the present economic developments. What is being sought after so fervently is a distinctively Central European heritage and identity. The argument so far has been that seeking the heritage of the region in terms of its national histories alone is a very questionable and ill-advised strategy. National strategies cannot fill the regional vacuum. It is Central Europe that needs to be reinvented.

We have had various attempts to formulate such a Central European heritage. The first that comes to mind is that of the Habsburg myth, which has existed since 1918 (if not before) and has recently gained new recruits, on the argument, I assume, that if that was how the region worked before 1914 it can work again on those, or very similar, principles again. This is a very dubious argument, which has at its core a very good idea, but a perception of the Past as flawed as its nationalistic rivals. Certainly the multi-national dispensation of a Monarchy bathed in a golden light by the late afternoon sun of Habsburg paternal tolerance, as so beautifully and touchingly illustrated in such a work as Joseph Roth's *Radetzky*, has its attractions, given what happened in the region without Habsburg supervision. On the other hand, Roth's vision was one through rose-tinted spectacles - with blinkers.

Habsburg mythologizers such as Roth neglect to mention that in Galicia, for instance, where much of *Radetzky* takes place, the Polish establishment perfected what became known as the Galician "Wahlschwindel", the engineering of elections to ensure the defeat of Ruthenian and Jewish political parties, often by the use of main force. Against such strong-arm tactics the Habsburg authorities were not simply helpless, but accomplices to these criminal acts, for they had left Galicia to the Poles, in return for Polish support of the government in the Vienna Reichsrat. Similarly, the minority nationalities in Hungary (which, taken together were a majority of the populace) were left by the *Ausgleich* at the mercy of the Magyar establishment. Habsburg "multi-nationalism" was as much a question of divide and rule as it was fairness for the nationalities. The other aspect which many in this camp neglect to consider is that the very reason why central Europe became the mess that it did was that the Habsburgs' dynastic game of juggling nationalities and nations for their own dynastic power was one which they ended up not being able to win (although that might have been an impossible task anyway). The Habsburg Monarchy is not a good model for overcoming the problems caused by Central European history, for the Monarchy itself was brought down by that very history, and the Habsburgs' view thereof.

If a strictly Habsburg definition of Central Europe seems inadequate, then others have suggested a broader based cultural definition, based on the religious heritage of the region. The most famous attempt at this in recent years has been that of Milan Kundera.<sup>(7)</sup> In essence his argument has been that Central Europe is definable as that part of Europe which was, due to its Catholicism, part of the West, and which became, due to the Soviet conquest, with its Russian Orthodox cultural heritage, part of the East. Out of the mixture one obtains a specifically Central European identity and experience. It is a very seductive theory, but is open to question on many counts, not least being the identification between the Catholic heritage and "the West". The Catholic heritage of Poland might, at a stretch, be seen as Western, but the Catholicism of the former Habsburg lands, with its very

strong Counter Reformation and Baroque heritage, is surely difficult to identify with what most Westerners regard as the anti-Counter Reformation heritage of the West. Which "West" is Kundera talking about?

The problem with such identifications of Central European Catholicism with "the West" can be neatly illustrated by the views, yet again, of that great Central European figure, Thomas Masaryk. For him Catholicism was the reverse of Western. The progressive west was above all a Protestant entity which had to fight the repressive character of Habsburg Catholicism. What is more, the Czechs were truly Western, not because they were Catholic in culture, but because they were, in their hearts, Protestants. As he stated: "the nations that did not pass through the Reformation and failed to differentiate themselves religiously, have not yet attained the same historical importance as the others. We [the Czechs] belong to these others."<sup>(8)</sup> According to this argument, then, the Czechs, a Central European people if there ever was one, are not Western because they are Catholics, as Kundera would have it' but because they were Protestants suppressed by Catholics.

Indeed, one could, if one were to follow this line of reasoning, claim that to be Central European is to be a Protestant, or even better a crypto-Protestant, the Protestantism of whose relatives was driven underground in the Catholic Counter Reformation, and whose Western proclivities were then buried under a further layer of conformism by the secular Russian Orthodoxy of Soviet communism. Given that much of Austria, Hungary and Poland, as well as Bohemia, had at one time been Protestant in sympathy, especially in the towns, and that there remained elite groups of Protestants in Hungary, then such a definition is not as far-fetched as it might at first seem. Crypto-Protestantism would become the progressive identity of the Central European.

If one indulges the rhetorical play here, the point remains that the disagreement between Kundera and Masaryk over Central European identity, especially Czech identity, only goes to show that their definitions of what is Central European are crucially shaped by the uses to which they wanted to put them, and that in turn was shaped by the audience to which they wanted to appeal. In Masaryk's case he was appealing to the Western (mainly Protestant) powers, as well as to what he genuinely thought were the leading sectors of the Czech intelligentsia, those who identified with his Hussite interpretation of Czech history. For Kundera what was important was to appeal to a West in which Catholicism was no longer a dirty word, and to a Europe where a secular, political form of Catholicism was a very influential if not dominant force. Equally, to Eastern Europeans Catholicism no longer appeared in the repressive guise of the Habsburg Counter Reformation, but rather in the liberating form of the Polish national church. Catholicism was also one of the few common factors between Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, apart from Soviet domination, that is. It is thus quite understandable why both used the definitions they did, but also clear that neither can have grasped the real identity of Central Europe.

This discussion has brought us nearer an answer, however, because it has raised the question of what the desired Central European identity is for, or, more accurately, for

whom Central Europe exists. History is about people, not only peoples, and it follows that Central European history cannot be properly understood until we grasp whose history it is. Arguably the strongest form of Central European identity has been a cultural one. Central Europe has been primarily an attitude of mind, a cultural heritage. In politics, economics, social organization, Central Europe has not been in the vanguard. Culturally and intellectually, however, Central Europeans, especially those active around the turn of the this century, made an immense impact on the way we think and act. It is by no means accidental, therefore, that some of the leading ideas about Central European identity have expressly based themselves on this intellectual and cultural heritage of fin-de-siècle Vienna, Budapest 1900, and Kafka's Prague. If it were possible to do so, then this heritage would surely provide, with its liberal, humane, individualist and critical qualities, a most suitable basis for the liberal and democratic Central Europe which is sought.

As luck would have it, such a procedure is much more difficult to effect than might be thought, because the very heritage now so prized by those who would be Central Europeans was one largely created by just those segments of the region's populace which are now, with small exceptions, no longer there. It was precisely the Jewish bourgeoisie, which provided the bulk of the audience and the creators for the sort of cosmopolitan culture which made Prague, Budapest, Vienna, and an outpost such as Czernowitz, such attractive and vibrant powerhouses of innovative and path-breaking thought. It was precisely the supra-national element, largely done away with in the years from 1918 to 1948, which provided that Central European heritage which so many want now to revive - as if the heritage was native to the region and not a product of people, of groups of individuals whose lives and histories were smashed before the Soviet occupation.

This supra-national group is no longer there in Central Europe, with a few exceptions, and a large exception in Budapest (where a sizeable Jewish community, at least on paper, remains). It is ironic, but in a way understandable, that it is survivors from that supra-national group, who stand at the forefront in contemporary Central Europe of those wishing to recast Central Europe in the image of its cosmopolitan and humane cultural heritage. However much one might not want to stress the fact for political reasons, there remains a strange air of inevitability about the fact that two of the leading intellectual advocates for

Central Europe have been Adam Michnik in Poland and György Konrad in Hungary, both of Jewish descent.

This absence of the creators of Central Europe's cultural heritage plainly presents problems for its adoption by present-day Central Europeans. On the one hand, the cultural heritage is plainly a legitimate part of Central Europe's heritage. On the other, because the group that was responsible for its creation is no longer present in the way it once was, there is something supremely awkward about present-day Central Europeans claiming the heritage as their own.

Most members of a nation take pride in the achievements of their predecessors. The English take pride in James Watt having invented the steam engine (even if he was Scottish), or in the work of James Joyce (even if he was Irish), and few eyebrows are raised, because these individuals were part of a culture and cultural community which still exists. When an Austrian today takes pride in the work of that great Austrian, Sigmund Freud, eyebrows - as well as hackles - are raised, for there seems something not quite right in it. It is the same when Czechs take pride in the great Czech composer, Gustav Mahler. What jars is the fact that the world of Freud, of Mahler, the communities of which they were a part, which formed them, are no longer there, were obliterated. Their Central Europe no longer exists in Central Europe, and so for a contemporary Central European to make an unmediated claim on these figures is, somehow, an illegitimate move. Imagine if the Spanish were to take an unmediated pride in the glorious culture of Moorish Spain, and claim it as part of the Catholic heritage. It would be equally odd for the peoples of Central Europe to glory in a culture largely created by a group which their immediate forebears had some part in eradicating or expelling.

On another level, however, the Jewish experience which was at the center of the Central European cultural heritage under discussion should be a vital component of any reinvented Central European identity, for it provides the central moral of the history of the abuse of the past which has marked modern Central European history. It was, as I have already mentioned, above all the Jewish part to Central European history which suffered exclusion due to the nationalizing of history discussed above. Having disappeared from the region's history, it was but a short, if terrible, step to disappearing from Central Europe altogether. But with the disappearance of the Jews, that which had kept Central European culture together was largely gone.

The Jews had been a minority common to all parts of Central Europe, which by maintaining links between its various parts (and links between Viennese and Galician Jewry were kept up) provided a unifying factor to Central Europe in general. What is more, in retaining the ideological commitment, inherent in the history of their emancipation, to both the universalist and individualistic aspects of liberalism, the Central European Jewish bourgeoisie also acted as a crucial link to the West. When the particularisms of Central European nationalism, as reflected in their abuse of history, resulted in the exclusion, expulsion and destruction of Central European Jewry, this link to Western culture, the Western economy and Western values was severely damaged. Central Europeans, all Central Europeans, suffered more than they realized by the triumph of nationalism, even before the arrival of communism.

There is an ironic epilogue to this morality tale. Central Europe lost its Jews, but many Central European Jews carried on their lives and careers, and their influence, not in Central Europe, but in America, Britain, Palestine and in other countries of the West. The emigration of scholars, writers, film-makers, composers, stage designers, patrons, and all the rest had an impact on Western thought and culture which we are still living through. American academia in the second half of the twentieth century without its Central European emigres would have been a completely different, and I would claim, a much poorer place. Central Europe's loss was thus very much the West's gain, with the added

irony that these Central Europeans often understood the West better than those in the West did, because they had seen what could go wrong in a way those in the West had never done. What happened was a mutual fertilization, which profoundly altered many aspects of the West's culture, so that it embraced many of the values of the exiled Central Europeans. In this sense, if Central Europeans are looking for a Central European identity in Central Europe, they may well be looking in the wrong place. In so many respects, Central Europe is, to borrow a phrase "elsewhere", in Berkeley, in New York, in Hampstead, Cambridge, Geneva, Paris, Melbourne, anywhere where the emigres settled, lived and worked.

The lesson from this is that there is no such thing as a "return of history." The world moves on, we cannot reconstitute the past as it was, nor is that desirable, certainly not in the case of Central Europe. What can be done is to rebuild the broken structures of Central European history, and hence its identity, reconnect Central Europe, for instance, with the Central European heritage now also part of the Western heritage. The way to reinvent Central Europe is the restitution of its links with the West and with its past, as honestly and objectively as possible, above the fray of national enmity and prejudice, and below it, on the level of the individuals who, after all, are the people who now compose the Central Europe of today.

What the story of Central Europe in the twentieth century tells us is that history does not let itself be easily abused, or even used very easily. If ever there was an illustration of the principle of Hegelian fate, this is it. I would argue, however, that the story has a hopeful conclusion, for a large part of the glory of 1989 was precisely that, despite all odds, Havel's "living in truth" won out, which suggests that, no matter how difficult it may be, history can be used properly, even in Central Europe. It can be used to illustrate what cannot be relied upon, and to point to what can inspire. It can help us avoid mistakes, and it can, in responsible hands, teach us to approach the past critically, but also positively.

There is a great mission ahead in Central European history to demythologize the past, to remove the quasi-messianic and utopian claims and demands made on it in the search for national meaning and self-justification. What should be resisted is the temptation to make history dictate what must be in the future. By all means a sense of responsibility to the past should be promoted. What was good in Central Europe's past should be preserved, and encouraged. Ultimately, however, the past must not be allowed to get in the way of the future. Central Europe, "sick with history", must come to terms with its past, but at the same time it should look beyond that past. Central Europe's identity can, perhaps, be reinvented by the responsible handling of its past. The reconstruction of Central Europe is, however, something which historians can only encourage, for it is a task not of history, but of the present and future.

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### Endnotes

1. Neue Freie Presse, morning edition, 16th June, 1901, p. 1.

2. Cf. Steven Beller, 'The Hilsner Affair: nationalism, anti-Semitism and the individual at the turn of the century,' in ed. R. J. Pynsent, T. G. Masaryk, 1850-1937, vol. 2, thinker and critic (Macmillan, 1990), pp. 52-76.
3. Quoted in Karel Kucera, 'Masaryk and Pekar: their conflict over the meaning of Czech history and its metamorphoses', in ed. S. Winters, T. G. Masaryk (1850-1937), vol. 1, Thinker and politician (London: Macmillan, 1990) p.95. On Masaryk's history see also Milan Hauner, 'The Meaning of Czech History: Masaryk versus Pekar', in ed. H. Hanak, T. G. Masaryk (1850-1937), vol.3, Statesman and Cultural Force (London: Macmillan, 1990) pp.24-42; Tony Judt, 'A Nation-builder and his Successors', T.L.S. Jan. 26 - Feb.1, 1990, pp.79-80.
4. C.f. Thomas G. Masaryk, The Making of a State: Memories and Observations 1914-18 (New York: Stokes, 1927) trans. H. W. Steed, p.431-2.
5. Quoted in Neue Freie Presse, morning edition, 23 December 1918, p.1.
6. Cf. Jan Havranek, "Central Europe, East-Central Europe and the Historians 1940-1948," in Verbürgerlichuna in Mitteleuropa: Festschrift für Peter Hanak (Budapest, 1991), pp.299-309.
7. Milan Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe," in The New York Review of Books, 26 April, 1984, pp.33-38.
8. Masaryk, The Making of a State, p.488.