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Nation as Tragedy: What is Special About Central Europe's Nationalism[*]

Abstract: The popular literature on nationalism is a poor guide for students interested in why nationalism has led to conflict in East and Central Europe. The problem is captured in the phrase "imagined communities" – taken to mean that humans could make of nations whatever they desired – culturally, politically, or otherwise. In fact, specific, constraining ideas of nationhood had existed in Europe for centuries, and when democratic movements arose in the nineteenth century, people had a definite sense of what made up the self-governing communities they hoped to make: Czechs imagined an ethnically Czech state, and Germans an ethnically German one, Poles an ethnically Polish one, and so on. Because ethnicities coexisted within very old settlement patterns, the basic ambitions of these movements proved incompatible, leading to strife. The piece takes particular issue with the notion that "national indifference" constituted a serious option for European political life in the modern period.

Zarys treści: Popularna literatura na temat nacjonalizmu nie jest dobrym przewodnikiem dla studentów zainteresowanych tym, dlaczego nacjonalizm doprowadził do konfliktów w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej. Problem ten oddaje wyrażenie „wyobrażone wspólnoty" – rozumiane jako to, że ludzie mogą tworzyć narody zgodnie z własnymi pragnieniami – kulturowymi, politycznymi lub innymi. W rzeczywistości konkretne, ograniczające idee narodowości istniały w Europie od stuleci, a kiedy w XIX w. powstały ruchy demokratyczne, ludzie mieli wyraźne wyobrażenie o tym, co składało się na samorządne wspólnoty, które chcieli stworzyć: Czesi wyobrażali sobie państwo czeskie, Niemcy – niemieckie, Polacy – polskie i tak dalej. Ponieważ grupy etniczne współistniały w bardzo starych strukturach osadniczych, podstawowe ambicje tych ruchów okazały się nie do pogodzenia i doprowadziły do konfliktów. Artykuł szczególnie krytycznie odnosi się do poglądu, że „indyferentyzm narodowy" stanowił poważną opcję dla europejskiego życia politycznego w epoce nowożytnej.

Students and laypersons interested in Central Europe in the United States usually start with one question: why has the region produced so much destructive nationalism? The question emerges from story upon story of ethnicities unable to live together in peace. Over many generations, we tell our students, Central Europeans have suffered discrimination, culminating in violence at the hands of next-door neighbors who considered them foreign. The tales vary, from inkpots beings tossed across multiethnic parliaments or people rioting over language rights, to nationally aggrieved middle-class voters choosing fascism, to ethnic cleansings beginning in Eastern Hungary in 1849 but extending through succeeding decades, most recently to crimes in Bosnia that count as genocide.

The legacies of interethnic conflict extend across the map of Central Europe, featuring plot lines that seem foreign further west or east. Take two of Europe's historic kingdoms on either side of the Rhine, France and Bohemia. Each had relatively clear borders for centuries; each had ruling houses producing kings, and each had societies divided by region, class, and culture. Both have been prosperous, with well-developed specialty industries, as well as culturally complex, featuring a range of mutually unintelligible dialects as well as religious strife. Each witnessed the rise of potent liberalism and socialism, and popular demands by men and women for nation-states. There, the similarities end.

One has evolved into a republic under the rule of law, admitting and absorbing peoples; the other featured perennial strife among politicians of two ethnicities. The year 1848 was a flashpoint. In France, it signaled a milestone on a tortuous path toward a self-governing nation-state; in Bohemia an upheaval revealing two incompatible solutions: Czechs who imagined the kingdom as a future Czech nation-state – with a nominal Habsburg sovereign – and Germans who considered Bohemia part of a German constitutional monarchy. Each group offered what seemed to them impregnable historic arguments. In the end, the problem of multiethnicity was "solved" through expulsions and resettlements of a third of Bohemia's population. Yes, there was a challenge across the Rhine of making "peasants into Frenchmen", but French territory did not feature several nations claiming France as their nation-state.[1]

Bohemia is a microcosm for the region between France and the Russian lands – not every part is interchangeable, but every one is comparable, whether Lithuania, Galicia, Volynia, Carniola, Silesia, many areas of the old Hungarian Kingdom,

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[1] Thanks to Katherine David-Fox for suggesting the two-kingdom comparison.

Macedonia, or Bosnia, and all regions disputed by two or more groups. The basic story in recent generations features multiethnicity, a context for strife, and some combination of ethnic cleansing and genocide.

Historians hoping to sensitize students to the nationalism behind such stories rely upon the classic texts of Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, and Eric Hobsbawm; and though the latter two were born and educated in Central Europe, their work fails to give basic guidance to the sources of strife in the region, or indeed what nationalism has meant there over time. On the one hand, readers seeking enlightenment encounter a disorienting tension: between the popular and liberating message that nations are "contingent", things that human beings freely create, but then, in stark contrast, the claim that humanity's march forward to modern industrial society made nationhood inevitable, so that what humans felt and did was secondary. Thus, Anderson famously called nations "imagined communities", implying products of artifice, things humans made up just as they liked, yet, at the same time, he told readers that nationalism arose from a necessary aspect of modernity, namely, print culture.[2] Ernest Gellner likewise drew attention to the contingent quality of nationalism, a by no means universal aspect of human existence, yet he too conjured necessity: industrial modernity itself made nationalism unavoidable, as it requires a literary high culture that enables strangers to communicate.[3] This deterministic scheme pushes the humans making nations into the deep background, along with the passions that drive them.[4]

On the other hand, readers seeking guidance on the troubled region between the Rhine and Russia find that theory had little patience for places that diverged from global models. Gellner knew that nationalism had arisen on the Balkan Peninsula long before industrial modernity, and he considered this "a major problem for theory" – but also an exception (an "accidental convergence") that did not upset the rule and did not demand explanation. Hobsbawm accorded no

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[2] Anderson's approach has its origins in the work of Hugh Seton-Watson, a political scientist who aspired to precision. The nation eluded "scientific definition", wrote Seton-Watson. Still, it existed: "All that I can find to say is that a nation exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation, or behave as if they formed one". Anderson presumed to improve upon Seton-Watson and wrote: "We may translate 'consider themselves' as 'imagine themselves'", Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 2006), 6. Yet the change came at a cost: "imagine" means to form a mental image of something not present, implying that nationhood is something in the human mind that is willfully translated into reality.

[3] "Modern society imposes on everyone the need to communicate and understand. … And the communication must take place not merely in a 'high' code, but in some one definite code, say Mandarin Chinese or Oxford English. That is all. It is this which explains nationalism", Ernest Gellner, *Nationalism* (London, 1997), 7, 29, 42–43.

[4] Failure to attend to the emotional side of nationalism was a criticism leveled by Perry Anderson and others against Ernest Gellner. For Gellner's response, see 'Reply to Critics', *New Left Review*, 1, no. 221 (1997), 81–84.

special attention to language, something crucial to identity in Central Europe, because language often fails to produce nations.

So our students wonder, where does Central Europe's version of nationalism come from, and when do we begin our study of it? Hobsbawm advised readers to shift the focus to conceptual history and pay attention to *the word* "nation", especially its transformations toward the end of the nineteenth century; nation as we understand it is a "very recent newcomer in human history". But what if the explanation for Central Europe's trajectory begins earlier? Can our students ignore legacies from before 1789 – for example, early Polish or Hungarian statehood, or foundational settlement patterns of Slavic and Hungarian tribes?[5] What if the word "nation" had an incubation period before 1789? Then there is the question of what changed after that point. Modernizing institutions deserve study, but why did people in Serbia, Poland, or Bohemia sacrifice and die for nationhood before the onset of statehood, capitalism, or literacy? Can we really understand what makes this vast region distinctive if we block off all premodern legacies?

For readers of Anderson, Gellner, and Hobsbawm, the realities of Central Europe get lost in a mixture of voluntarism and determinism. Nothing that Central Europeans did could stop the coming of nationhood, yet they were free to imagine and shape it just as they liked, with little relation to their specific histories.[6] By way of a short circuit, North Americans conclude that Central Europeans have chosen irrational forms of nationhood and ought simply to adopt our "civic" models, where people pick up and put down nationalism on the spur of the moment, becoming British one day and American the next. The voluntarist approach essentializes Central Europeans in the minds of the West: they seem people unwilling to break with age-old prejudices; perhaps *Imagined Communities* is influential among North Americans because it allows them to imagine people everywhere understanding nationhood as they do.

What students lack from the classics is an internal perspective from the Central European lands that have witnessed intense interethnic violence. What was it like within the intellectual and emotional realms of Bohemia or Poland, among people collecting funds for national theaters, collating lists of words, singing folk songs, and preaching messages of solidarity, but also of vigilance and hatred?[7] The issue

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[5] Hobsbawm, *Nations*, 5, 9. For a helpful alternative, see the essays in Eugene Kamenka (ed.), *Nationalism: The Nature and Evolution of an Idea* (Canberra, 1973).

[6] Gellner was consistent in reducing the agency of individual nationalists to effect anything substantial (the agents for him were modernity and nationalism), but he is not read that way, even by his son, who described his father's view, mixing voluntarism and determinism. David N. Gellner, 'Preface', in Ernest Gellner, *Nationalism* (London, 1997), viii.

[7] The current trend is for historians to resist reproducing "nationalist" argumentation in their work, in order to avoid perpetuating "methodological nationalism"; George Vasilev, "Methodological Nationalism and the Politics of History Writing", *Nations and Nationalism*, 25 (2009), 500–521.

of *when* to study nationhood also matters; if one ignores the centuries before 1800, one has no idea why Central Europe has been a patchwork of dialects and faiths – or why diversity grew into a problem when the region advanced from traditional to representative politics.

The National Indifference Approach to Nationalism

When one turns to important recent work on the region between the Rhine and Russia, one finds historians taking the voluntarism of nationalism theory to its next logical step. If human beings imagine nations, a new generation has wondered, what about those who chose to imagine their identities in different ways, perhaps remaining indifferent to nationhood?[8] If Anderson, Gellner, and Hobsbawm failed to specify the individual commitment that drives people to be national, perhaps people might avoid nationalism altogether. And if nationalists invent nations, why not just imagine these zealots out of the picture? After all, the product of their labors – nation-states – has generated war and suffering, a finding that social scientists have even quantified.[9] Maybe people's benign natural state is to be indifferent to nationalism.

Beyond problems of theory, scholars imagining Europeans as basically indifferent to nationhood point to questions of evidence.[10] The older literature assumed European states made implicit nationals – say ethnic Poles or French – into people self-consciously national, who considered their belonging to the nation necessary and natural, and were willing to stake their lives for it. But what evidence do we possess about how people really felt? Despite reams of studies, we know little about how nationalization reached ordinary people, who were "often indifferent, ambivalent, or opportunistic when dealing with issues of nationhood".[11]

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[8] Tara Zahra, 'Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis', *Slavic Review*, 69, no. 1 (2010), 93–119. For discerning early critique of the 'national indifference' approach, see Gerald Stourzh, 'The Ethnicizing of Politics and "National Indifference" in Late Imperial Austria', in Gerald Stourzh, *Der Umfang der österreichischen Geschichte: Ausgewählte Studien 1990–2010* (Vienna, 2011), 283–323.

[9] Andreas Wimmer and Brian Min, 'From Empire to Nation-state. Explaining Wars in the Modern World, 1816–2001', *American Sociological Review*, 71, no. 6 (2006), 867–97.

[10] Many valuable works on East European nationalism appeared alongside the works discussed below: among English-language authors one could also mention Jakub Benes, Chad Bryant, Holly Case, Patrice Dabrowski, Benjamin Frommer, Eagle Glassheim, Emily Greble, Dominique Reill, John-Paul Himka, and Timothy Snyder to name only a few. I invoke exemplary cases from the huge literature on nationalism in order to make distinct, and I hope new, points. For an excellent recent survey, including important works by Anthony Smith, Adrian Hastings, and John Breuilly, see Umut Özkirimil, *Theories of Nationalism* (New York, 2017).

[11] Maarten van Ginderachter and Jon Fox (eds), *National Indifference and the History of Nationalism in Modern Europe* (London – New York, 2019), i.

Studies inaugurating the national indifference (NI) approach trace the fraught progression of nationalization, usually in borderlands. In a pathbreaking and erudite study of the southern Bohemian city of Budweis, Jeremy King probed how people shifted from a non-national local identity, *Budweiser*, to identification as Czechs and Germans. "Before 1848", he writes, "Germans in the Bohemian lands actually numbered very few". Among his sources is the German traveler Johann Kohl, who visited Bohemia in the 1840s and, according to King, "found no fellow Germans with whom to rejoice during his brief stay".[12] Instead, people in Budweis tended to be bilingual and to celebrate regional identity.

From the 1860s that began to change. Czech nationalists emerged from the indifferent population and began demanding Czech institutions, above all schools, and they also splintered off from mixed societies and created their own, dragging other Czech speakers with them. A local social club (*Beseda*) spawned a network of Czech organizations, and the school council was divided into German and Czech sections; in 1861, enthusiastic crowds celebrated the founding of a Czech theater.[13] With the expansion of suffrage came political parties, which were also divided by ethnicity. Still, King urges readers not to overrate the Czech and German movements; nationalization in Budweis was "contingent". Habsburg authorities might have given people other chances – for example, of choosing "bilingual" as one's identity in the decennial census.[14]

In line with the voluntaristic side of nationalism theory, King shows that nationalism advanced not on its own, but through acts of those nationalist zealots, known in Budweis as German Constitutionalists and "Ultraczechs". Pieter Judson has placed such figures at the center of *Guardians of the Nation*, an eloquent exploration of the German-Slavic borderlands, where people were content with bilingual identities until nationalist agitators entered the scene.[15] "Nationalists clearly owed their advances to hard ideological work", writes Judson, "and not to some organic process by which unsuspecting Czech speakers or German speakers magically awakened to find themselves Czech and German in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries".[16]

Other works have also studied the nationalist activists who fomented nationalization. James Bjork focuses on the Upper Silesians, lodged between German and Polish nationalities, but failed to side with either. A bit incongruous is Bjork's claim to explore indifference when the people in question struggled passionately for local

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[12] Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics* (Princeton, NJ, 2004), 22.

[13] Ibid., 37, 40–41, 47, 49, 51, 53, 68.

[14] Ibid., 46, 59.

[15] Pieter Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 5.

[16] Judson, *Guardians*, 6.

identity.[17] Tara Zahra provided insights on the nationalist activists who worried about borderland populations in Bohemia that identified as neither Czech nor German. Many sent their children for holidays to areas dominated by the other language for the practical advantages bilingualism gave people in all aspects of their lives.

Zahra entreats readers to imagine national indifference as a stable identity, but she also admits that we cannot quantify the people whose sense of identity never settled on either option.[18] Like King and Bjork, she assumes that bilinguals figured between nationalities, but the sources she cites suggest their numbers were limited.[19] Questions follow: why did conflicts about nationhood emerge if people's default position is indifference; why are these conflicts often bloody and irreconcilable? Can we pin the blame on small groups of "nationalists"? Indeed, who were these faceless extremists who began popping up across Central Europe after 1800, preaching the apparently irrational gospel of nationalism? And what about resistance: if ordinary people retained a healthy skepticism about nationalists' claims, why did they not organize, for example, in defense of bilingual identities? History provides little evidence of imagined noncommunities.

When Is the Nation? Is It Real?

Still, Anglo-American readers who considered Central Europe a series of clearly bounded nations learn from NI authors that identity can be an unstable thing: in Austrian Silesia, a Pole could act as a German tomorrow, or a Czech the following day. People practiced multiple identities; therefore, belonging to a specific nationality is not a person's fate. This recognition has led scholars to wonder if we can speak of collectivities of Germans, Poles, and Czechs at all. Sociologist Rogers Brubaker, a major inspiration for NI scholars, wrote that nations are not "things in the world but perspectives on the world", a view that NI scholars have embraced.[20]

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[17] James E. Bjork, *Neither German Nor Pole: Catholicism and National Indifference in a Central European Borderland* (Ann Arbor, 2008).

[18] Zahra argues for the "fundamental contingency and fungibility of national loyalties", *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands* (Ithaca, 2008), 6.

[19] In only five of the twenty-three Bohemian districts were over 16 percent of school children bilingual. When one turns to the source in question, one learns the reason: these districts were mostly northern industrial areas where children had immigrated from Czech regions; they spoke Czech and attended German schools, becoming assimilated and denationalized, a very old story. This indeed is what the author concludes. Heinrich Rauchberg, *Der nationale Besitzstand in Böhmen*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1905), 437–438. For probing and insightful challenges to conclusions that have been drawn from the NI approach, see Jakub Benes, *Workers and Nationalism: Czech and German Social Democracy in Habsburg Austria* (Oxford, 2017), and Benjamin Lieberman, 'From Nationalism to National Indifference', *Nationalities Papers*, 49, no. 5 (2021), 855–872.

[20] Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), 213.

This insight, which at first seems to make nationhood insubstantial, a kind of fiction, in fact opens paths for fruitful historical research. Nationhood is indeed a way of looking at reality – one that has been shared by vast numbers of people. Put another way, there is no German nation as an unchanging "thing", but there are shifting and amorphous groups of humans that consider themselves German. Like every thing, like every word, situated in time, what humans call nations possess dimensions that persist and those that fade. So while it's worth pointing to the variability in time of human communities, but it also bears noting that academic students of nations have not treated them in a reified, surreal, and ahistorical manner.[21]

Beyond such elaborate conceptual skepticism and the mentioned penchant for voluntarism, there is the third injection I mentioned above from nationalism theory that informs historians of National Indifference: the claim that nationalism emerged with modernity, implying that we need not look at earlier history to understand it. Zahra notes that canonical works of theory – Anderson, Gellner, and Hobsbawm, but also Eugen Weber – maintain "the absence of national loyalties before the modern era". These scholars have "definitively dismantled the primordialist claims of nationalists and established a firm consensus among historians that nations are modern, historically and politically constructed communities".[22] Yet can historians take intuitions from theory and simply transfer them into running chronological time? Is not our method rather to draw conclusions from historical sources? When a skeptic indeed turns to sources, the question becomes: if national consciousness did not exist in the premodern period, at what point does it start? Where does modernity begin?

As we have seen, Jeremy King boldly selects the year 1848. Before that, one found "few Germans or Czechs" in Bohemia. If one probes eyewitness accounts from that year, one finds evidence of a new sensual reality in Bohemian towns – Czech and German colors everywhere – as well as assertive use of Czech in public places. Germans worried about a Slavic Congress held in Prague and began using new words to describe their aspirations, but also their concerns. At a meeting in August, elected politicians whose descendants would be called Sudeten Germans for the first time used the expression *deutsche Gesinnung* to indicate not just a quality they admired in heroes from the past but also an active expectation for co-nationals in the present.[23] Nationalism had become an assertive, even aggressive

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[21] In their joint study, Rogers Brubaker, Margit Feischmidt, Jon Fox, and Liana Grancia claim to transcend studies of "bounded groups", but they cite no historian who conceives of an ethnic group as existing within an absolutely firm boundary; *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton, NJ, 2006), 357.

[22] Zahra, 'Imagined Noncommunities', 96; also id., *Kidnapped*, 6.

[23] This phrase exploded in use in 1848 at the meetings of Bohemia's German deputies. See the *Stenographischer Bericht über die Verhandlungen der am 28. August in Teplitz im Namen deutscher*

idea. These delegates worried about "decline" (*Untergang*), a word previously encountered among fretful advocates of embattled Slavic or Magyar nationality, but not among Germans.[24]

King is thus right to claim that something new was in the air, but did people in Bohemia really have no sense of being German or Czech before that point? As noted, a prime source for King's argument was Johann Kohl, who produced travelogues from across Eurasia, beginning with his visit to the Habsburg lands in July 1842. When one reads beyond the sections cited by King, one finds that Kohl was encountering Germans and Czechs from the moment he set foot in Bohemia. People he met were bilingual, but when he talked to them, Kohl discovered that the majority was Czech. He also learned about their perspective on the world and, as a sensitive traveler, adjusted his speech accordingly.[25]

That perspective involved geography and history. Kohl knew that Bohemia belonged to the German Confederation, but took care to omit this fact in conversations; one Bohemian he met had been outraged by a book calling Prague "one of the most beautiful cities in Germany". Germans, he said, had a reputation for entering Slavic lands – like Lusatia – and laying eggs, so that the German "cuckoo" gradually displaced the Slavic "titmouse". One only had to look at the villages ending in Slavic "itz" across Saxony or Brandenburg to see how aggressive Germans had taken hold of Slavic lands over the centuries. Kohl learned that Czechs had a keener historical curiosity than Germans; their pubs, for instance, carried the names of nobles from the deep past.[26]

Czechs inherited their sense of history from bygone ages, and that did not need to be inculcated by nationalists. But Kohl also witnessed something very new during a tour of St. Wenceslaus Chapel at the Prague Castle. On the one hand, he beheld woodcuts glorifying the battle of White Mountain, a Habsburg victory over Czech nobles in 1620; on the other, he noted the pained expressions these portrayals elicited among his Czech hosts. For them, White Mountain was the crushing of a native culture that had celebrated diversity of religion, quality schools, and world-class intellects like Kepler and Brahe.[27] "No German, no Austrian, no friend of humanity", wrote Kohl, "can watch Czechs mournfully walking past these images, and deny them his sympathy".[28] Kohl learned of executions of

Städte, Gemeinden, und konstitutioneller Vereine Böhmens zusammengekommenen Vertrauens-männer (Litoměřice, n.d.), 17, 21, 28, 59–60.

[24] *Stenographischer Bericht*, 44. Fear of ethnic decline is a central theme in Gary B. Cohen's classic *Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague 1861–1914* (West Lafayette, IN, 2006).

[25] Before embarking, Kohl had learned that three districts of the kingdom were almost entirely Czech, and thirteen more (of sixteen total) were mixed German and Czech.

[26] Johann Georg Kohl, *Hundert Tage auf Reisen in den österreichischen Staaten*, vol. 1: *Reise in Böhmen* (Dresden–Leipzig, 1842), 46.

[27] Kohl, *Hundert Tage*, 97–98.

[28] Ibid., 97.

Czech leaders, of Czechs having their tongues cut out, and of mass expulsions, after which the Habsburgs burned every "heretical" book they could find.

The Czech perspective amounted to a sad and miserable *story*, one set up to move hearts and nurture outrage. Some details were inaccurate, but others, including the basic plotline, emerged from documents collected by a rising historical profession. In succeeding decades, the gospel Kohl heard entered schoolbooks, popular media, and political debate, becoming a narrative of collective identity shared by millions. There is truth to Jeremy King's insight, yet it needs an adjustment: Kohl did not meet Czechs or Germans with fully formed senses of national identity. People found themselves in a transition between an amorphous but real ethnicity, and nationhood as a well-elaborated, widely absorbed creed. In the 1840s, no one was called upon to die or kill for the Czech or German nations; two generations later, that had changed. A question is exactly why.

Proto-Nations by Different Names: Premodern European Ethnicity

One finds two things of note when traveling backward in time before Europe's break toward modernity: sources speak of Czechs (*die Böhmen*), and they speak of Czechs among European peoples. The examples are innumerable. Take Anton Friedrich Büsching, a theologian, historian, and geographer active in the late eighteenth century. He detailed virtually all the peoples inhabiting the map: there were Bohemians, Poles, Germans, *Raitzen* (or *Serwier*), Croats, Greeks, Swedes, Cossacks, Bulgarians, Bosnians, Vlachs, Hungarians, Russians, Lithuanians, French, Swiss, English, and Dutch.[29] A decade earlier, the jurist and philosopher Nicolaus Hieronymous Gundling was writing of *Teutsche* (Germans), *Czechiten* (Bohemians), *Lechiten* (Moravians, Silesians, and Poles). He recorded conflicts over language, noting that the Germanizing of Silesians had upset the Poles.[30] An earlier travel author, Heinrich Ludwig Gude (d. 1707), wrote that Czechs had conducted wars in defense of their language, and that the Germans who had entered Bohemia under Charles IV were much hated.[31]

Gude compiled histories of other European states, but his work was forgotten by later generations. His contemporary Carl Scharschmidt visited Bohemia in 1688, and in his work, likewise lost to scholarship, related the basic story we hear from Johann Kohl. History had witnessed centuries of struggle between Germans

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[29] *Neue Erdbeschreibung*, part 1, vol. 2 (Hamburg, 1770), 1196, 1299, 1455, 1562, 1545, 1706. See also Jakob Friedrich von Bielfeld, *Lehrbegriff der Staatskunst*, Part 2 (Breslau, 1761), 111–112.

[30] Nicolaus Hieronymous Gundling, *Discours über den vormaligen und itzigen Zustand der deutschen Churfürsten-Staaten* (Leipzig, 1747), 697.

[31] Heinrich Ludwig Gude, *Staat von Böhmen* (n.p., 1710), 348–349.

and Czechs, leading to stereotypes within each group about the other. Bohemians spat when encountering Germans, and Germans considered Bohemians envious, deceitful, and concerned only about their "own people".[32]

This sense of ethnic groups coexisting, but doing so uneasily, extended into Poland-Lithuania, where the Austrian author Martin Zeiller disentangled the political, regional, and ethnic. The Lithuanians had their own language, occupied a distinct territory, and constituted a complex society, consisting of nobility and commoners. In Lithuania, there were also Tatars who kept to Muslim practices, but like other Lithuanian subjects, they answered to the king of Poland. "Most inhabitants of the Kingdom of Poland are Slavs or Wends", wrote Zeiller, but there were also German artisans in the towns, supposedly more industrious than the Poles.[33] In a sixteen-volume study of Germany, Zeiller extended his ethnographic curiosity to Bohemia and Moravia: Moravia's Slavic population was almost identical in habits and customs to the Czechs, and a bit friendlier than the Germans. Moravians were escaping to Bohemia because peasants there had better lives and the Bohemians "speak their language".[34]

This is far from modern Europe. Poles are sometimes called Slavs or Wends; Moravians have no inkling of common statehood with Czechs. Indeed, no one was imagining nation-states, as the rule was monarchic. Still, the referents are ethnic and not regional: Bohemians and Moravians, though living in Germany – the Empire – were not Germans. *Die Pohlen*, after centuries of common state-hood, became a pooling concept for West Slavs. These forgotten authors knew that these and other collectivities had emerged from forgotten groups and were not "eternal"; their painstaking studies told them that peoples came and went, occupied particular spaces at one point but lost them at another, along with their identities.[35]

Zeiller used several words interchangeably to describe ethnic populations. He wrote about *Völcker*, but these tended to be synonymous with would later be called *Stämme* (tribes) – that is, the groups from which Poles, Bohemians, and so on had arisen.[36] But *Volck* could also mean "army", and "*Nation*" could connote the nobility, or a group of a particular regional background at a university. More systematic was the encyclopedist Johan Heinrich Zedler, who defined a nation as "a united number of citizens, who have the same habits, customs, and laws".

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[32] Carl Scharschmidt, *Das in Unruhe ruhige Staats-Prognosticon* (Freiburg, 1688), 208–212.

[33] Martin Zeiller, *Newe Beschreibung Deß Königreichs Polen, vnd Groß-Herzogthumbs Lithauen* (Ulm, 1663), 41-48.

[34] Id., *Topographia Bohemiae, Moraviae et Silesiae* (Frankfurt, 1650), 88.

[35] Gude wrote that nothing in the world is permanent (*beständig*), *Der Staat von Hungarn* (1708), 8.

[36] On the multiplicity of meanings of 'nation' in the Middle Ages, see František Graus, *Die Nationenbildung der Westslawen im Mittelalter* (Sigmaringen, 1980), 179, 187.

What connected co-nationals was membership in a descent group, differentiated by "way of life and habits", qualities that were passed down through time. Germans born outside Germany were still German.[37]

If one goes back further back in time – and why not? – one finds that a Europe of nations did not commence in the sixteenth century. Polish historian Benedykt Zientara traced national histories to medieval kingdoms, and chided modernist colleagues for ignoring these earlier ages. Thus the French nation arose in the thirteenth century with strong state support, and in Germany, even absent state authority, national consciousness had commenced in the fifteenth century at the latest. These early senses were not equivalent; thus nationhood was felt with special intensity among Czechs, because language coincided with religion and both were under threat.

If it is impossible to date the precise emergence of nations, one can say that between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries the French, German, English, Polish, Czech, and Hungarian nations gained "long-lasting foundations, both political and ideational".[38] A mass of research thus makes clear that we cannot understand modern nationalism without attention to centuries before the nineteenth. The modernist/anti-modernist debate among social scientists ignored a huge base of premodern understandings, producing an inability to explain nationalism's powers to produce violence in modern Central Europe, where the predicament of several nations claiming the same land goes back to quilt-like ethnic settlement patterns inherited from times when modern nationhood was unimaginable.

We also see that the word *nation*, along with its synonyms, was never a stable concept – as nationalism theory implies – but always subject to change, gradually becoming the word whose meaning we dispute in the terms of our time. Furthermore, no matter what word was used to describe it, the sense of ethnicity – *gens* in Latin – has traveled from ancient times into our day, living in various lexical shells over a long odyssey.

Explaining why some European regional groupings became modern nations – Germans or Serbs – and others did not – Bavarians or Moravians – goes beyond this essay, but the answer also has to do with this premodern heritage and the indelible symbols, sacred or heroic figures, legendary battles, and cherished stereotypes that lent "Germany" a gravity that the Pflaz or even Bavaria would never possess. To put it differently, because of episodes in the deep past, modern Germans came to care about the Pfalz or Schleswig *as parts of Germany* with

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[37] Zedler admits to several understandings of nation, for example, "society" or "cult", or university "nation". but the cited meaning was the "real and first meaning" and was synonymous with "Volk"; Johann Heinrich Zedler, *Grosses vollständiges Universallexicon aller Wissenschaften und Künste*, vol. 23 (Leipzig–Halle, 1740), 902–903.

[38] Benedykt Zientara, 'Korzenie nowoczesnego narodu', *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, 90, no. 1 (1983), 189; Graus, *Nationenbildung*, 18.

a force and concern that outweighed even what natives of the Pfalz or Schleswig would feel about their regions. As important as evolving connotations of the same word – "nation", "Germany", or "Bohemia" – were the emotions invested in it.

What Really Changed with Modernity

At the outset of modernity, a map of nations therefore existed in the European mind, one whose imprints lay deeper than those of states: Poland, Serbia, or Bohemia were more than mere provinces of empires. But if we take an internal view of nationalism, we see a dimension entering the story that goes beyond basic knowledge of nationhood. From the late eighteenth century, people began caring about the security and welfare of nations in the modern sense, meaning complete peoples, male and female, across social groups. In addition to well-known concerns among elites (especially the Hungarian) about economic backwardness, there was also a cultural dimension to that troubling sense of inferiority and vulnerability toward the West, above all France.[39]

The word "indifference" permits us to chart Central Europeans' transition to modern nationhood: before the mid-nineteenth century, they knew about their ethnicity but were largely indifferent to it. Only after about 1800 did awareness give way to commitment. Consider František Palacký, historian and driving force behind the Czech movement. Palacký's conversion from indifferent knowledge to restless concern took place in 1813: he had known that he was a Czech speaker, neither German nor Hungarian, yet now he was suddenly ashamed of not caring enough about "his" language and people, which was ancient and historical like France, but on the verge of extinction. Palacký started with language and then proceeded to history, formalizing the stories that Johann Kohl would hear at the Prague castle in 1842 and helping spread that sense – nationalism as a modern ideology – to thousands of people within his lifetime.[40]

Miroslav Hroch gives us the fullest account of this process. Hroch is a critic of global works of theory, calling fellow Bohemian Ernest Gellner's scheme insufficient because mass nationalization began before the onset of industrialization.[41] Yet despite attention to the phases of nationalism's advance in Europe, Hroch did not show why stories about the national past – like those related by Kohl – became

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[39] Andrew Janos, *The Politics of Backwardness in Hungary 1780–1945* (Princeton, NJ, 1982).

[40] Gellner says it would be a mistake to assume the transition had to do with a "conscious long-term calculation on anyone's part", but he does not record a motive that moved people to mass propagation; id., *Nations and Nationalism*, 60–63.

[41] Hroch spoke of nation-building in small nations as occurring in three stages: (A) creating the intellectual and spiritual resources; (B) molding a constituency among patriots; (C) spreading the full national idea in a mass movement; Miroslav Hroch, *Das Europa der Nationen: Die moderne Nationsbildung im europäischen Vergleich* (Göttingen, 2005), 89–90.

not just popular but also parts of a binding ideology. In Hroch's account, "national history" simply appears and spreads.[42] But why did people of his stages A and B make propagation of national messages their life's work? Hroch says the early movement grew in a time of romanticism, itself part of a cultural crisis unleashed by the disintegration of traditional loyalties; increasingly society consisted of "inner-directed" individuals, seeking new sources of solidarity.[43] Yet Hroch also admitted that this general background was insufficient as an explanation.[44]

Thus, readers must scrutinize Hroch's work to detect the full human dimensions of the nationalism that broke through in early nineteenth-century Central Europe. Late in his study, when discussing literacy, Hroch gets to emotions – to massively shared individual sentiments. For generations Czech speakers had been content to absorb German as their public language, but from the 1820s they angrily insisted that schools teach their children in Czech. Why did they not ask for more and better education in German? The answer has to do partly with rising feelings of social discrimination. In Prague, with its self-confident German population, Czech children, usually of lower social status, could rarely catch up to their German-speaking peers. This failing had nothing to do with individual talent, yet in that German-dominated environment, Czechs were made to feel "human beings of an inferior category".[45] In 1832, Palacký's incipient Czech movement produced a memorandum insisting that this discriminatory situation end.

What Hroch does not stress was that the memorandum found fertile ground because Bohemian cities were growing, and a trickle of Czechs from the countryside was becoming a steady gush; therefore, the national movement could appeal to rapidly growing constituencies. Equally significant, because schools were the most important element of social mobility – for Gellner, the "entry ticket to complete citizenship and human dignity" – nationalism could appeal to people in material and idealistic terms at the same time. Previously, newcomers had been few and their grumbling was easily ignored; yet now Czech-speaking migrants numbered in the tens of thousands, generating growing outrage that Palacký and his disciples cleverly addressed. The concept linking material interest to idealist cause was *justice* in a capacious sense: Czech families' demands for social justice were made to coincide with the gospel of historical justice for the Czech people.

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[42] Id., *Europa der Nationen*, 154–155.

[43] For keen insights on this predicament, see Thomas Nipperdey, *Nachdenken über die deutsche Geschichte* (Munich, 1990), 143–145; Christian Jansen, 'The Formation of German Nationalism', in Helmut Walser Smith (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern German History* (Oxford, 2018), 240.

[44] Hroch, *Europa der Nationen*, 175.

[45] Ibid., 193; id., 'Die tschechische nationale Mobilisierung als Antwort auf die Identitätskrise um 1800' in Otto Dann, Miroslav Hroch, and Johannes Koll (eds), *Patriotismus und Nationsbildung am Ende des Heiligen Römischen Reiches*, Kölner Beiträge zur Nationsforschung, 9 (Köln, 2003), 203.

The stories of Czech grievance that Kohl jotted down had brought this gospel painfully to life, telling Czechs they had become social inferiors in their "own" country, in a sacrilege against history.[46]

With this background, one sees how German nationalism – like the Hungarian and Polish variants – differed from the small-nation nationalisms about which Hroch is the master scholar. The emotion fueling the German movement's growth was also anger from shared humiliation, growing not so much from inferiority felt toward supposed social betters as out of lengthy foreign occupation. For over twenty years, Germans endured French hegemony – some one-third of the men conscripted in Napoleon's Grande Armée were German – and demands for unity and independence proliferated, as did a harsh critique of the status quo. One pamphleteer asked: "What, German brother, do you *feel* in the face of the impotence of the German emperor?" French forces could not identify the author, so they executed the pamphlet's distributor on Napoleon's direct order: news of this infamy spread and then "electrified" the masses.[47] No one was imagining a German national state, but the logic of grievances and hopes led in that direction. If the French could live within secure boundaries, protecting their existence as a nation, why not Central Europeans? Thus, if at the turn of the century words like *Volk* or *Vaterland* still applied mainly to localities, by 1813 a new sensitivity had arisen to basic demands of nationhood.

What was changing was much more than lexical, however: it was that German, like Czech authors, cared intensely. Christian Jansen calls the period before 1814 a time of "incubation", when people possessed knowledge of ethnic difference, but three conditions of modern nationalism were missing: national solidarity was not yet a cause worth dying for; national consciousness was not yet a substitute religion; national affiliation was less important than allegiance to a local prince.[48] Now a transition occurred. People ceased living in what Friedrich Meinecke called a "vegetative" state and began expressing the will to nationhood. In Dieter Langewiesche's formula, the nation became an "ultimate value".[49]

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[46] This interpretation is inspired by Karel Šima and Henryk Wereszycki. In Benedict Anderson's terms, what is clear from Central Europe is not that capitalism produces nationalism, but that out of capitalism, and expanding markets, grew opportunities unlike any previously known, and that these were best realized by people acting nationally. Gellner captures the dynamic active in Prague in the early nineteenth century when describing Estonia in the twentieth: "the conditions of modern life favored the demographic majority". Yet he also implicitly grants the reality of a nationalism existing before modernity among not just Balkan peoples but also among Czechs, Estonians, and presumably many others; id., *Nationalism*, 97.

[47] Emphasis added. *Deutschland in seiner tiefen Erniedrigung* (1806), 81, 84. Friedrich Gentz reported to Metternich that news of the execution "forfait exécrable a Braunau a électrisé toute les âmes"; *Briefe von und an Friedrich von Gentz*, ed. Friedrich Carl Wittichen (Munich, 1913), 59–60.

[48] Jansen, 'The Formation', 235.

[49] Dieter Langewiesche, 'Reich, Nation, und Staat', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 254, no. 2 (1992), 344.

After the Vienna Congress we can trace the advance of the new consciousness in patriotic newspapers, memberships in singing societies, and attendance at national celebrations; but, as noted, only in 1848 does modern nationalism burst onto the scene – along with unanticipated strife, because virtually everywhere two or more national movements demanded secure boundaries for their nations within the same territory, a fact that became evident with early experiments in democracy.[50] In April and May 1848, Central Europe's men cast ballots in the first ever general election, and those in the region's heartland – Bohemia – took for granted that their kingdom would fit into either of two very different self-governing countries. For Czechs, Bohemia was fated to be a Czech kingdom in a constitutional monarchy under Habsburg rule; for Germans, Bohemia would be a province of a free Germany. Elsewhere, given the chance to speak and vote freely, Central Europeans likewise supported politicians advocating national autonomy, sometimes within existing empires (Hungary, Croatia), sometimes independently (Italy, Poland, Serbia), but always in conflict with other national movements claiming the same spaces.

Did Nationalism Reach Everyone?

Still, there is room to wonder about nationalism's spread to every corner of this vast region after 1848, especially among populations that came late to literacy and to suffrage – for example, peasants. Peasant parties sprouted up as politics emerged at the village level, but when their leaders went off to parliaments, they adapted to urban worlds, making fabulous careers and lots of money – in effect becoming spokespersons of the nationalist intelligentsias. Polish historians have long urged caution when considering the nationalization of the village. Stefan Kieniewicz, implicitly questioning the teleological scheme of Miroslav Hroch, where Phase C proceeds from B and A, wrote that peasant national consciousness did not grow like a plant from a seed, but instead advanced like a complex chemical reaction with multiple factors at work. Yet like Hroch, he understands the social element as crucial for nationalization: any political order calling itself Polish yet neglecting land re-distribution would only perpetuate myths of the "good emperor".[51]

As it advanced, national consciousness betrayed a regional character. People from different areas often did not recognize each other as co-nationals: each region,

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[50] All of this occurred with a widening of the public sphere, a fact that struck contemporaries as an epochal change, meaning that education – and knowledge of things like history – was going deep into the 'country'. See the reflections of the pedagogue Wilhelm Prange, 'Der geschichtliche und geographische Unterricht', in Karl Nacke (ed.), *Pädagogischer Jahresbericht für Deutschlands Volksschullehrer*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1846), 162–163.

[51] Stefan Kieniewicz, *Historyk a świadomość narodowa* (Warszawa, 1982), 247.

like each class, had its own idea of Poland. Before 1918, therefore, when peasants went from the Austrian to the Russian partition for work, they reported having gone "abroad".[52] "Fatherland" was the region where one was born and grew up, and for them it was Galicia. Thus, it was left to the press and schools to inform peasants they were one *naród*. Over a scholarly life extending from World War I into the 1960s, sociologist Stanisław Ossowski adapted scholarly terms to village realities. The idea of homeland (*ojczyzna*) was universal, as no humans lacked a sense of community, but in modern times, this idea embraced larger groupings united by history and language.[53] A region became a "fatherland only as much as a group of people has a relation to it and in some way shapes its image".[54] Therefore, people did not determine the shape of the nation individually: without their collective input, it was nothing. Patriotism thus developed without peasants being aware of the process they were involved in, and it was full of contradiction. In 1917 he observed that peasants might fear the word independence because it was dear to the lords and might signal their return; but they "steadfastly defended their land, speech, and habits, feel a link to co-nationals – and will not give up their nationality, even if they are not aware of it".[55] Only by World War II did evidence emerge that Ossowski had captured the trajectory of Polish peasants' consciousness: armed conspiracy spread through the countryside and a prime criterion of modern nationalism was fulfilled: willingness to die for one's country.[56]

In her pioneering work on Galician villagers before World War I, Keely Stauter--Halsted captures an intermediate stage of this process, confirming the importance of local institutions in nationalizing peasants but showing how these were the creations of the peasants themselves. Villagers became aware of their ethnicity and then fashioned nationality according to their own cosmologies. Usually, the principal actors were insiders, teachers who had returned to their villages after graduation. They procured books that were soon dog-eared, going from hand to hand, telling about peasant uprisings, peasant heroes, or peasant self-organization.[57]

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[52] Florian Znaniecki, 'Studia nad antagonizmem do obcych', *Przegląd Socjologiczy*, 2–4 (1931), 171; Roman Wapiński, *Polska i małe ojczyzny Polaków: z dziejów kształtowania się świadomości narodowej w XIX i XX wieku po wybuch II wojny światowej* (Wrocław, 1994), 340.

[53] Ossowski updated the older idea that nationalism supplants old loyalties: instead it overlaps, tightly coexisting. For the older notion see Eugene N. Anderson, *Nationalism and the Cultural Crisis in Prussia* (New York, 1939).

[54] Cited in Wapiński, *Polska*, 9.

[55] Jan Molenda, *Chłopi, naród, niepodległość: kształtowanie się postaw narodowych i obywatelskich chłopów w Galicji i Królestwie Polskim w przededniu odrodzenia Polski* (Warszawa, 1999), 37.

[56] Ibid., 38.

[57] Like their counterparts across Europe, teachers in Galicia viewed themselves as secular enlighteners, and "deemphasized links to clergy" while connecting with peasant activists; Keely Stauter-Halsted, *Nation in the Village: the Genesis of Peasant National Identity in Austrian Poland, 1848–1918* (Ithaca, 2001), 164.

Rather than imposed, nationalism was interpreted and then adapted to local needs – often against conservatives in the Polish ranks who felt "too much" schooling was not appropriate for peasants, but also under the noses of Austrian authorities (who would not even permit a map of Poland to hang in classrooms).[58] With some delay, the Catholic church, originally hostile to nationalism, tried to pick up step with the movement. After all, many priests were peasants. Few in the impoverished villages could afford national indifference because nationalism became a tool for social advancement. Whether they demanded democratic rights, enlightenment, or social rights peasants employed nationalist language and their newspapers took for granted that progress of any kind required Poland's independence.[59] Only a free Poland could assure peasants "land, the native [*ojczysty*] language, and belief of one's fathers", and those who disagreed were servants of "Moscow".[60]

National Identity in Mixed Regions

What happens when we place Polish peasants in multiethnic environments – for example, in areas farther east with mixed populations? Katherine Ciancia has explored parts of Eastern Poland (Volynia) that were estimated to be 20 percent Polish by statisticians of the interwar years, with the remaining population consisting of Ukrainians, Jews, and Russians. Because everyone spoke a western variant of Ukrainian, outsiders had difficulty discerning ethnic differences, and Ciancia wonders whether ethnographers' categories – Polish, Ukrainian, etc. – reflected popular opinion. Yet she also discerns an idiosyncratic factor enhancing the muddle: Polish authorities supported ideas of "national uncertainty" and inflated numbers of the indifferent to bolster their argument that locals needed to be civilized – in other words, Polonized.[61]

A Polish governor (Henryk Jóżewski) concocted a way to make the mostly non-Polish population loyal to the Polish state: he would make everyone "Volhynians". In the abstract that seems an excellent solution to nationalism: "Volhynians"

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[58] Teachers were also "forbidden, on threat of removal from their posts, to use their own materials to teach on national topics", ibid., 165.

[59] Kieniewicz (*Historyk*, 246) says that all peasant programs from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contain the same demands for national independence as those of the progressive intelligentsia. The same was true of socialists.

[60] Molenda, *Chłopi*, 219, 222. For a suggestive discussion (with much literature) of how peasants were mobilized, above all by clerics, in a social movement, to think of themselves not just as Poles, but necessary, special Poles, see Michał Łuczewski, 'Naród jako ruch społeczny', *Studia Socjologiczne*, 211, no. 3 (2011), 55–72.

[61] Kathryn Ciancia, *On Civilization's Edge: A Polish Borderland in the Interwar World* (Oxford, 2020), 14.

have never harmed anyone. Yet a Ukrainian movement was burgeoning, and its activists portrayed Jóżewski as a mortal danger, calling his policy clever denationalization. While claiming not to Polonize, he did nothing to relax state harassment of Ukrainian national institutions.[62] Thus, reminiscent of 1870s Bohemia, multi-ethnic, regional organizations began to lose members while nationally divided ones grew.[63] Inculcating Ukrainian identity did require hard work, but again, the work was not difficult, because the Orthodox peasants found it easy to identify with Ukrainian narratives preached in their own language by nationalists of their own faith and from their own villages. Thus, officials may have been right that Orthodox Volhynians had little defined sense of nationality when independent Poland emerged, but they knew who they were not: they were not Poles.

The anthropologist Olga Linkiewicz has studied mixed areas farther south, in Eastern Galicia, and captures local perceptions through a rich sociological heritage complemented by oral interviews. Like Ciancia, she is gentle in ascribing identity and focuses on vibrant senses of the local, which she calls *swojskość*, roughly "hereness". Despite intense nationalization, regional identities persisted through the interwar years, aided by frequent mixed marriages (a bit below 20 percent), and the "rubbing away" (*zatarcie*) of differences through ceaseless social interaction. What her interview partners recalled, often at two generations' remove, was unity: "there were no differences".[64] People united in habits attended each other's religious services and proved indistinguishable for outsiders because of their common dialect (a variant of Ukrainian called *chachłacki*).[65]

In the NI spirit, Linkiewicz does not prejudge, and writes that identity had a "fluid and transitional character".[66] Yet from the region's few towns we have reports of people who felt Polish or Ukrainian, and perhaps she overstates the degree to which differences were "rubbed away". Still, reminiscent of the dynamics uncovered by Pieter Judson in Cisleithania, nationalist activists worried obsessively about the margins, the loss of a few percentage points of one's group that might signal fatal decline.[67] Linkiewicz, like Ciancia, conforms to the NI sensibility: absent the work of activists, people in multiethnic villages lived in peace, hardly

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[62] Ibid., 195.

[63] Ibid., 194–195.

[64] Olga Linkiewicz, *Lokalność i nacjonalizm: Społeczności wiejskie w Galicji wschodniej w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym* (Kraków, 2018), 9, 35, 75.

[65] Sebastian Conrad notes that German officials separated migrants from the Habsburg lands by ethnicity (to rule them better), but they often had difficulty determining who was Ruthenian and who Polish. This did not mean, as Conrad notes, that the people involved did not possess some loyalty to one or another ethnic group; they simply manipulated the situation to their advantage; *Globalisierung und Nation im Deutschen Kaiserreich* (Munich, 2006), 161–164.

[66] Olga Linkiewicz, 'Peasant Communities in Interwar Poland's Eastern Borderlands: Polish Historiography and the Local Story', *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 109 (2014), 26.

[67] Ibid., 25.

aware of divisions. Who knows what might have happened had war and brutal
ethnic cleansing not intervened in 1939?

Such questions bring us to Poland's opposite end, the western borderlands,
where local identity indeed solidified and shielded people from assertive nation-
alism. Next to Bosnian Muslims, Upper Silesians have been the largest East
European group to frustrate nationalizers.[68] Upper Silesians were the local Slavic
population – often called *Ślązacy* in Polish and *Wasserpolen* in German – that
lived alongside the German townspeople who were mostly expelled after 1945.
They stretch the word "ethnic" but also require it, because though Slavic they
were not clearly Polish, and had no popular memory of Polish statehood.[69] We
can pose two questions: why Upper Silesians did not become German, and why
they have also largely not become Polish.

The main answer to the former has to do with a factor we saw in the Poland's
eastern provinces: awkwardly imposed state-driven nationalization. After first
practicing tolerance, even permitting education in Polish, in 1863 Prussia switched
to Germanization, and a decade later Chancellor Otto von Bismarck launched
his *Kulturkampf*, casting Silesians' Catholicism as treasonous and supporting an
anti-Polish rhetoric that demeaned local folk traditions. The result was that people
sought shelter in Upper Silesian identity.[70] Yet the Prussian German state's for-
tunes shifted when it provided incentives rather than bigotry, sometimes making
"Germans" by giving Slavic-speaking peasants unheard-of chances for upward
mobility.[71] More frequent was a kind of ethnic opportunism: using whichever
aspects of Slavic or German identity that permitted tangible advantages. Thus,
farmers cultivated Polish nationality when it permitted them to counter margin-
alization, yet because the men were veterans of Prussia's wars, the villages put
out Prussian flags on Sedan Day, and veterans socialized at the *Kriegerverein*.
Whenever the Polish or the German side's nationalism crossed a boundary into
chauvinism, it seemed distasteful.[72] The extremist Polish National Democratic
party rose and declined because Upper Silesians preferred less strident options,
like Social Democracy.[73] Prussian state loyalty or Slavic Catholicism became dear
elements of local sensibility, and those who denounced either put Upper Silesians

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[68] Wapiński, *Polska*, 341.

[69] Józef Chlebowczyk rejected any teleological sense of the development of this group toward
Poland; id., *O prawie do bytu małych i młodych narodów: kwestia narodowa i procesy narodotwórcze
we wschodniej Europie środkowej w dobie kapitalizmu* (Katowice, 1983).

[70] Bjork, *Neither German*, 69.

[71] See the case of East German writer Hans Marchwitza in Chlebowczyk, *O prawie*, 286.

[72] Brendan Karch, *Nation and Loyalty in a German-Polish Borderland: Upper Silesia 1848–1960*
(Cambridge, 2018), 44, 63, 80.

[73] James E. Bjork, 'Monoglot norms, bilingual lives', in id., et al. (eds), *Creating nationality in
Central Europe, 1880–1950: modernity, violence and (be)longing in Upper Silesia* (London – New
York, 2016), 129.

in uncomfortable places. After the region fell to Poland in 1945, authorities failed to draw lessons from Prussia's experiences; instead, they pushed a threatening atheism and disdain for "German" traditions. So where Bismarck had failed with Germanization, the Polish United Workers Party succeeded. By the 1950s Upper Silesians ostentatiously spoke German among themselves and emigrated by tens of thousands to West Germany.

Students of Upper Silesia say its experiences can be generalized, yet broader views suggest the region was an outlier, missing two things that propelled nationalization elsewhere.[74] First was an undisrupted national education, which normally transformed bilingual populations into populations with literacy in one language. Recall that German Prussia's first step was to confuse this narrative by teaching Silesian children Polish. In Galicia, by contrast, tales of national heroes taught in Polish schools for generations shaped imaginations that inspired adult loyalties. Second, Upper Silesians did not share stories of belonging to proto--national kingdoms – unlike Bohemians, or Croatians, or Hungarians.[75] They were not necessarily Germans or Poles: they had the option of becoming either, or of simply remaining *Ślązacy*. Unlike Czechs, Croats, or Hungarians, Upper Silesians could not easily be attached to any national story. Locals sensed symbols of either side as not quite native – for instance, Polish flags on graves – yet they also were free to feel as close to memories of the two nations as they liked. Rather than indifferent, they cared deeply that they not be attached to either nationality.

Violence and Total Ideologies

Perhaps most remarkable is that Upper Silesians did not simply resist nationalization but also did so against the century's extreme ideologies. In other areas governed by Nazism and Stalinism, ultimate nationalism came to mean ultimate destruction of ethnic others, yet in Upper Silesia, the "other" population (seen as *Wasserpolen* by one side, as *Ślązacy* by the other) survived. In other places, however, total regimes subjected "unredeemable" populations to destruction. In Eastern Poland, for instance, everyone was targeted through ethnic cleansings ranging from expulsion to genocide. Nothing in previous history gave any hint of what became commonplace during the war – attacks upon villages by Ukrainian nationalists, who killed every Pole they found, and then revenge killings by Poles, similarly total. Likewise, Jewish communities, though victims of pogroms and boycotts, lived in harmony with their neighbors before the Holocaust.

If one shifts attention to Southeastern Europe before the 1990s, one also reads of shared communal life across ethnic boundaries, of deep friendships and

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[74] Karch, *Nation*, 57.

[75] Upper Silesia was part of Poland, Bohemia, Austria, and Prussia, always a border area.

frequent intermarriages. That well-documented reality of coexistence has clashed with subsequent claims by journalists that interethnic violence grew out of "primordial" hatreds. The origins of the National Indifference school lie precisely here, in its scholars' rejection of misrepresentations of the historical record. In fact, multiethnic populations lived peacefully until nationalist zealots brought discord from without. Our authors bring forth ample evidence, but the spark causing them to collect it goes beyond scholarship: it's an enterprise in solidarity. Rogers Brubaker's *Nationalism Reframed* (1996), detailed the tribulations of the Yugoslav author Slavenka Drakulić, who was made to be defined by nationality in once cosmopolitan Zagreb by forces beyond her control. Once she could be defined by her education, job, ideas, and character: and now only national identity mattered. "I am not a person anymore. I am one of 4.5 million Croats. … I am not in a position to choose any longer".[76]

The point of the NI school has been restoring the choice over identity that nationalists denied to Drakulić and millions more Central Europeans. Brubaker and the historians he inspired launched a battle not so much of words, but of undoing words and then un-imagining the discursive communities that had robbed Drakulić of her freedom. Soon no concept conventionally used to describe collective belonging was left standing. Ethnicity, group, collectivity – as we have seen, all were rejected as tools of analysis because they were considered bounded "things".[77] After chiding Anthony Smith for saying that we live in a "world of nations", Brubaker wrote: "nation is widely, if unevenly available and resonant as a category of social vision and division. It is a world in which nationness may *suddenly*, and powerfully, 'happen.' But none of this implies a world of nations – of substantial, enduring collectivities".[78]

One does not have to reify "nation" to demonstrate the ahistoricity of that statement. Even absent the word nation, for centuries collectivities have perceived – and been perceived – as nations. Historians cannot talk about Europe as Europeans have perceived it over the past millennium without the word nation – in its multiple implications, but with a radical shift in quality after the year 1800. Brubaker admits as much by referring to nations as people commonly understand them: as collectivities such as Ukrainians, Albanians, Turks, Poles, and Armenians.[79]

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[76] Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge, 1996), 20, fn. 17.

[77] They were categories of practice rather than categories of analysis; Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, 'Beyond "Identity"', *Theory and Society*, 29, no. 1 (2000), 1–47. At the same time the authors operate from an ethical plane above simple analysis: following George Orwell, they urge readers not to "surrender" to words.

[78] Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 21.

[79] Ibid., 56, 164.

Brubaker's insight that nations crystallize suddenly aligns with Drakulić's portrayal of forces converging from one moment to the next, and it has been influential, shaping a recent pathbreaking study of genocide in Yugoslavia, Max Bergholz's *Violence as a Generative Force*. Bosnia is especially troubling because it had little history of intercommunal violence, and he claims that the outburst of 1941 was therefore a rise of "sudden nationhood".[80]

Yet if the shift was sudden, it had a history. We learn of a 1875 uprising when mostly Orthodox peasants rebelled against Muslim landholders and Ottoman authorities, and of long-term resentments among Serb tenant farmers percolating to the surface in 1918. The farmers referred to Ottoman rule as "530 years of sad slavery and the immeasurable pain and suffering that we have had to endure". Land seizures and other acts of violence against Muslims marred the early days of the new Yugoslav state. Still, the general picture, as a British traveler noted, was of "union" among people.[81] Still, ethnicity was never absent as a potential divide, especially given that the Muslim hold on land continued after 1918. Was the social reality of Bosnia really peace, or was it an uneasy truce, with Serbs hoping to get land?

Bergholz makes a convincing case that nothing from prehistory gave clues of what was to come: the wanton destruction of villages in April 1941 by Ustaša and NDH units. Numbers of local Croat and Muslim recruits to the cause were initially tiny, less than one percent of the population, with motivations ranging from shared racism to opportunities to settle local disputes. With time, however, thousands were drawn into the vortexes of violence, as vengeful survivors mercilessly annihilated people they may have sat next to at weddings. The brave few who tried to stop the bloodshed invariably failed, courting violence from their "own" side.[82]

Yet contemporary reports tell us the would-be peacekeepers more truly represented mass sentiment than the killers. Catholics and Muslims, wrote one NDH official, "condemned this anarchy, and expressed their disgust with the bloody deeds, which not only deprived their fellow citizens of life, with whom they had lived for decades in good relations, but also deprived them of *their most beautiful memories*".[83] The explanation, not only for what happened in 1941 but also for what transpired afterward, is the opposite of primordial hatreds: it's ferocious, unforgiving alienation manufactured within the space of weeks, not just upon but against a society.

No doubt the change was "sudden", but is the word "nationhood" the right word to describe it? If a sense of nationality had not already existed, how did

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[80] Max Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community* (Ithaca, 2016), 272.

[81] Ibid., 37, 50–51, 55–57.

[82] Ibid., 74, 76–77, 96–97, 136–137, 139.

[83] Ibid., 111.

people know so precisely who the "other" was? The shift was actually to viewing ethnic others as enemies. At some point, as whole families were wiped out, the NDH elite pushed communities beyond a threshold, causing them to see themselves in terms of ethnic "categories of inclusion and exclusion".[84] Yet even this radical change had some relation to older memories, a fact captured in emotions expressed by some Serbs: "You Turks want to take our land. […] You won't be here long, you'll be slaughtered. […] You Turks and Catholics won't forget what you have done. Everything of yours will be burned".[85] Such words are connected to long-standing narratives about imperial rule, of Muslims as descendants of "apostates" having no scruples, willing to trade faith for land, and of Catholics as servants of imperial authority.[86] Yes, the sudden descent of peaceful communities into mass murder was "historically contingent", but were there other kinds of division that could have been exploited in this way?

Like Brubaker, Bergholz uses the metaphor of crystallization to capture the new mass feeling. But more apt is a different geological metaphor: that of sedimentary rock, where one layer adds to another. Genocidal forces applied a fierce hammer blow to a formation grown solid over centuries, sundering it at the seam of ethnicity. But if one well-armed modern state had no problem providing the pressure for violent disruption in 1941, its successor only imperfectly reassembled the strata after 1945. In glimpses of unsettled coexistence from the 1950s and 1960s, Bergholz shows how knowledge of genocide was passed on to the next generation. Everyone in villages across Bosnia knew what everyone else had done during the war, and that provided a context for the 1990s.

At this point it's helpful to reintroduce a factor underrated in NI scholarship as well as in Bergholz's book: extremist ideology. Radicals rose and prospered according to the dynamics not just of any nationalism, but of uncompromising Ustaša *racism*; the generative force in Bosnia was not simple violence but the hatreds stoked by a fascist state.[87] But the Ustaša state did not enable itself. Its leaders were a tiny, unrepresentative coterie of fanatics, sometimes more fluent in Italian than in Croatian, who possessed power thanks to Nazi Germany and the Europe-wide racist revolution that it provoked, finding collaborators almost everywhere amid much contingency. In Bosnia the racist revolution could not have happened – for example, had the Germans recruited less ideologically fanatical collaborators among the peasant politicians they courted after the conquest of Yugoslavia in April 1941, which followed upon the highly contingent coup in Belgrade the previous month.

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[84] Ibid., 95.

[85] These were recorded by NDH informers; ibid., 111.

[86] On such narratives as they were expressed in the nineteenth century, see Edin Hajdarpasić, *Whose Bosnia: Nationalism and Political Imagination in the Balkans* (Ithaca, 2015), 42ff.

[87] Bergholz, *Violence*, 96.

But once Germany placed Ante Pavelić and his killers in power, contingency gave way to system. Beyond Bosnia, genocide raged in Poland, Ukraine, Belorussia, and parts of Romania in 1944; across hundreds of miles, armed bands under German imperial prodding disrupted cohesive multicultural communities. Obviously these murderers did not reflect broadly shared "ancient hatreds".[88] Thus Bergholz, in refuting stereotypes held by influential nonscholars, does not quite touch the larger explanation. There were contingent events in 1941, but there was also a pattern of genocide, and its origins lay in a force that has long tormented eastern Europe: not so much native nationalism as foreign imperialism – now German, now Russian. Imperialism is a word and a problem largely absent in NI-inspired literature, but it's in tune with the basic NI intuition: that violence to multiethnic areas comes from outside.

We see the disruptive role of empires from the fifteenth century onward in Southeast Europe, with the initial Ottoman conquests. The Ottoman regime divided co-ethnics by religion, favoring the in-group with land ownership and positions – a structural injustice that fueled regular uprisings extending into the nineteenth century, causing Ottoman control to recede and opening room for Russian-Austrian imperial rivalry. The Austrian occupation of Bosnia in 1878 commenced with great violence against Muslims and Serbs, but created new imperial favorites – Catholics – while not solving ancient land problems. World War I was an Austrian imperial venture to secure lands further east, one that heightened the victimization of Serbs; within a generation came the Nazi empire, with its racial revolution and its willing accomplices: Polish, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Romanian, Slovak, Croatian, etc. Anthony Oberschall has remarked upon the cycles of violence plaguing Bosnia over many generations, creating "normal" and "crisis" frames in people's minds: those frequent catastrophes coincided with the ebb and flow of imperial intervention.[89]

The wars of the 1990s are indelibly associated with nationalism, a view that makes sense when one surveys Slavenka Drakulić's predicament in Zagreb – yet another case where a would-be nation-state unleashed violence. But a broader look reveals the imperial context. The withdrawal of Soviet reach allowed new forces to rise, the most aggressive being "greater Serb", a would-be imperial behemoth, out to create a mega–South Slavic state out of Yugoslavia's remains. The medieval Serbia that Slobodan Milosević evoked in mass rallies was a *tsarstvo*, empire. Pieter Judson and others have noted that there is no absolute distinction between nation-state and empire; nation-states, especially those governed by

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[88] Bergholz might have integrated the work of Christopher Browning, who suggests one can find avid killers in any population.

[89] Anthony Oberschall, 'The Manipulation of Ethnicity: From Ethnic Cooperation to Violence and War in Yugoslavia', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 23, no. 6 (2000), 982–1001.

illiberal forces, aggrandize themselves by seizing foreign territories, proximate or distant. Either nationalism is harnessed by a rules-based liberal order or it becomes imperialism or fascism – or both.

Conclusion

What changed in Central Europeans' sense of the nation from the early years of the nineteenth century was *care*, a feature that prominent theories underrate; indeed, the emotion-driven concern about "justice for the people" that drove national movements between the Rhine and Russia is absent from the work of Anderson, Gellner, and Hobsbawm. But thanks to digitized texts, we can easily summon from obscurity passionate worries that took hold of people two centuries ago, with Europe at the cusp of modern nationalism and visions of previously unimaginable futures suddenly imposing themselves upon ideas about the past. For German patriots, the Holy Roman Empire became not just a political structure that had withered but also a once-vital actor that had committed errors that could not be repeated in the *Reich* they would re-create. For the first time in the region's history, history was put at the service of the future.

Though the self-appointed patriots claimed to care about a nation that had existed from time immemorial, what they were living and dying for was in fact new. How exactly to define the new nation has defied social scientists: was it an inescapable function of modernity, an imagined community, or a daily plebiscite? Was it united by language, by history, by common statehood, by all or none of these? If one gets inside people's experience between the Rhine and Russian lands, a simple answer suggests itself: the nation was a *story*, one that grew out of the remnants of the past and the desires of the present, and patriots along with burgeoning legions of co-nationals were actors on its stage. Around 1800, "nation" went from a word that a few had used for divergent purposes to something virtually everyone took for granted and took part in, an existential frame commanding ultimate loyalties.

As evidence for this proposition, we have accounts from post-Napoleonic Europe like Kohl's, where Czechs walk through portrait galleries feeling like witnesses to their own collective story, one involving not just Bohemian strangers whom they would never know but also people long dead, famous and forgotten Czech-speakers from the seventeenth century and earlier – as well as generations to come.[90] The modern nation recalls Edmund Burke's depiction of society as a partnership of the dead, the living, and those yet to be born; in 1813 Wilhelm von Humboldt pronounced its German version to be a "commonality of habits, language, and

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[90] Anderson wrote that the nation is "*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members", id., *Imagined Communities*, 6.

literature, the memory of rights and freedoms enjoyed as a community, of fame attained and *dangers overcome*; remembrance of an intimate union, formed by fathers but alive only in the longing of grandchildren".[91]

No such understanding had existed in the 1780s, yet now popular media and education carried it to the edges of society. Period schoolbooks testify to Germany's experience. Before 1800, histories of Germany and Europe featured lifeless lists of events and peoples from centuries past, informing pupils (among many other things) that French troops had devastated the Palatinate in the late 1600s, reducing Heidelberg to ruins, but leaving this a dry fact. From the 1820s, Germany's historians and their allies in literature, music, and the visual arts were portraying this act as an outrage, the people maimed and killed as "we", and the evil deeds as things that happened to "us".[92] This conviction then made its way into popular media, summoning contemporaries to "feel" the injustice suffered by earlier generations of people "just like" them.

Theorists have emphasized the role of states in creating nations, but no central authority spread this new German (let alone Czech!) spirit; if it constituted the teaching of any nation-state, it was one the patriots wanted to make. Their basic demand was simple justice and it spread quickly, meeting Germans, who had endured decades of French occupation, where they lived, across classes. Uniting past with present was a conviction that rule by a foreigner was evil, and that justice could be attained only if the people – the nation – governed its own affairs. Doctrines about popular sovereignty had crossed the Rhine into Central Europe along with now-despised occupation forces, yet, as in all translations, they attained a new quality: the modern nationhood solidifying up to the borders of Russia and Turkey was more about ethnicity than the variant across the Rhine, which was more focused on politics and civic rights.

Please note: there is nothing essentially ethnic about Central European nationhood. The reason for the difference in tendencies of nationhood west and east of the Rhine had to do with the local circumstances of the revolutionary transfer of legitimacy from crowns to people – or, to put it in the dramatic phraseology of the period, to a new era of human freedom. In France, the constitutive phase of revolution happened rapidly. At issue was who would govern, people or king; patriots did not need to spend their lives fighting foes who denied French culture and language, and no one had to die to put the basic idea of political France on the map. When lives were lost it was over differences about whether and how the French would gain their right of self-governance.

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[91] Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1800–1866* (Munich, 1985), 305.

[92] For the earlier version, see Christian Daniel Beck, *Entwurf der allgemeinen Welt-und Völkergeschichte* (Leipzig, 1790), 123; Ernst Bornschein, *Geschichte unseres deutschen Vaterlandes*, vol. 3 (Lobenstein, 1803), 160–161. The new spirit is in Friedrich Kohlrausch, *Die deutsche Geschichte für Schulen bearbeitet*, 10th edn (Elberfeld, 1833), 487–502.

In Central Europe's revolutions for popular sovereignty, by contrast, patriots struggled for basic self-definition, challenging world opinion with a radical claim: "we the people" – Czechs, Germans, and Slovenes – *exist*. That is why Central Europeans seem obsessed with ethnicity: without arguments about their unique cultures, essential to humanity, they and their causes for freedom and self-government simply vanished. Generations were consumed with simply putting Germany, Serbia, Czechia, or Slovenia on the map *as ideas*, a process accompanied by uncertainty and fear.[93] By contrast, only reactionaries doubted the right of inhabitants of the French, Spanish, or English kingdoms to build nation-states.

Because no one denied the existence of France, French patriots said they were simply claiming the rights to self-government that all humans possessed; their nationalism thus appeared universal. In Central Europe, by contrast, before such rights could be asserted, patriots had to claim they wanted what all nations should possess: secure existence. But beyond this distinction, nationhood on each side of the Rhine is civic and ethnic – universal and particular – in differing mixtures. In and beyond Europe, liberal nation-states guarantee civic rights but also insist upon linguistic-cultural integration, each tendency strengthening precisely to the degree it is denied.

In our day there are those who argue for an ethnic Ukraine, but people in Ukraine are fighting and dying in a war against tyranny. Ukraine's national struggle is thus about political and civic rights with language or history being secondary. What the future holds is uncertain, but it's interesting that as in the French or American revolutions, the Ukrainians' view of the nation – its story – is more focused on the present and future than the past, perhaps a hallmark of nationalism that is more political and civic. As everywhere else in Europe, it's the type of national revolution Ukrainians are prosecuting that shapes their nationhood.

<p style="text-align:center">⋆ ⋆ ⋆</p>

Unlike Milan Kundera's famous definition of Central Europe, the foregoing has insisted on Germany being part: the region between France and Russia constitutes historic Central Europe, a place whose character derives from shared but conflicting quests for popular sovereignty over many generations. The inextricable linking of nationalism and democracy explains why critics of nationalism in our day are attracted to Metternich. If his policies of crushing free thought and incarcerating nationalists had continued, Central Europe might supposedly have

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[93] *The New York Times* ('The Situation of Germany', 4) reported on 1 July 1866: "There is, in political geography, no Germany to speak of". Germany was kingdoms and duchies, and a "natural undercurrent tending to a national feeling and toward a union of the Germans". Germany was thus sentiment and history, far from a tangible reality: "The war now begun seems the harbinger of a united Germany in some form or others, the distinctive features of which they [the people] cannot yet foresee". Some feared that if Germany were absorbed into Prussia, "there would be a Prussian instead of a German nationality consolidated in Central Europe".

avoided nationalism altogether. Wolfram Siemann writes that "Metternich was ahead of his time when he declared nationality as dangerous and egregious as a building block and characteristic of a state".[94] Indeed, much in the spirit of our time's voluntarist theoreticians, Metternich said that nationalism was "just words".[95] But if one idealizes Austria's chief minister, one also has to see the complete man: Metternich abhorred nationalism because it arose in movements demanding political rights, above all the Polish one. Thus, those who imagine Europe not becoming national have to imagine 1848 not happening, Metternich remaining in power, and Europeans stalled at the threshold to mass politics.

An alternative is envisioning 1848 as a moment in a living sequence, one of many historical frames in motion, all interconnected, forming a continuous narrative – rather than stopping the reel and focusing on still images, one by one. No month in 1848 can speak for itself, as indeed the story of 1848 cannot be limited to a calendar year; it had consequences and precursors. For the time being, a comparative glance over the *longue durée* in Central Europe suggests four lessons that may help our students grasp the region's susceptibility to interethnic violence.

The first responds to why stories drawn from the national past have drawn Central Europeans into nationalism's vortexes with such force. The answer has to do with how the stories in Central Europe are told. When people in France and Russia reflect upon bygone ages, the mode is tragic: thoughts turn to annihilated elites and devastated cities, children dragged off as tribute, co-nationals tortured by neighbors, decades of foreign occupation numbering into centuries. Outsiders often comment wryly upon Serbs' penchant to commemorate a national defeat, but this oddity is in fact a rule: beyond Kosovo Polje there is the Czech defeat at White Mountain, Germany's hecatomb in the Palatinate, Kościuszko's failed rebellion, Hungarian disaster at Mohacs. Tragedy is not the governing mode among West European nations or in Russia – let alone in the United States – where imperial pasts are emplotted as epics, involving glorious destiny, stories of making rather than being on the receiving end of history.

Please note the word "central": the place where tragic stories of the nation predominate includes areas considered "western" as well as "eastern"; its boundaries are fluid, migrating in space according to how human communities have experienced imperial exploitation. In terms of deep experience, the nationalism of "western" imperial Britain and France has much in common with that of "eastern" imperial Russia, while Ireland, a place on Europe's western edges, "tragically" exploited by Britain over many centuries, shares basic national plotlines with

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[94] Siemann follows Wolfgang Reinhard in bidding us to say goodbye to the "fiction" of the national state; Wolfram Siemann, *Metternich*: *Strategist and Visionary* (Cambridge–London, 2019), 866–867.

[95] Metternich, *Nachgelassene Papiere*, ed. Richard Metternich-Winneburg, vol. 7 (Vienna, 1880–1884), 207.

Poland or Bohemia. Central Europe cannot be located precisely on any physical map at any point in time, but many Central Europeans, in Galway as much as in Arad, are sure that it exists.[96]

In Central Europe tragedy generated not despair but fanatic activism, romantic dramas of self-sacrifice and heroism. The script's centrifugal power was such that the only real escape was emigration. It drew strength from shame, from fear of fingers pointed in one's direction and of impossible questions.[97] It's one thing to be accused of "not caring" about things national. One might respond: who are you to tell me how to think of my identity, leave me in peace. It's another thing to be called a traitor to the community in which one lives, and to endure questions like: don't you care about people speaking *our* language being burned alive, about having *our* land despoiled, and about having no state to protect *us*? Fichte challenged his students in a Berlin lecture hall in 1808, under the shadow of French hegemony: do you want to go down as the last generation of an unremarkable people [*Geschlecht*], or will you begin a new time, from which future generations will date their salvation? Amidst the questions without answers, the particular soon became universal: out of "are you not German?" evolved "are you a proper human being?" While browbeating his students, Fichte also told them: the world is watching you, and all Germans who ever lived are asking from the grave: will you save our honor?

That leads to point two: in order to advance, national movements promised to leave tragedy behind; but for that to happen, they needed an idea that began being pronounced among German liberals in 1848: that of "traitor" – not just the "other" through whom to define the nation, but a scapegoat to provide an active mission within a revolutionary morality. Villains from within and without had betrayed the "virtuous" people, making egotism a virtue and pity a superficial sensation that would never generate solidarity. In 1848, the admiration that German liberals had felt for Poles or Italians quickly gave way to "realism"; Poland's tragedy must continue for Germany to move forward.

But, third, it's important to recall that ideas of treason emerged most strongly at first on the left, and that the word traitor, *Volksverräter*, reflected radical democratic sentiment emanating from crowds decrying the compromises on the national question by the Frankfurt Assembly in the fall of 1848. Yet *Volksverräter* was also a new word, reflecting a disappointment unimaginable in March 1848, which one encounters across Central Europe by the summer. The more the rights

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[96] For my own effort to relate Ireland to Central Europe, please see my contribution to H-Diplo Roundtable XXII-47 at https://issforum.org/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XXII-47.pdf (accessed 12 Nov. 2025).

[97] The "story form" one chooses, writes Hayden White, "imports particular kinds of valorization, most especially of an emotive or affectual kind", with reception shifting according to emplotment: "it matters whether a given set of events is presented in a voice that is ironic, or sentimental or reverent"; id., *The Practical Past* (Evanston, IL, 2014), 19–20.

to self-government of Central Europeans stalled, the more voices of fear and exclusion rose, and politics radicalized.

The word radicalization pervades studies of the late nineteenth century, when extremists seemed to arise automatically with "mass politics"; but historians have yet to plumb the process's dynamics. Why, to recall Jeremy King's depictions of Bohemian politics after 1867, were voters of the fifth curia – the lower middle class five-florin men who flooded Habsburg politics – easily available for nationalist agitation? Were the purveyors of fear creating or responding to sentiments among new voters for radical nationalist arguments? Why, ultimately, did proto-fascist extremism sprout up more forcefully in Bohemia or Poznań region than in Burgundy or Tuscany?

A basic answer has to do with a liberal order that could not honor the central promise of 1848 – popular sovereignty, the power of the *Volk*.[98] Initially, nationalism had been a gospel of liberation. Traditional authorities vacated spaces that were now teeming with opportunities for self-realization; for Czechs, nationalism was the place where self-enrichment and self-realization seemed to coincide. Yet a gloom began setting in with nationality battles and pogroms in Bohemia or Hungary in 1848. By the 1870s, self-governing nations of Czechs, Poles, or Ukrainians seemed fantasies, while the new German, Italian, or Serb nation-states were evidently incomplete, and therefore became "irredentist". And so the once liberating gospel of national self-government gave way to ideologies of anguish and desperation.[99]

This connects to a final, ironic point. It was because Central Europeans were so gloriously unconcerned about mixing ethnicity in the premodern period – with single cities, like David Frick's Vilnius, sheltering in their walls a dozen different groups – that the region proved poorly suited to the transition to popular representation in the mid-nineteenth century. In Poland, Hungary, and Bohemia, kings had once attracted German and Jewish settlers, and centuries before that, elements of Slavic and other tribes had settled with no regard to dialect or religion. Modern historians don't need to become medievalists, but they cannot explain what happened in Bohemia or Bosnia in the half-century after 1880 without attention to the distant ages when Central Europe became a patchwork of ethnicity. If "methodological nationalism" makes us sensitive to the powers of deep legacies, let us embrace it.

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[98] Peter Pulzer credits the rise in antisemitism in Central Europe not so much to economic decline (and search for scapegoats) as to the rise of radical nationalist movements, above all among pan-Germanists, the alienated children and grandchildren of 1848, aggrieved by the "solution" of the German question in 1871; id., *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), xx–xxi. But why nationalism itself generated such support among the "lower classes" is not clear.

[99] Brian Porter-Szucs has provided the most complete description of that process for Poland's young liberals; see *When Nationalism Began to Hate* (Oxford, 2000).

It's also true that a glance cast backward cannot but generate a sense of loss for a world of complexity, a theme emphasized by István Deák, the doyen of NI scholars. Still, we know something is amiss when we pin our retrospective hopes upon princes and potentates that liberals of earlier times detested. Arguably, our task is not to sift the past for episodes that may suit our present preferences. As Sheila Fitzpatrick cautioned in a different controversy: "history has not consulted us, and we really have to deal with what seems to have happened and how it fits together".[100] Historians don't have the license to undo words from the past: instead, we are called upon to explore their often mysterious powers.

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[100] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution 1917–1932* (New York, 1984), 9.

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