Ten Untaught Lessons about Central Europe:
An Historical Perspective

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HABSBURG Occasional Papers, No. 1. 1996

Author's note-- This paper was written in the spring of 1996, several months after the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords and shortly after my return from a three-week trip to the Balkans, during which I visited the former war zones in Bosnia and Croatia. Its genesis is rooted, however, in years of frustration with the ignorance of our news media, the lack of a deep historical context among political leaders (and the political scientists who advise them), and especially the reluctance of Habsburg historians to contribute their considerable insights to the ongoing public debate over U.S. policy. Copyright (c) 1996 by Charles Ingrao, all rights reserved. This work may be copied electronically for non-profit use without the permission of the author or the HABSBURG postings editor. For other permission (including distribution for instructional purposes or for other lists) please contact Ingrao@vm.cc.purdue.edu or Habsburg@vm.cc.purdue.edu.

Lesson #1: The East is Different
Lesson #2: "Ethnic Cleansing" has a Long History
Lesson #3: There is still a Habsburg-Ottoman Frontier
Lesson #4: Multiethnicity is the Solution, not the Problem
Lesson #5: The Nation-State is the Problem, not the Solution
Lesson #6: Versailles + Four
Lesson #7: The Jews were the First Victims of the Nation-state
Lesson #8: The US has always deferred to its allies in Central Europe
Lesson #9: Past, Present & Future: Recasting Central Europe
Lesson #10: Toward a Lasting Solution: The Case for War Crimes Trials

Neville Chamberlain spoke for millions of his British and American contemporaries when, at the height of the Munich Crisis, he lamented the prospects of going to war over "a faraway country" inhabited by "people of whom we know nothing." The prime minister was, of course, speaking of Czechoslovakia. But he could have just as easily used these same words to characterize his knowledge -- or concern -- about the other lands and peoples of the entire region between Germany and the former Soviet Union. A half century later we still know very little about what the Germans call Mitteleuropa, and even less about its history. Even today, as the world press reports recent events in the former Yugoslavia in terrible detail, it has never explained why there is such intense ethnic conflict throughout Central Europe. Instead, they merely repeat -- and thereby perpetuate -- the myth that the peoples of the region have been fighting each other for centuries.

We have many excuses. The region's languages are dissimilar to anything we speak. Its multiplicity of intermingled ethnic and linguistic groups challenges the most curious. It boasts no great power to attract our admiration or concern. And, it is not especially strategic or important to us. It may have been only a century ago when Bismarck warned that "the Balkans are not worth the bones of a Pomeranian grenadier," but his advice has guided the statesmen of the West for centuries. But our lack of knowledge or commitment does not mean that we have not played a major role in shaping its past, present, and -- as it now seems -- future. Although it is true that Central Europe has many endemic problems, the current crisis stems in great part from the West's imposition of its own values and solutions on a region about which it knows little -- and cares less.

In reality it is not so difficult for a reasonably intelligent person to understand how we have gotten to this terrible juncture in Central Europe, or to envision where we are heading. But first our journalists, political scientists, and policymakers must delve a bit more deeply into the region's past. All have operated under the misconception that they can learn the lessons of history by going back a few decades to the immediate origins of a
particular crisis. But only by going beyond the past half century of the region's history -- beyond Tito, the Ustasa, and World War II -- can we comprehend what is really going on today, not just in the Balkans, but throughout Central Europe and much of the former Soviet Union. The answers to our questions are not unteachable, just untaught.

Lesson #1:

The East is Different

Implicit in our profession our ignorance is the sense that the eastern half of Europe is somehow different from the West. But this realization is not very helpful unless we can understand why and how it is so. Obvious explanations, such as the legacy of a half-century of Communism, economic backwardness, or the lack of exposure to Western ideals are less the cause than the most recent effects of deep-seated structural differences that go back half a millennium. Rather, it can be traced to different traditions of government that stressed greater regional and local autonomy that are deeply rooted in geopolitics and the dynamics of statebuilding.

A good place to start is Paul Kennedy's suggestion that intense military competition at the beginning of modern times impelled western Europe (and its North American progeny) to surpass the world's other great civilizations in creating more highly centralized governments. By contrast, the rest of Europe was composed of massive political units like Poland and the Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman empires that remained much less highly structured because their relative security and greater expanse made it difficult for their rulers to justify and carry out political reform. In this respect, the eastern half of the continent was actually much more like the world's other great civilizations; it was western Europe that was unique.

Kennedy points to the technological, military, economic, and fiscal ramifications of Western statebuilding that ultimately led to worldwide hegemony. I would suggest that another ramification was language and culture. Contemporary observers who are bewildered by the multiplicity of peoples in central and eastern Europe forget that western Europe (like the immigrant societies of the United States and Canada) was originally no less diverse. The peoples of what we today call Spain, France and Great Britain spoke perhaps a dozen languages before the onslaught of government officials, edicts, road builders, universities and other agencies of statebuilding molded each of them into a single nation in which everyone could speak and understand Spanish, French, and English. Although "regional" languages like Catalan, Basque, Scotch and Welsh have survived, they could not prevent the evolution of a common language among the monarchs' officials and other educated subjects that later served as a reference point for national identification. Significantly, the central governments of western Europe never compelled their subjects to learn the official state language; rather, the literate elements of each province simply established a pattern of voluntarily acquiring what became a key prerequisite for upward mobility and higher social status.

But the East adopted a different approach. The Ottomans refused altogether to consider adopting the innovations of their Christian adversaries, a decision that guaranteed that the inhospitable Balkan landscape would continue to incubate separate regional languages, customs and loyalties. By the eighteenth century the Austrian Habsburgs and Russian tsars did take the necessary step of adopting some of the statebuilding tactics of their western European counterparts, in order to compete in the rough and tumble world of European politics. Yet they remained relatively decentralized states that delegated considerable authority to local elites, which either encouraged or tolerated the survival of ethnic and linguistic diversity. Thus the process by which the Western peoples of Europe and North America adopted a single language or culture was arrested throughout the eastern half of Europe; even closely related dialects like Czech and Slovak, Serbian and Croatian, Bulgarian and Macedonian, or the various branches of Russian never merged, but rather survived long enough to develop as the distinctive written languages of today.

Lesson #2:

"Ethnic Cleansing" has a Long History

Centuries of warfare between the Turks and Habsburgs further enriched the complex mix of Balkan languages. The approach and retreat of opposing armies led to the first instances of what has come to be known as ethnic cleansing. Westerners who are at a loss to comprehend the barbaric tactics of the last five years should start with today's populations' collective memory of Turkish raiding parties that purposely terrorized Christian communities with the destruction and pillage of property, mass rape, and gruesome executions in order to demoralize and intimidate them into fleeing without resistance. The legacy of these forced migrations includes much of the 700,000-strong Hungarian
minority in today's Slovakia, as well as the 600,000 Serbs of Croatia, whom the Habsburgs resettled as soldier-colonists along their southern "Military Border" or Vojne Krajina. Once the tide had turned against the Ottomans, the fear of retaliation or simply Christian religious intolerance encouraged most Balkan Moslems to move southward to safer areas like Bosnia.

Even more population movements were voluntary. The brutal combination of wartime devastation and emigration left much of the central Balkans a no-man's land that was ripe for colonization. The Ottoman government replaced the Serb exodus from Kosovo with loyal Albanian Moslems (whose descendants now comprise ninety percent of that province's population) while encouraging ethnic Turks from Asia Minor and Sephardic Jewish refugees from Spain to resettle in their Balkan conquests. When they arrived they mingled with those indigenous Christians who had chosen not to flee, thereby creating additional ethnically mixed areas. Meanwhile, the Habsburgs repopulated the huge Danubian plain that they had taken from the Turks. They attracted wave after wave of colonists with offers of fertile land, freedom from serfdom, and religious autonomy. Colonists came from all over Central Europe, and some from as far away as France, Italy, Spain and Russia. Most were Germans from various parts of the Holy Roman Empire, including Habsburg-controlled Austria and Bohemia. Many Hungarians returned from their mountain refuges in the Carpathians, followed by Slovaks, Ukrainians, and even some Czechs from Bohemia. More Serbs emigrated from the Ottoman side of the new frontier, followed by large numbers of Romanians, and even some Bulgarians and Armenians. The result was a crescent of colonization that spread from the Adriatic Coast in the West all the way to the Russian steppes (see map). Neither the Turks nor the Habsburgs made any effort to separate their colonists by ethnicity, with the result that some districts spoke a Balkan Babel of a dozen or more languages. The messy demographics still persist in many areas today, most notably in Croatia's eastern arm of Slavonia, Rump Yugoslavia's northern province of Voivodina, and the Banat of western Romania.

Lesson #3:

There is still a Habsburg-Ottoman Frontier

Both as historian and politician, President Franjo Tudjman is fond of citing the dichotomy between Croatia's Habsburg and Serbia's Ottoman past. It is a distinction that appeals to Tudjman's Croatian constituents -- as it does to many people in the present-day Voivodina, Banat, Bukovina and Transylvania -- who occasionally exploit it as a device for asserting their cultural superiority over their Balkan neighbors. Indeed, although both empires were instrumental in promoting the ethnically mixed societies of the present day, the Habsburgs' belated application of Western strategies of statebuilding placed a premium on honest, efficient and professionally dedicated administrators, as well as on the creation of a statewide infrastructure for education and commerce; by contrast, the Turks abided by a less sophisticated model of government more commonly found in other Asiatic empires. The sultans were the archetypal oriental despots: In theory they claimed to have absolute power over everyone and everything; in practice, they cared less about how their empire was run, so long as each of their dominions provided them with a steady supply of revenue and recruits for the army. This diffidence helped incubate traditions of public ignorance, technological backwardness, local corruption, social injustice, lawlessness, and violence that are still evident in the Balkans today. Only in the nineteenth century did the sultans belatedly realize that their laid back approach to government rendered them incapable of warding off aggression by the great Christian powers. By then, however, patterns of local economic control, political patronage, and systemic corruption were simply too entrenched to reverse. Although neither empire exists today in a political sense, the former Habsburg-Ottoman frontier retains its utility as a point of demarcation between West and East (see map).

Another major difference between the Habsburg and Ottoman legacies is in religion. Even before the Protestant Reformation split the Christian West, its governments opposed religious diversity as a threat to the unity and stability of the state. Like their fellow monarchs in Spain, France and England, the Catholic Habsburgs enjoyed considerable success in convincing or coercing their religious minorities to adopt the state religion. Although they rarely disturbed the religious rights of the recently settled Protestant and Orthodox colonists, they were sufficiently successful in converting the rest of their subjects that Catholicism won widespread acceptance among all of the Habsburg empire's ethnic groups, with the sole exceptions of the relatively insular Jewish and Serb communities. By cutting across ethnic lines, the adherence to Catholicism among most Habsburg Germans, Hungarians, Romanians, Slovaks, Ukrainians and Czechs eliminated the possibility that the former Habsburg peoples would associate religion with national identity.
This was not the case in the Ottoman lands. Many Christians voluntarily converted to Islam during four centuries of Turkish rule. Yet the sultans tolerated the various Christian and Jewish sects, partly because they regarded them as equally misguided, but also because they saw religious identification as a handy vehicle for governing their various subject peoples. Under the so-called millet system the Ottomans organized their peoples by religious sect (Orthodox, Jewish, Islamic, etc.) -- regardless of language or ethnicity and delegated to each group's leaders the responsibility for governing and taxing itself. In the absence of a system of secular education, each millet's religious leadership provided the sole source for literacy and all forms of culture for the members of its community. This infinitely more humane approach to religious diversity promoted autonomous cultural development among the Balkan peoples, as well as remarkably relaxed relationships between neighbors belonging to different millets. One of the many virtues of Ivo Andric's Nobel Prize-winning The Bridge on the Drina is the picture it paints of peaceful and mutually respectful coexistence between the Orthodox, Islamic and Jewish communities of the formerly multiethnic eastern Bosnian city of Visegrad. Of course, what neither the Turks nor their subjects could have ever foreseen was that the millet system would preempt the evolution of a sense of nationhood stemming from common language or ethnicity. Far from being religious fanatics, Bosnia's Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and Bosnian Muslims are merely expressing their own form of national identity, even though they all speak one language and descend from a common Slavic ancestry.

Lesson #4: Multiethnicity is the Solution, not the Problem

Central Europe's greater diversity distinguishes it from the more homogeneous societies of Western Europe. But we would be mistaken if we judged it any more backward or unsuitable than culturally rich urban centers like New York, Los Angeles, Toronto or Vancouver. We Americans actually share a common experience with the East in that we have both learned to live side-by-side with numerous ethnic, religious, and racial groups that are intent on preserving at least some distinctive cultural traits.

Indeed, the key to determining the degree of mutual acceptance and toleration is the numerical balance between ethnic groups living in a particular area. If any one nationality comprises a majority, then there exists the temptation for it to assert its dominance -- and for the minority populations to become paranoid, even in instances when their fear is unjustified. This was the lesson of decades of tension between Czechs and Sudeten Germans that Adolph Hitler ultimately used as a pretext for dismembering Czechoslovakia, just as it has been in seemingly insoluble conflicts in bi-national societies like Canada or Belgium.

Northern Ireland is easily the worst example of how such conflicts can escalate into violence. Yet, although tension and occasional violence is unavoidable wherever there exists a dominant ethnic group, it rarely justifies the Bosnian Serbs' dogged insistence on an outright physical separation of ethnic groups. More typically, tensions remain under the surface and off the streets, much as do our own country's conflicts between ethnic, religious, and racial groups. Surely we don't cite centuries of sporadic racial violence -- ante bellum slave revolts, the Civil War, Reconstruction, southern lynchings and northern urban riots -- as evidence that European- and African-Americans have been at each others' throats for centuries and cannot live together peacefully! However flawed it may be, our polyglot society has survived by attaining what Austrian Prime Minister Edward Taaffe once described as "a state of uniform, nicely tempered discontent," whereby every competing ethnic group derives sufficient benefits to accept an admittedly imperfect overall settlement.

Taaffe's formulation exposes the greatest paradox about achieving peaceful coexistence among ethnic groups. Whereas the presence of two ethnic groups represents a formidable challenge to peaceful existence, the task becomes much easier in polyglot societies. Whenever there exists a balance of power between three or more ethnic groups, where no single group enjoys an absolute majority, there is a much greater tendency to coexist in an atmosphere that is free of the fear of persecution by a single, dominant group. The absence of intense ethnic tension encourages people to devote themselves to social and vocational pursuits that promote intermarriage and the voluntary acquisition of the various local languages. This has generally been the case not only in Bosnia, but in other multiethnic regions; unfortunately we never hear about the generally positive ethnic interaction in regions like the Bukovina, Voivodina, Banat and Transylvania, or in such formerly diverse urban centers as Vienna, Bratislava, Salonika, and Istanbul for the very reason that their lesson of multiethnic toleration is a peaceful one that never seizes the headlines. Closer to home, we take for granted the almost effortless harmony of Canada's numerous Asian, European and African ethnic groups, while

focusing our attention on the apparent incompatibility between its two great language groups.

Lesson #5:

The Nation-State is the Problem, not the Solution

This was also the case in Central Europe. Within the Ottoman empire, Bosnia's Muslims, Serbs, Croats and Jews invariably cooperated in fighting the sultan's janissaries and even his belated attempts to eliminate the widespread corruption that had taken root within Bosnia's ruling elite. Farther to the north, the Croats and Serbs of the Habsburg empire not only lived together in ethnic harmony, but almost always acted as one in their dealings with their more numerous Hungarian neighbors. But such ethnic coexistence was eventually undermined by the nation-state model that had emerged from the French Revolution. It took hold first in those Ottoman provinces that still contained a numerically dominant ethnic group, thereby providing the crucible for new nation-states like Serbia (1815), Greece (1829), Romania (1858), and Bulgaria (1878). The process accelerated with the installation of Western-born German princes and ministers (except in Serbia) and the repatriation of Western-educated Balkan intellectuals who linked the Balkans' destiny to the uncritical imitation of Western models. The final step came during this century's three great Balkan Wars (1912-1918), when each of those countries extended the reach of the nation-state to ethnically mixed areas like Macedonia, Thrace, Kosovo, Dobruja and Bosnia -- even though each contains large populations that were less committed to abandoning the multinational Ottoman state for domination by a single dominant ethnic group. Thus, by 1918 the nation-state had wholly replaced an Ottoman model that had been discredited not because it was based on multiethnic coexistence, but because it was associated with other, patently dysfunctional Turkish political institutions.

By contrast, the Habsburg empire was far from dysfunctional. Its success in promoting mass literacy throughout its dominions did, however, expose its own peoples to the legacy of the French Revolution. The revolutionary forces of democracy and nationalism posed a challenge to governments everywhere. But whereas statesmen like Bismarck, Napoleon III, and Disraeli were able to utilize universal suffrage and national feeling in ethnically homogeneous western Europe to fortify their popularity, Habsburg statesmen like Metternich and the young Emperor Francis Joseph recognized the dangers inherent in such a strategy. Hence their reluctance to place their empire's fate in the hands of such dynamic, though potentially destructive popular forces. In the end, their unwillingness to confront the inevitable hardly forestalled the spread of nationalism among their subjects. Instead it only guaranteed that nationalism emerged as an independent force capable of challenging the monarchy's essentially supranational institutions.

The Habsburgs' reluctance to embrace fully the democratic ideals of the West made it possible to destabilize their multiethnic empire by associating it with its increasingly outmoded aristocratic and monarchist institutions. The first signs of ethnic conflict surfaced in the revolutions of 1848. Centuries of ethnic harmony ended abruptly in bi-national Bohemia, with the German minority's interest in joining a united Germany,16 as well as in Hungary, where the short-lived Magyar nation-state (1848-49) sparked a bloody civil war in ethnically mixed areas like Transylvania, the Voivodina and eastern Slavonia; two decades later, the Dual Compromise (1867) made Hungary the Habsburg lands' first nation-state and inspired many Czechs to fashion a second one out of greater Bohemia.

The four decades of Austria-Hungary (1867-1918) were marked by frequent constitutional squabbles, punctuated by occasional strikes and riots. But there was very little bloodshed, largely because the government in Vienna combined a reluctance to embrace the forces of nationalism with a genuine willingness to afford equal treatment and patronage to their various peoples. Right up until its dissolution in 1918, the Habsburg empire counted Czechs, Italians, Hungarians, Croats, Poles and Jews among its most important civilian and military leaders. Nor was it all that atypical of other multinational states. For centuries the Ottomans had drawn their best soldiers and administrators from converted Christians, and depended more on Greeks, Jews, and Albanians than on their own Anatolian Turks. Despite its deeply entrenched roots as a Russian nation-state, even the former Soviet Union made significant concessions to multiethnicity; thus, the KGB was founded by a Pole, the driving force behind the failed 1991 coup was a Latvian, and both its most brutal dictator and its last foreign minister were Georgians.

Yet every multinational state has at least one ethnic group that sees itself as a preeminent, "master nation" whose mission it is to safeguard its national patrimony by leading other, less able "subject nationalities". Thus the tsarist and Soviet empires were "entrusted" to the Great Russians, the Ottoman empire to the Anatolian Turks, Austria-Hungary to
the Germans and Hungarians and, for that matter, the great American republic and Canadian commonwealth to the WASPs. However intangible or incomplete such pretensions may be, they exacerbate ethnic tension by calling into question the dignity and self-worth that comes from the achievement of some measure of popular sovereignty; in the process, they forge the kind of persecution and inferiority complexes that still afflict the former subject nations of Central Europe.

In fact, the next stage in the progressive destruction of multiethnic Central Europe came in the opening decades of the twentieth century, with the triumph of those "subject peoples" who established fully independent nation-states on both sides of the Ottoman-Habsburg divide. To legitimize their separate existence, their governments employed printed and visual media to pronounce their nation's past greatness -- and the guilt of the formerly dominant "master nations" in arresting their natural development. While stressing the national identities of the oppressed and their oppressors, the new governments de-emphasized the positive achievements of the multinational states from which they sprang. The "founding fathers" of Central Europe's new nation-states accomplished their task all too well. To this day, laymen and scholars alike perceive their region's history from a distinctly national perspective, while minimizing the achievements of other ethnic groups and the multinational societies to which they once belonged. This mass exercise in national amnesia also explains how so many of the region's peoples could celebrate World War I as the moment of their liberation, rather than as the most catastrophic event to befall Central Europe in the five centuries since the Turkish conquest.

**Lesson#6: Versailles + Four:**

**World War I's "Other" Treaties still plague Central Europe**

It is widely appreciated that the Treaty of Versailles doomed Europe to a second, even more destructive world war, followed by mass genocide and a half-century of nuclear confrontation between the two great superpowers. Only in the last five years have we recovered from some of this unfortunate legacy with the reunification of a decidedly democratic Germany and the end of the Soviet Bloc. But, if we have overcome much of the Versailles legacy, we have yet to address the equally unfortunate consequences of the four other Paris peace treaties that we concluded with Germany's World War I allies. Notwithstanding our focus on Versailles, the settlements with Austria (St. Germain), Hungary (Trianon), Bulgaria (Neuilly), and Turkey (S vres) were no less instrumental in fomenting the outbreak of World War II, the Holocaust and five decades of Soviet hegemony in eastern Europe. Moreover, it is the legacy of these "other" Paris treaties that informs Central Europe's continuing instability.

Much of that legacy still reflects the fortuitous constellation of alliances during World War I. Although the head of Serbian intelligence acted alone in hatching the assassination plot against Archduke Francis Ferdinand, his country's dependence on Russia -- and Russia's alliance with France and Britain eventually linked it with the victorious coalition. By 1918 a combination of allied promises and pressure had recruited three other regional nation-states with irredentist aspirations: Italy (1915), Romania (1916), and Greece (1918). Although the Entente offered considerable territorial acquisitions to each of its four Central European allies, it had no intention of eliminating the multi-national Habsburg empire; its most ambitious plans ranged from Woodrow Wilson's call for a more truly democratic multinational federation (primarily at Hungarian expense) to Great Britain's suggestion that the empire be repositioned squarely between Germany and Bolshevik Russia by merging it with all of the Polish lands.

Then, in the fall of 1918 the allies made the fateful decision to recognize the exiled Czech and South Slav "national committees" as the only legitimate spokesmen for their peoples. These independence-minded exiles did not necessarily represent their countrymen. Whereas the 80,000-man Czech Legion had fought for the allies on the Italian and Russian fronts, a far greater number of Czechs, as well as virtually all Slovaks and South Slavs, fought doggedly for their Habsburg emperor until -- and, in some instances beyond -- the end of hostilities. Nevertheless, these committees' agenda proved congenial to the Western political model of the nation-state, reinforcing the Entente's generous territorial commitments to its Serb, Romanian and Italian allies. It was also a logical response to growing allied apprehension that the Habsburg empire had become a vehicle for German imperialism in Mitteleuropa.

The allies compounded this mistake with the terms that they meted out to Germany's four defeated allies. Nowhere was
the fiction of "peace without victory" more apparent than in Central Europe. To their credit, the American negotiators in Paris and their commissioners on the scene generally worked to advance the principle of self-determination, even when it favored the peoples of the defeated Central Powers. Nevertheless, President Wilson chose to invest most of his waning political leverage in negotiating the Versailles Treaty with Germany. This exercise in diplomatic triage presaged the detachment of future presidents, who understood and cared much less about the strategically remote center of the continent. By contrast France recognized a vital interest in Central Europe, where it was determined to create and cultivate loyal clients which could help it encircle its German nemesis in the next war. Its unabashed patronage of Czechoslovakia, Romania and what soon came to be known as Yugoslavia ultimately earned it not only the gratitude of the so-called Little Entente, but their dependence for assistance in holding on to patently illegitimate acquisitions. In the process France and its clients essentially created an unjust, but durable three-tiered hierarchy of peoples that has guaranteed 75 years of regional instability:

1. At the top were the victorious Greeks, Italians, Romanians and Serbs, together with the Poles and Czechs whom the French readily identified as key allies on Germany's immediate eastern flank; each acquired territory in which its own people were in a decided minority, so long as it could be justified by some historic claim or by a tangible strategic or economic need.

2. The Albanians, Bosnian Muslims, Croats, Slovaks, Slovenes, and Ukrainians existed in a kind of limbo reserved for those peoples who were essentially unrepresented at the peace conference, either as winners of losers. Their interests were represented by the victorious allies, with decidedly mixed (but rarely catastrophic) results.

3. At the bottom were the four nationalities that had lost the war. Having been denied the right of self-determination, the Germans, Magyars, Bulgars and Turks all yearned to revise the peace settlements. The Turks achieved many of their objectives four years later after a successful war with Greece and a new round of forced population exchanges. The others would have to wait two decades for their opportunity to revise the settlements.

The peace settlements for Central Europe not only committed an injustice that would not go unchallenged, they also exacerbated three of the problems that the allied statesmen were supposed to resolve. Given the region's complex ethnic demography, the decision to replace a multinational entity with nation-states actually worsened what had been reasonably tolerable interethnic tensions. As the western peacemakers discovered -- many for the first time -- it was simply impossible to create a system of geographically contiguous, ethnically homogeneous political entities. The defeated countries approached this ideal only by relinquishing areas of mixed settlement to their triumphant neighbors. After 1919, their largest ethnic minorities comprised isolated pockets of other "defeated" nationalities, namely a million Turks in Bulgaria and nearly that many Germans in Hungary. By contrast, the spoils of war had converted their victorious neighbors into the worst possible contrivance: multinational states governed by a single, dominant ethnic group. A third of Poland and Romania consisted of sullen, if not openly hostile minorities; nearly half of Czechoslovakia's population -- including the supposedly co-equal Slovaks -- was essentially controlled by a slim, but politically sophisticated Czech majority;22 likewise, Slovenes and Croats quickly realized that their country's Serb plurality was determined to dominate Yugoslavia through its own king, capital, ministers, and an army that counted 161 Serbs among its 165 commanding generals.

Ironically, the region's ostensibly democratic institutions actually made matters worse by promoting the creation of a national identity built around each country's dominant ethnic group. Nor was it long before populist politicians discovered that the quickest way to win an electoral majority was to play to the dominant nationality's latent resentment and fear of other, potentially disloyal ethnic groups. Like gasoline companies who formerly used lead additives to boost octane ratings, politicians had found a cheap means to gain power, albeit at the expense of poisoning the atmosphere. Under this kind of scrutiny, any attempt by disenfranchised ethnic groups to preserve their cultural identity could be easily interpreted as treason. In 1937 the celebrated British historian Trevelyan expressed his dismay at the inability of democratic institutions to overcome ethnic conflict:

The truth is that even the most genuine and established democratic way of life is exceedingly difficult to apply when you are dealing with a minority that does not want to live under your rule. We know very well that we ourselves were never able to apply...democracy to our own attempt to govern the Irish.

If eliminating the multinational Habsburg empire worsened reasonably tolerable ethnic tensions, it also created an insoluble geopolitical imbalance where none had existed before. Despite the allies' fear of a pan-German Mitteleuropa,
the Habsburg monarchy had served for centuries as a vital counterpoise to the growth and aggressiveness of Germany and Russia. The peacemakers naively assumed that the string of smaller states that they had created would continue to hold that balance, while providing a *cordon sanitaire* between the two remaining great powers. Instead they created a power vacuum of unprecedented magnitude that has been exploited in turn by both Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. It didn't take a rocket scientist to presage the consequences, only an understanding of diplomatic history. As early as 1891, one proponent of the Habsburg empire's role as a multinational great power rebutted radical Czech aspirations for independence by asking,

> What will you do with your country, which is too small to stand alone? Will you give it to Germany or to Russia, for you have no other choice outside this Austrian union.

A third, somewhat less obvious consequence of the Balkanization of Central Europe was its toll on the economic well-being of the peoples of the former Habsburg empire. At the turn of the century, production levels and living standards within Austria-Hungary were actually rising faster than the European average. The Austrian lands were already comparable to western Europe, while even the economically less developed Hungarian lands were appreciably better off than their immediate neighbors to the north, east and south. Yet the data presented by economists show that the gap between the region and western Europe began to widen with the dissolution of the Habsburg "customs union of fifty million," a shortfall that become even greater with the imposition of Marxist economics after World War II.

Nor does it take an economist or statistician to notice the effect that the decline in discretionary spending had on what had once been one of the world's richest sources of creative talent. In the years immediately prior to the Great War, men like Bartok, Dvorak, Mahler, Schoenberg, Smetana and Strauss still upheld an unbroken tradition of great composers that included Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann and Brahms; Hoffmannsthal, Kafka, Rilke, represented a somewhat more recent resurgence in literature, much as Freud and Mendel did in the world of science. Although it remains today a source of great technicians -- conductors and soloists in music and inventors of practical technology -- east-Central Europe no longer contributes the world-class creative minds of centuries past.

### Lesson #7:

**The Jews were the First Victims of the Nation-state**

A more tangible consequence of economic stagnation and growing poverty was the instability caused by popular unrest. It may be mere speculation to suggest as many observers have -- that economic prosperity would have spared Yugoslavia from its cataclysmic slide toward ethnic hatred and violence; but it is undeniable that declining living standards helped fuel the surge of rabid anti-Semitism in the two interwar decades. The Jews were, however, more than the victims of economic hard times. They had been the ultimate beneficiaries of multinational political systems like the Habsburg and Ottoman empires, where the regime appreciated the practical potential of human resources more than they did national consciousness. And they had responded by becoming a key force in the Balkan commercial economy, especially in major urban centers like Sarajevo or the great port of Salonika, where they not only constituted a majority of the city's 160,000 people, but still spoke the Spanish dialect of their sixteenth-century forebears.

At the same time Jews were a powerful source of trained professionals within the Habsburg dominions. By 1918 they comprised roughly twenty percent of Austria-Hungary's university students and civil servants, despite constituting only five percent of its population; they even held over fifteen percent of all military commissions (including two dozen generalships), which made Austria-Hungary the only country in the world with a disproportionately *higher* percentage of Jewish army officers. "My libido bleeds for Austria-Hungary," wrote Sigmund Freud on the morrow of this century's first Sarajevo Crisis. Indeed few ethnic groups bled more than the 300,000 Habsburg Jews who served in Great War. But the end of Central Europe's multiethnic empires left them stateless. Many ethnic Germans joined the young Adolf Hitler in linking the Jews to whatever they resented about Austria's imperial past, such as their opposition to a fully unified Germany, their disproportionate share of government patronage, and their role in overwhelming the German population of administrative centers like Vienna. Like Vienna's legendary mayor Karl Lueger, whose anti-semitism was more tactical device than personal preference, democratic politicians all over Central Europe found anti-Semitism a handy means of garnering popular support from electorates suddenly obsessed with the need to establish a single, dominant national identity against the threat posed by ethnic minorities.

We all know the ultimate fate of nearly six million Central European Jews. Over the past four years journalists and political observers alike have repeatedly pointed out that the murder of scores of thousands of Croats and Bosnian Muslims in the former Yugoslavia constitute the worst episode of genocide since the Holocaust. Yet none of these analysts has recognized the obvious link between these two horrible human catastrophes: namely, the imposition of the nation-state on multiethnic, Central Europe.

**Lesson #8:**

**The US has always deferred to its allies in Central Europe**

Of course, there is yet another parallel between Central Europe's two twentieth-century holocausts of which we are aware. Historians of the Second World War have documented the unwillingness of many neutral and allied leaders to take action, or even speak out about Hitler's death camps. That realization has inspired many to remind today's statesmen of our commitment that such a horror would "never again" be allowed to happen. But they did, simply because statesmen in the position to intervene -- then, as now -- did not deem such heroic action to be in their country's national interest. Even less evident is that the United States has previously confronted the same choice between abstention and intervention in Central Europe at least three times in this century. As we have seen, the first was during the Paris Peace Conference, when Woodrow Wilson concentrated his attention and political leverage on the Versailles Treaty, at the expense of Central Europe and the peoples who lived there; unfortunately, deferring to our allies resulted in injustice and instability that ultimately led to another war that required American involvement. Indeed, it is hard to imagine Hitler's eastward expansion into Central Europe -- or even the region's partition in the infamous Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact -- had there been another great power in the region, especially one committed to maintaining the status quo. And there would have been no chance of mass genocide, whether against Jews, Gypsies, or Serbs and other Slavic populations.

America's entry into World War II presented us with a second chance to craft a more just -- and thus durable -- peace. The US Council on Foreign Relations did not miss the opportunity. By 1942 it had recommended the formation of a new Danubian confederation to take the place of the old Habsburg empire. Nor was it alone. Across the Atlantic, eminent British historians like Arnold Toynbee and Robert W. Seton-Watson, who had advocated partitioning Austria-Hungary in 1918, had since recognized their mistake years before the outbreak of World War II. Together with Sir Lewis Namier (himself a Polish Jewish refugee), they had already won Winston Churchill's support for the plan even before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought America into the war. For the next three years Churchill pushed what soon became a joint Anglo-American agenda for the reestablishment of a multinational great power in Central Europe. Indeed, his better-known plan for an allied landing in the northern Adriatic offered the advantage of placing the entire region at the disposal of the western Allies.

In their design the allies and their advisors were most interested in ending the regional power vacuum, reasoning that the small states of the cordon sanitaire could not possibly keep up with the new military technology that was currently rewriting the rules of warfare. For this reason they eventually dropped any idea of restoring the Habsburgs, and even considered excluding Austria's population in order to keep the proposed confederation clear of German influence. As the war progressed they picked up additional support from former proponents of the nation-state like the former Czechoslovak president Eduard Benes, who joined with his Polish counterparts in contemplating a single, confederated power to hold off future Russo-German aggression.

The Anglo-American design of a multinational confederation was the best of three options. By 1941 Hitler had put the finishing touches on his own solution, which upheld the principle of nation-states, but with redrawn borders that often corrected the most blatant violations of self-determination. Although a sober analysis of Hitler's new frontiers constitutes the ultimate exercise in political incorrectness, the fact remains that it applied the concept of national self-determination better than any of the 1919 settlements: Austrians and Sudeten Germans got their wish of joining a united Greater Germany; the Slovaks split off from the Czechs; Hungary retrieved most of the three million Magyar speakers it had lost at Trianon; Croatia became independent; Bulgaria's people were again reunited, together with the Macedonians; Serbia was shorn of all of its conquered minorities, including the Albanians, all of whom were now
assembled for the first (and last) time in a single country.

Of course, there was much that was intolerable about Hitler's new *Mitteleuropa*, especially the creation of German and Italian protectorates over several of the newly constituted nation-states, the institution of brutal fascist regimes, and the commission of genocide on an unimaginable scale. Hence, it is understandable that Hitler's defeat demanded that the baby of reasonably legitimate national frontiers be thrown out with the bath water of Nazi aggression, totalitarianism, and genocide. Unfortunately it was not replaced by the Anglo-American plan for a multinational confederation. That was eventually vetoed by Stalin, who correctly surmised that such a state would inhibit not only German, but also Russian penetration into Central Europe. Instead, Churchill and Roosevelt reluctantly consented to the restoration of the *status quo ante bellum*, except for the extensive Soviet acquisitions that Stalin had won in his earlier pact with Hitler.

The Anglo-American capitulation was politically defensible, at least in the short term: Maintaining allied solidarity against the Axis Powers was of more immediate consequence than a potentially divisive revision of the region's borders. Yet this third option was arguably the worst in the long run. By 1945, deference to our Soviet ally had led to the westward expulsion of fourteen million Germans, including nearly five million from the ethnically mixed lands of the former Habsburg empire. An estimated two million people died in this, the most massive expulsion of human beings in world history. Next came forty-five years of Soviet hegemony over the eastern half of Europe. As the Hungarians discovered in 1956, US Cold War diplomacy placed a higher priority on peacefully deterring the Soviet Union, than on liberating the occupied peoples of Central Europe. Our priorities in 1956 reflected the long-standing American judgment -- already articulated at the end of both world wars -- that a just settlement in Central Europe was less vital to our national interest than the immediate maintenance of peace and stability.

**Lesson #9:**

**Past, Present & Future: Recasting Central Europe**

Unfortunately, without justice there can be no longterm stability. The subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Bloc has finally permitted the peoples of Central Europe to contest anew the legacy of the Paris Peace Settlement. Given the freedom to choose, the Slovaks have again left Czechoslovakia. Theirs was a supremely illogical choice, impelled by pent up feelings of inferiority and persecution that are all too common among minorities in bi-national states. More justifiable was the rush to secession in the former Yugoslavia that was triggered by the nationalist demagoguery of Slobodan Milosevic. If Tito's greatest achievement was the creation of a balance of power between Yugoslavia's many nationalities, Milosevic committed his greatest crime in 1989, when he crushed the autonomy of the overwhelmingly Albanian-populated province of Kosovo and demonstrated that a single nationality once again dominated multiethnic Yugoslavia.

We all know what followed: The departure of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Hercegovina and Macedonia from the Yugoslav union; Milosevic's use of the state-controlled media and his fellow Serbs' collective paranoia to equate Tudjman with the *Ustasa* and Izetbegovic with the Ayatolla Khomeini; the "preemptive" commission of genocide primarily by paramilitary units, ably assisted by the Rump Yugoslav army and local Croatian- and Bosnian-Serbs. Though appalled by the slaughter, successive American presidents deferred to their allies for four years, until the enormity of our negligence was made clear by the Srebenica massacres. Mercifully, American intervention in the summer of 1995 quickly put an end to the horror, marking the first time in this century that US diplomacy had taken the lead in resolving the problems of Central Europe.

After nearly a century of missed opportunities, we have yet another opportunity to intervene decisively in Central Europe. Over that time, our failure has helped effect a truly incredible change in the region's political demography. It has gone unnoticed by the news media, which reports on the day's events and relies for much of its historical background on the accounts and cliché's of other journalists. Nor has it grabbed the attention of political scientists, whose sober application of abstract models to current crises ignores the region's individual character and historical experience. What both have overlooked is the century-long perspective that exposes the gradual, violent transformation of an ethnically diverse region where people once lived in peace with their neighbors, into a poor imitation of the West. Multiethnic areas like the former Czechoslovakia, the Aegean littoral, Transylvania, the *Krajina* and Bosnia have been transformed by a combination of mass executions and forced population transfers. Millions of Jews and Germans who
Ten Untaught Lessons about Central Europe--Charles Ingrao

contributed so much to the region's political development, economic prosperity, and cultural sophistication are gone altogether.

But is it too late to turn back the clock on Central Europe's twentieth-century catastrophe? As late as 1962 the eminent British historian C.A. Macartney could claim that many observers were convinced that the region's best interests required "the creation of some larger multi-national state or states with special institutions appropriate to the special conditions of the area." Even three decades later, the BBC's Misha Glenny ventured that the ideal, longterm solution to Yugoslavia's problems might be the reformulation of new multiethnic confederations. The benefits would be enormous. A large multinational state would eliminate the power vacuum that has tempted aggressors three times in little more than a half century. It would resolve the current impasse with Russia over the expansion of NATO by creating a reasonably independent great power that could serve as a buffer between them. Indeed, the same settlement that Stalin rejected in 1943 would be a godsend to Boris Yeltsin as he endeavors to assuage the Russian electorate's fear, anger and humiliation over the triumph of the West. It would also offer a realistic interim solution to the region's economic goals. Few Central European leaders have publicly admitted that their economies are decades away from attaining full integration with the European Union. Yet until they achieve that dream, their countries' exports will continue to be frustrated by trade barriers that the EU has routinely erected to protect its own producers. The expanded free trade zone created by a multinational state could shorten the wait for admission by accelerating the commercial integration already begun by more modest intraregional consortia like the Visegrad Group and the Septagonale.

Finally, only a multinational entity could hope to end the century-long conflict born of nation-states and intentionally imprecise borders. Over the past five years the Western democracies have achieved some success in inducing the region's leaders to guarantee the rights of ethnic minorities by offering eventual membership in the EU, NATO, and other international organizations, or by extending direct financial aid, such as reconstruction funds for those Bosnian factions that fully implement the Dayton Accords. Whereas this approach has proven reasonably effective so far, there is no way of enforcing compliance once these governments have received their reward. Greece's numerous acts of diplomatic sabotage in the former Yugoslavia have amply demonstrated that neither NATO nor the EU are capable of disciplining maverick member states. By contrast, a fully democratic multinational state would be able to police itself by denying any one ethnic group the ability to establish its hegemony.

Such an entity could easily embrace much more than the ill-fated Yugoslav union. At the very least, it could encompass the eastern half of the former Habsburg empire -- though assuredly without the Habsburgs. It would certainly not include the Austrians themselves, who after a millennium of indecision have finally chosen the West by joining the EU, rather than the East with all its unresolved problems. Nor would the other "Austrian" parts of the former Austria-Hungary be likely to join such a union: the Czech, Slovene and Polish nation-states of today are too ethnically homogeneous and close to EU membership to be attracted to such a union. On the other hand, a multinational state drawn from states like Croatia, Bosnia, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania would make sense, as might a second union of Bulgarians, Macedonians, and Albanians from south of the great Habsburg-Ottoman divide. Such a solution would be truly visionary, especially for a century of peacemakers who have been blind to the forces of history and geopolitics.

But realistically speaking, the obstacles are almost certainly insurmountable. Seventy-five years of statebuilding by the region's "successor states" and radical changes in its ethnic demography have created a seemingly irresistible momentum for the creation of nation-states like the dozen new entities of the past five years. Having ridden to power on hi-octane nationalism, demagogues like Vladimir Meciar, Slobodan Milosevic, and Franjo Tudjman are not about to change now. Moreover, the remaking of even a small part of Central Europe would require a truly great world leader -- a Winston Churchill, Woodrow Wilson, or at the very least, a Henry Kissinger, rather than a John Major, Bill Clinton, or Warren Christopher.

Nevertheless, it is not too late to launch a public dialogue throughout the region, daring (but not compelling) its people both to rediscover the forgotten benefits of their multinational past and to confront what nationalism has cost them in external security, economic prosperity, and domestic peace. At the very least, it would also reassure and reacquaint the Serbs of Bosnia and Croatia with their long history of ethnic coexistence and collaboration. But such a discussion would also temper the misperceptions of past persecution that have so poisoned relations between the peoples of the entire region. Having exorcised the demons of the past and experienced the euphoria of independence, perhaps some would have the self-confidence to consider the advantages of voluntary reintegration, much as the Thirteen Colonies
Toward a Lasting Solution: The Case for War Crimes Trials

By contrast, the emerging peace settlement in the former Yugoslavia requires a heavy dose of outside oversight, combined with the threat of intervention. Yet, because we perceive no immediate national interest in the region, it remains unclear whether we will repeat our allies' past mistakes by seeking a superficial peace, but not the longer term stability that comes with a just and legitimate settlement. The Dayton Peace Accords have the potential to achieve both objectives. It has certainly brought an end to the fighting. As I passed through the former war zones in Bosnia and Croatia during my recent trip, I was encouraged to hear American GIs complain about the mud, the boredom, and the separation from their families, but not about the presence of physical danger. I was no less impressed by the superficial sense of normalcy that prevailed among the civilian population, amid long lines of ruined buildings and unemployed workers picking up subsistence payments. The West also has the means to help rebuild the region's shattered economy.

It remains to be seen, however, whether the US and NATO have the willpower to negate four years of ethnic cleansing by guaranteeing the right of refugees to return to their homes; failure to enforce this provision would ratify war crimes that have converted yet another of the region's multiethnic societies into a nation-state with oppressed minorities. Indeed, more than half of the so-called Republika Srpska consists of land that formerly housed Muslim-Croat majorities. Even less clear is our determination to prevent the Serb Republic from seceding from Bosnia and merging with Greater Serbia. The British and French have yet to be persuaded of the efficacy of a multinational solution, especially one that does violence to their cozy relationship with their traditional Serb allies. Yet failure to prevent a Bosnian Serb secession would almost certainly doom Dayton's remaining artifice -- a Bosnian-Croatian Federation whose bi-national composition is a recipe for internal conflict and collapse. In short, Bosnia can survive only as it has in the past: as a multiethnic union of all three confessional groups.

Most dubious of all is our determination to enforce Dayton's provisions for the trial of war criminals. At present we are relying on the assistance of Milosevic, whom we have provided with documents detailing the crimes committed by numerous individuals currently living in Rump Yugoslavia. His failure to act is not surprising, especially since we have made no effort to detain accused war criminals inside Bosnia. Indeed, as I passed through IFOR checkpoints manned by US troops, I was impressed that not a single GI with whom I spoke had any idea who the war criminals were, or what they looked like. They had not even been supplied with photographs of Bosnian Serb President Karadzic or Commanding General Ratko Mladic. Apparently the only places where such photographs are displayed are major American installations like the airbase at Tuzla, where IFOR personnel have been known to append photographs of their immediate superiors for comic relief. So long as the likes of Karadzic and Mladic stay away from such installations they should be as free as the rest of Bosnia's population to roam the country at will.

Yet enforcing Dayton's provisions against war criminals is absolutely necessary, not just because it is "just" in a strictly legal sense, but because it has the potential to transform the culture of persecution and revenge that informs so much of the region's violence. Since 1919 the nation states of Central Europe have engaged in the kind of mythmaking that is common to all new nations attempting to legitimize their existence. Much as America's mythmakers transformed George Washington into an Olympian hurler of silver dollars and slaveholder Thomas Jefferson into the champion of the common man, Rump Yugoslavia has made national heroes out of the Chetnik warrior bands that harassed the Turks and the Bosnian Serb teenager who assassinated Francis Ferdinand and his wife. Yet, like so many of their Balkan neighbors, Yugoslavia's statebuilders have forged a national identity based extensively on the Serb nation's past suffering at the hands of its enemies. The anniversary of Serbia's defeat at the battle of Kosovo Polje on 28 June 1389 remains the most hallowed day on the Yugoslav calendar, marking as it does the onset of five centuries of Turkish occupation. Nor is it a coincidence that 28 June also marks the anniversary of Francis Ferdinand's assassination and Milosevic's fateful decision to destroy the autonomy of Kosovo's Albanians. It is this deeply ingrained and continually nurtured persecution complex that has enabled so many Serbs to support and assist acts of aggression and genocide. To date they continue to dismiss the formidable evidence presented by countless international agencies as lies born of an ongoing conspiracy to persecute and oppress them.
War Crimes Trials constitute a realistic antidote to the psychosis that explains Rump Yugoslavia's horrific actions in Bosnia and Croatia. With them we can hope to reacculturate the Serbs and others who reject international norms of behavior as an unjustified restraint on their thirst for retribution. There is a precedent for such confidence in the cathartic effects of such trials: We need only look to Germany, where the Nuremberg Trials, de-Nazification, and the diligent use of public media effected a far-reaching change in a people's collective memory and political culture. So effective was that campaign that a search today for xenophobic Germans is best launched in the former East Germany, while any hunt for German anti-Semitists is best undertaken in Austria, which escaped much of the official opprobrium that followed the fall of the Third Reich.

Whatever the path -- whether an ambitious, wholly voluntary regional restructuring that promotes a larger multiethnic union or a limited solution in Yugoslavia based on the full implementation of the Dayton Accords -- the US will have to challenge its allies' shortsighted sense of expediency and insist on a just, and thus durable, settlement that guarantees regional stability. Or it can walk away and invite renewed hostilities, whether in Bosnia after the departure of IFOR, or in Rump Yugoslavia's remaining, ethnically mixed provinces of the Voivodina, the Sandzak, and Kosovo. As it has in the past, failure to act now will not bring lasting peace. It will only prolong ethnic conflict and ensure the need to return in the future, perhaps to fight another Balkan war between World War I's winners and losers.

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