

Being a Historian of Central Europe: The Survey of HSCE

The main goal of *Historical Studies on Central Europe* is to provide an interdisciplinary and international platform for disseminating new findings on Central Europe and enhancing the dialog on it. In this spirit, the editors have decided to launch a series asking prominent scholars of the region: their personal motivations for choosing Central Europe as their field; their view on central questions of methodology, trends, and definition, as well as their opinion on the status of the field.

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A response from Professor Miroslav Hroch

HSCE: *The historian's interests may have very different origins: they may be inspired by the scholar's family background, personal experiences or even certain dilemmas concerning their own era which they seek to comprehend through studying the past. What is your motivation for studying Central Europe?*

Maybe I have to start my answer with a statement: I never considered myself a specialist on the history of Central Europe. This does not mean that I ever questioned the existence of a European macro-region called Central Europe. Nevertheless, I have focused my academic work on problems which overstep the bounds of Central Europe. In my younger years, my main interest was the uneven development in Early Modern Eastern and Western Europe and the role of Baltic trade in this process. In my later years, it was nation formation, a process that took place everywhere

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in Europe. For this reason, I have to modify your question and ask what my motivation was for studying European history. Naturally, there was one precondition to all these reflections: knowledge of languages.

This motivation was multiple and changed with time. As a student, I found it exciting to read (and write essays) about distant countries and events. It was some kind of ‘exotic’ experience to me at a time when our mobility was extremely limited. Since we were not allowed to cross the border, all that was behind this border was attractive, including its history. For example, my motivation to write my MA paper on Wallenstein’s politics on the Baltics in 1628–30 was some kind of romantic enthusiasm to write about ships, trade, and harbours, as I was born and bred in a country with no access to the sea. Another, less irrational drive resulted from my interest in defining the place of my nation in the context of other European countries. Do we belong to the East or the West? Asking this question, I was concerned about the different levels of economic prosperity and political culture. Another motivation was based on my interest in the Czech national movement. Was it a unique event? It was not. Then we have to ask, ‘Where are we in comparison with other small European nations?’

Growing older, a methodological aspect modified my interest in European history. Trying to minimize ‘narrative’ elements in my work, I understood the past as a structure, not as a sample of singular events. I focused my historical research on processes, on the history of changes and of transformations, trying to explain and conceptualize them. To fulfil this task, we cannot be limited by national borders or by the history of our own nation. In the 1960s, this was my point of departure for developing comparative history. By the way, comparative history in my understanding allows to adopt some principles and procedures that are demanded by ‘transnational history’ or *l’histoire croisée* today. Naturally, the easiest and most promising way is to apply this concept of ‘transnationality’ to countries in your neighborhood, i.e., on Central Europe, but this is not the only choice.

HSCE: Perhaps it is no exaggeration to state that the notion of ‘Central Europe’ is one of the most disputed terms in historiography. To recall but only a few from the diverse definitions: in the Anglo-Saxon milieu, they often refer to Germany as Central Europe, while others mean the Danubian region of the Habsburg Empire; in the meantime, there are still other definitions that integrate the Baltic states into the notion. Some consider that the German notion of ‘Mitteleuropa’ should not be used as it is ideologically charged, implying a German hegemony. Certain thinkers believe that Central Europe is simply undefinable. Moreover, inspired by cultural studies, some scholars aim to break with the traditional geographical approaches and conceive Central Europe as a space of communication. Which of these definitions do you agree with? Have you created a new definition for Central Europe which is more adequate to your own research?

You are right, the geographical localization of 'Central Europe' is extremely differentiated. To your examples, I would like to add the concept of Central Europe, where Poland is underrepresented, the Baltic countries are ignored, but Romania is included. There are, however, two cardinal mistakes or misunderstandings in most of these debates. First, they are timeless, they ignore the factor of time, as if the phenomenon 'Central Europe' always existed in the same territory, starting in the Middle Ages and lasting to our time. This was not the case. Second, ideas (visions) and geographical space are not always distinguished, or worse, contemporary ideological aims are consciously mixed with historical data.

In my earlier years, I used 'Central Europe' as a neutral 'technical' term, as a name given to the territory between the east and the west of Europe, and between the Baltic Sea and the Alps. Studying the crisis of the seventeenth century, I found important differences in the economic development and social life between the north and the south of Central Europe. The dividing line was the River Main in the west, then the mountains in the north of Bohemia and Moravia, and the Carpathians in the east. Without a doubt, under conditions of the seventeenth century, I regarded the Holy Roman Empire as a western part of Central Europe.

Thirty years ago, I had to deal with the fashionable confessions of faith in Central Europe, which was initiated by Milan Kundera in 1980s. I was not convinced that this ideological concept of our region could become a helpful instrument of scientific research of the past. I redefined Central Europe, asking if we could construct a macro-region as an actually existing territory, whose inhabitants shared the same or a similar destiny during the Early Modern time, i.e., political and cultural experiences, dangers, transformations, which we do not find in the history of other European macro-regions, such as Western, Eastern, Northern Europe, Southeastern Europe, and the Mediterranean. And vice versa: they created some kind of '*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*' using a term borrowed from Otto Bauer.

I tried to define the borders of this macro-region during the Early Modern period. In the North and South, there was no other choice than the Baltic coast and the Alps, while in the West and East, it was not easy, since some regions were always transitional. On the Western border, Rhineland and Switzerland were transitional regions. The distinct difference with Western Europe was the absence of colonial expansion. Eastern Europe is in my mind defined by Orthodoxy, but there were transitional territories, like the Orthodox part of the former Grand-Duchy of Lithuania, i.e., the core of present-day Belarus and Western Ukraine, originally the eastern part of the Polish Rzeczpospolita. In my construct, Transylvania represented a transient territory in a double sense: both towards Eastern and to Southeastern Europe.

This territorial demarcation makes sense only if we define concrete ties and interactions that forged this territory into a community of a shared destiny

(a common fate). I have to be very brief, giving you only some indications or allusions. We could start from far back in the past: this territory was almost completely at the opposite (northern) side of *Limes Romanus* and adopted Latin Christianity only some centuries after the decline of the Roman Empire. It received also later innovations, like urbanization and colonization from the West. Nevertheless, the decisive steps towards Central Europe started around 1500 with two great events: the European overseas expansion, where Central Europe was absent, and secondly, the Reformation, which in contrast was born in Central Europe and expanded towards the West, provoking wars of religion. After some decades, wars ended everywhere in Europe, except Central Europe, by the victory of one side. Scandinavian countries became Protestant, France Catholic, England Protestant, etc. In Central Europe, both camps survived as conflicting parties, culminating in the Thirty Years' War, but later ended in some kind of religious 'cohabitation' in most countries. This war, however, was in my opinion a strong collective experience for Central Europe, not only because it required an extremely high level of suffering, but also as an object of collective memory during the following two or more centuries. There was a similar case with the 'Turkish thread': everywhere in Central Europe, people were involved in wars against the Ottoman expansion—directly in battlefields or indirectly through the 'Turkish tax'.

A significant feature of state development in Central Europe is its remarkable discontinuity. None of the present states in our macro-region have evolved in continuity out of the Middle Ages into a modern nation state like France, Denmark, Spain, or England. Some medieval states in our macro-region were engulfed by a larger political unit during the Early Modern period (Bohemia, Lithuania, and Hungary). Combining this discontinuity with the disintegration of the Holy Roman Empire and with ethnic diversity, Central Europe developed into a region with exceptionally complex overlapping identities. Regional patriotism overlapped with dynastic state patriotism and with ethnic identity.

This complicated crisis of identities resulted in a search for new identities i.e., in nation formation. This process had three specificities in Central Europe. Firstly, it proceeded as a national movement; second, these national movements started earlier than in other parts of Europe; third, linguistic and cultural arguments were prioritized and acknowledged as political ones (hence the label of 'ethnonationalism'). Nevertheless, we cannot form an ideal type of 'Central European' nation formation. Simplifying, we have to distinguish two types and one transitional case. There are movements with a strong focus on political goals (German, Polish, and Magyar), and movements without any elements of statehood and without a political program (Slovaks and Slovenes), and the Czechs constitute a transitional case. Most of these national movements defined themselves in opposition to the German

cultural dominance and, at the same time, they were to varying degrees influenced by German culture. Sooner or later, the German cultural dominance was in some cases accompanied by the struggle for political dominance.

In connection with ethnicities, we must not forget that after having been granted equal rights as citizens, the Jewish community's contribution to cultural and scientific advancement in Central Europe was more marked than in any other European macro-region.

Trying to identify the Central European specificity during the process of modernization, we find a significant asymmetry between the highly developed education and the modest development of industrialization. Starting in the second half of the eighteenth century, attendance in elementary schools was made obligatory; consequently, a significant majority of the population in Central Europe (except for parts of the Polish and Hungarian territories) acquired literacy by the mid-nineteenth century. With the exception of Scandinavia, this is unparalleled in Europe.

My concept of Central Europe is limited in time. As I have said before, it became a distinct territory around 1500 and started to fall apart after some 350 years. The first step was the successful movement for the German unification under Prussian hegemony. After having defeated the Austrian Empire in 1866, Prussia could unify Germany. Consequently, Central Europe was divided into two parts: the German 'Second Empire' and the territory between the eastern German border and Orthodoxy. This territory was increasingly becoming a German sphere of interests. This division changed through World War I only in that the former eastern part of Central Europe consisted of seven or eight nation states, and that the German hegemony over this territory was replaced by the dominance of the two competing great powers—Great Britain and France. Already before World War II, German scholars started to use '*Ostmitteleuropa*' (East Central Europe), maybe as an allusion to recovering the German influence. Paradoxically, this space between the eastern German border and the western Soviet border survived as a *sui generis* macro-region as the territory behind the 'Iron Curtain' and, at long last, with the V4 as an eastern part of the EU.

Nevertheless, the notion of Central Europe has survived. Since I do not think that it is a relevant methodological instrument, I was not interested in its different definitions over the last decades. For this reason, I cannot answer the concluding part of your question. Only one more remark. It seems to me that in recent discussions the term concerns above all the 'idea' of Central Europe as a value, i.e., it has declined to the level of a mere ideology. I do not mean that Central Europe is a value. There is no specific Central European citizen, no specific Central European nation-forming process. If I were to use this concept, then only as a research tool of historical processes, not as a political program. It has its legitimacy as a chapter in the history of ideas and ideologies.

HSCE: *As every field of history, Central Europe has its influential scholars whose thoughts and approaches have inspired researchers or even a whole generation. Who are the scholars that you consider as your masters? Whose oeuvre and approach has influenced your work?*

This is a key question for my generation. We started our studies at university only a few years after the communist purges. Compared with the traditional curriculum, we were 'self-taught persons'. The teaching staff consisted mostly of young people, party members, who replaced the 'bourgeois' professors of interwar Czechoslovakia. They were interested in contemporary history and trying to misuse history for political indoctrination. Nevertheless, some of the pre-war historians stayed. One of them was Josef Polišíenský, an excellent scholar in the European history of the seventeenth century. He was my master during my studies, I attended his seminars, and wrote an MA paper in his seminar. After having finished my studies, I was his assistant for three years. He was an excellent scholar in the traditional 'narrative' sense and he managed to maintain contact with Western historians—if not personally, then following their work. As his assistant, I could benefit from his knowledge and read, among others, recent works of the Annales School or of British Marxists. Among them, I was strongly impressed by the early works of Eric Hobsbawm (*The Age of Revolution*). Another important influence came from personal contact (and reading) with a group of Polish colleagues of my age, who belonged to the 'school' of Marian Malowist, especially Antoni Maczak. In addition, I was inspired by the work of Witold Kula. This all concerns my younger years up to 1964, when I was interested in economic history and wrote a PhD on Baltic trade in the seventeenth century. Then, 'rekindling' my interest in nation formation, I was really a 'self-taught scholar', since there was nobody in Prague that I could talk to about my problems, concerning both methodology (comparative method) and the issues of concrete national movements. Concerning methods, almost nothing had been published before the 1960s. The most important influence to me were K. W. Deutsch, Eugen Lemberg, and Otto Bauer. Concerning national movements, I was in correspondence and in personal contact with some colleagues in Norway, Finland, Estonia, and Belgium. But, in this case, they were neither my masters, nor my influences. However, it is important that I took a negative stand to Hans Kohn's concept of 'nationalism' that was dominant at the time.

HSCE: *The researcher of Central Europe has to face numerous difficulties which are not present in the case of other subjects—the most evident being the multi-lingual makeup of the region. For you, what has constituted the greatest difficulty in your research on Central Europe?*

You are right, you have to know more than one foreign language if you intend to do research into Central Europe, even if we do not take into account the Baltic nations.

This was, by the way, always irritating for me, these Americans, who came to Prague and regarded themselves as qualified for studying Central Europe, being familiar only with their own and one Central European language (in most cases, German!). I always said to my Czech students that it is enough for a historian to be able to read in a foreign language, that they do not need an active knowledge. By the way, also for the study of Western Europe and the Balkans, you need to be familiar with (i.e., read in) more than two languages. As I said in my first answer, I am not an expert on the history of Central Europe, and I could not be, since I know only German and Polish, ignorant of Magyar and Romanian.

HSCE: What do you think of the current state of research on Central Europe's history? In your view, how does research into Central Europe fit into the major trends of European historiography? What do you consider the most debated questions? What do you think the most pressing issues are in the field? Where do you detect deficiencies?

Unfortunately, I cannot give a sufficient answer to these questions—because, as I am repeating, this is not—and never was—my field of research. I can only give some impressions and recommendations. The first, maybe erroneous, impression is that there are very few books published on the history of Central Europe (in Czech only one). Perhaps such works are more frequent by Western authors. Second, in those books, I know, no one presents a comparative history, but merely narratives of singular national histories. Third, there are some authors who write about Central Europe as an idea, as a concept, but in my eyes, this is not history in the proper sense of the word, but something different, something like the history of ideas or ideologies. Fourth, if we accept my above delineated 'definition' of Central Europe, then research on the history of this macro-region suffers from the ignorance of its temporality, i.e., neglecting the changing borders in this region over the centuries.

Maybe the fluid borders of this macro-region and, above all, the fact that it does not exist today, is the main reason why it is so difficult to write a genuinely synthetic or comparative history of Central Europe.

