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CENTRAL EUROPE – THE STEPCCHILD OF THE WEST?

A distinguished British historian, Hugh Seton-Watson (the son of one of the makers of the post-First World War “New Europe”), published a little volume in 1975 on Central Europe, calling it “the sick heart”¹ 35 years later an American scholar, Timothy Snyder wrote a much heavier book on the history of “Bloodlands,” the larger region². Anne Applebaum, who is closely connected to Poland, summarized the latter as „a brave and original history of mass killing in the twentieth century”³, and a reviewer in The New York Times “the Devil’s Playground”⁴. Is that true, is Central Europe the scene of endless internal and external conflicts, a permanent war zone?

The present essay first wants to address a perennial question: whether Central Europe, in a larger sense the region that lies between Germany and Russia, and between the Baltic and the Aegean Sea, is a distinct historical and political region? Is it a sub-region of the West? If yes, is it a bridge between East and West or a battleground? And what is perhaps more significant, is the notion justified that Central Europe has always been neglected, sacrificed by Western Europe (and by America) to the ambitions of the neighbouring Great Powers, first to the Ottoman and more recently to the Russian/Soviet Empire?

Today Central Europe contains twenty-one independent, sovereign states, with a population of 200 million. It has distinct features, different from Eastern Europe (basically Russia) and also from Western Europe, but in my view it is culturally, mentally, even economically basically part of the West, the *Occidens*, torn off only by the Sultans, the Czars, later by Lenin and Stalin. Central Europe has a long, turbulent history, its countries were often victims (and sometimes makers) of wars of conquest. People in America and in Western Europe know practically nothing about the medieval and early modern history of this region, and at best are aware only that following the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the Czarist Empire the small, quarrelling states of Central Europe became easy preys first of Nazi Germany and then of Soviet Russia.

There are many common themes in the history of the smaller nations in the middle of Europe. The first was the adoption of Christianity at the end of the first Millennium. With the Great Schism of 1054 the Church split into two, Catholic and Orthodox versions, reflected also in a territorial division. After a promising start “ill fate” took over Central Europe: long defensive wars against the Mongols and Tartars, then against the Russians and/or the Ottomans, ending in being absorbed by those empires for centuries. Until recently agriculture was the main occupation of the people, a sort of feudalism existed until the 19th century, and the large peasantry survived until the mid-20th century. Central Europe became the scene of bloody battles in the First, and even bloodier campaigns in the Second World War. The first part of the 20th century saw several substantial redrawing of the state borders. Starting in 1945 communism was gradually imposed upon the whole region, with the exception of Austria and Greece. The strong intellectual traditions are also a feature of these lands: writers and poets led the national revivals; education spread it among the masses. Before the Holocaust the number of Jews in Central and Eastern Europe ran into many millions; they contributed very much to business, the professions and the arts. Most of the survivors emigrated, increasing the loss. It was also a loss that poverty induced so many people to emigrate, mostly to the U.S. and Canada. But those people established and still maintain a special link with the place of their or their ancestors’ homeland.

Central Europe showed a mixture of the two major political traditions in Europe, authoritarian and pluralistic. In the East political, social, economic and even cultural functions were mostly (albeit not always) performed by the state. Society and even the Church was expected to be obedient and to serve the common cause, the greatness of the Monarch and of the State (*gosudarstvo*), to carry out necessary changes from above. In Central Europe (as opposed to Russian Eastern Europe) elements of pluralism, of a representative tradition, were always to be found: there were elected Diets, towns and ethnic groups with privileges and elected leadership, and the nobility had the right to resist the Sovereign (mainly in Poland and Hungary). This region also abounds in fortresses, castles and churches in Roman and Gothic style, it also had a Renaissance – all largely absent in Russia. The Reformation spread as far as

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Poland and Hungary; it had a democratizing influence. The eastern border zone of Central Europe is the sole home of the Greek Catholic Church.

Probably the most interesting feature of “the lands between”⁵ is the richness and variety of languages and ethnic groups, it is rightly called an ethnic mosaic. Here nations and States do not coincide. Why? Migrations, conquests by Empires and colonisations made the population very mixed. The break-up of the Habsburg, Ottoman and Russian Empires and the border changes of 1919/20 created large – usually mistreated – national minorities. Although the “radical” solutions in the 1940s (border changes, then large-scale expulsions) reduced their number, but the 1991 break-up of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia created even more such minorities. Rapid industrialization and dictatorial regimes resulted in assimilation, “creeping ethnic cleansing”, but the minorities have not disappeared. Unlike in the U.S. and in the case of the mainly Muslim immigrants in Western Europe, here most minorities are old established, did not immigrate, did not cross the borders, but the borders crossed over them. Their aim is not assimilation but the preservation of their identity. Many have a “mother country” or “kin state” on the other side of the border. So whatever the claims are, or what some constitutions declare, the countries of Central Europe are all multi-national.

Independence and the misery of the small nations⁶

„There is not one of the peoples or provinces that constituted the Empire of the Habsburgs to whom gaining their independence has not brought the tortures which ancient poets and theologians had reserved for the damned.” (Winston Churchill: *The Gathering Storm*)⁷.

The idea that Central Europe was always abandoned by the West was first supported but soon disproved when the Ottoman Empire destroyed the Byzantine Empire, and having overrun the Balkans conquered the central part of the Hungarian Kingdom, too. France and Venice helped and abated that, but the Pope and other Christian monarchs called for crusades against the Muslims. Eventually it was an international Christian army which expelled the Turks from Hungary at the end of the 17th century. In the 19th century Western Europe, led by France and England, was instrumental in the liberation of South-Eastern Europe, although not without selfish interests. (Russia also participated in that, for its own, even more selfish reasons.)

The French Revolution and Napoleon’s wars shook up the borders of the whole of Europe. The new concept of *nation* replaced territorial and dynastic loyalty: it was “blood,” the ethnic-linguistic community, transcending social and class differences, which was to unite a people. That was expressed and propagated by priests, poets, historians and lawyers, who dreamt about independence for the nation on the largest possible territory, absorbing or eliminating the unwanted national groups. Modern nationalism engulfed the educated classes and gradually penetrated the peasants and the workers, too. The Congress of Vienna (1815) tried to enforce the dynastic principle and ensured that Central Europe was divided between Russia, Prussia, the Habsburg and the Ottoman Empire. Soon the national movements in the Balkans challenged the Ottoman Empire and enjoyed the limited support of England and France, but the liberal and national revolutions of 1848 were crushed by Russia and Austria. In 1867 the Hungarians achieved internal independence (Home Rule) from the Habsburg dynasty; the Berlin Congress of 1878 recognized the independence of Serbia and Romania, and partly of Bulgaria. The Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 completed the liberation from Ottoman rule, but also sowed the seeds of territorial quarrels.

The First World War clearly demonstrated that Central Europe was indeed crucial to the maintenance of peace and security in Europe. In fact most of the arguments advanced in the 19th century in favour of the preservation of the Habsburg (and also of the Ottoman) Empire were based on the assumption that the disappearance of either would lead to a series of wars of succession, and would result in a very serious dislocation in the influence and strength of the remaining powers. The Great War was partly the result of the rivalries of the western Great Powers, partly due to Russia’s support of its Serbian client and its old rivalry with the Habsburg Empire. But the Serbian and Romanian irredentist schemes and the Czech drive for independence were supported by the Entente Powers only after the war broke out. War enthusiasm soon gave way to war weariness, first in Russia, leading to a revolution in February 1917. The Germans helped Lenin to return from his exile in Switzerland to make a social revolution in Russia. Following the successful *coup* in St. Petersburg in October, the Bolsheviks promised self-determination for all the peoples of the Empire. Finland, the Baltic nations and Ukraine proclaimed their independence. That was recognized in the peace signed at Brest-Litovsk between the Central Powers and Soviet Russia in March, 1918. Fearing an overall German victory, the Allies (the Entente) launched a policy of subverting Austria-Hungary, in the name of the principle of self-determination, to ‘liberate’ the Slav and other nationalities from ‘oppression.’ They recognized the still non-existing Czechoslovakia in the summer. Totally exhausted, Austria-Hungary asked for an armistice on 3 October, based on U.S. President Wilson’s 14 Points. Between 25–31 October peaceful national revolutions took place in Prague, Zagreb, Vienna and Budapest.

The Bolsheviks (Communists) of Russia thought that a socialist revolution was bound to be victorious all over the world; states would be abolished to give way to a world-wide alliance of governments by *Soviets*. The antidote to that appeared to be nationalism, independence with generous borders, and it worked with the Czechs, Slovaks, Romanians and South Slavs, while the vanquished Germans and Hungarians had little alternative but shifting towards leftist radicalism. The westward march of the Red Army was stopped in August 1920 in Poland (“the miracle on the Vistula”) and the Soviets soon recognized the independence of the three Baltic republics and Poland (1921), while crushing the young Ukrainian state.

By the end of the First World War most of the nations of Central Europe achieved political independence. That went along with radical border changes between 1917 and 1921. In treaties imposed rather than negotiated Germany

and Bulgaria suffered minor territorial losses, while Austria became a small German state denied the right to join Germany. The ‘principle of nationality’ did not become the true guiding line of the peace settlements; it was reduced to a slogan favouring only the lucky victors. Based on economic and strategic as well as ethnic arguments Hungary was reduced to a quarter of its former territory and a third of its population, transferring 3.5 million protesting Hungarians (as well as 88 % of forests, 83 % of iron, 100 % of salt, 74 % of roads and 62 % of railways) to the neighbouring states in the infamous Treaty of Trianon. Since the ethnic principle was not followed in so many cases (Dobrudja, Macedonia, Southern Slovakia, Vojvodina, Transylvania, Silesia, the western rim of Czechoslovakia, Eastern Poland) special treaties were drawn up to be signed by all the Central European States for the protection of the 30 million people who became national minorities as a result of the new borders. The newly created League of Nations was to guarantee all the provisions of the new European order. The arrangements combined what was probably necessary and inevitable with unnecessary humiliation. *With the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and the ensuing peace treaties Great Britain, France, Italy, the United States (and also Belgium), “the West,” accepted responsibility for creating new states, new borders, and measures for the protection of the national minorities in Central Europe.*

The defeated countries were convinced that they were victims of grave injustice; the result was the perpetuation of the division of Europe into hostile groups. The ‘birth defect’ of the new political order in Central Europe was the national composition of the new states, which were not really “national” but multi-national states, mistreating their minorities. Instead of trying to befriend the national minorities, the new ruling nations of ‘the successor states’ introduced repressive measures against them: expulsions, the denial of minority rights, land reform to their detriment, efforts at assimilating them through schools, etc. Even the junior “brother nations” (Slovaks, Rusyns, Croats, Slovenes) were not given autonomy. Nationalism became a kind of religion, a mass phenomenon. Hostilities broke out even among the victors over disputed lands, e.g. between Romania and the new Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes over the territory known as Banat (Temesvar and the surrounding area). The settlement based on the wishes of the ardent nationalists of the victorious camp led to much worse consequences than anybody could dream of. “In each of the new states there prevailed a narrow official nationalism”, and the repressive policies used against national, religious and political minorities led to perpetual internal and external divisions and conflicts. “This state of generalized and mutual hostility provided opportunities for any great power intent on disturbing the peace”⁸. Instead of finding their common interests the “small, unstable caricatures of modern states”⁹ were looking for great-power patrons for the maintenance or for the overthrowing of the new order. It was found unexpectedly difficult to achieve the economic integration of the territories gained by the new states. The new borders broke up the previously unified market, customs barriers reduced trade and increased the prices, and inflation annihilated the savings of generations. All that combined with growing corruption led to a significant decrease in the standards of living. The peasants remained extremely poor, with little opportunity for upward mobility. In most of the small states too many parties competed; that made parliamentary government difficult, leading to *coups* (e.g. to Pilsudski’s in Poland in 1926), or to royal dictatorship in Yugoslavia (1928), later in Romania.

During the Great Depression (1929–33) these predominantly still agrarian and poor societies were hit harder than Western Europe. Industrial prices fell far less than agricultural ones. The general disappointment in liberal democracy turned many people to the radical ideas of the Left or of the Right, becoming easy prey to false gods. Germany under Hitler bought up the agricultural surplus of Central Europe, capturing more than 50 % of their trade – while the West withdrew from it economically and to a large extent politically, too. Britain and France “appeased” Nazi Germany with various concessions, in the vain hope that it will then turn against the Soviet Union. That meant practically abandoning “the lands between”. First Austria was lost with the *Anschluss* with Germany (March 1938) – and practically no objections were raised by the West. Then Czechoslovakia’s fate was doomed at the Munich conference in September 1938, with the end coming in March 1939 when Germany set up the Czech-Moravian Protectorate and a Slovak puppet state.

The promises and forecasts about the beneficial international consequences of the „New Europe” proved to be illusory. After two decades of existence, faced with the brutal behaviour of Nazi Germany and abandoned by its creators, the brave new world set up by British, French and American policy-makers collapsed. Of course the cause of the failure was not independence, but the petty quarrels born out of the unfair borders, the utilization of those quarrels by Hitler and Mussolini, and the selfish and short-sighted policy of the Western democracies. All the Europeans paid a heavy price for their mistakes.

The loss of independence and the appeasement of the aggressors

Unlike in the case of the First World War, where responsibility for the war is divided (though not evenly) between the Great Powers, there is no doubt that it was Nazi Germany who prepared and then launched the most devastating war of human history. But the western democracies cannot be absolved from having inadvertently contributed to the rise of Germany from the hopeless mess the country was in 1933 by the policy of appeasement. The Munich Conference was just the last stage. The creation of an air force, the reintroduction of compulsory national military service in March 1935, the remilitarization of the Rhineland in March 1936, and finally the *Anschluss* were all violations of the Versailles peace treaty. Each concession was father to a new aggression. The rape of Czechoslovakia was an eye-opener, but the West still did not prepare for a war against the aggressive powers. The Molotov-Ribbentrop “Non-Aggression Pact” (23 August 1939) shocked the world, even without anybody knowing about its secret protocol about dividing North-Eastern Europe between the two totalitarian powers. The British guarantee to and the alliance with Poland proved a bluff when on 1 September Hitler invaded his eastern neighbour and Britain

and France did not do more than declaring war on the aggressor. The Soviets, however, joined in the aggression. The fourth partition of Poland was followed by the Soviet invasion of Finland (November 1939) and the annexation of the Baltic states (June 1940). The West stood idle until it was defeated in the spring of 1940. With the Soviet annexation of Bessarabia (June 1940) and Hitler dividing Transylvania between Hungary and Romania (August 1940), finally Germany destroying Yugoslavia and Greece in 1941, Central Europe (indeed whole continental Europe) came under the control of Nazi Germany, leaving a portion to Stalin.

Despite Stalin's loyal collaboration with Germany Hitler invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. That life-and-death struggle made the fate of the peoples caught up between those two evil empires even more difficult. Their behaviour was determined mainly by their geographical position, and by the aims of those two dictatorships towards each country. Some nations (and many individuals) showed remarkable heroism, others committed terrible crimes, but most people wanted simply to survive. It is wrong to categorize whole nations as "guilty" or "right," nevertheless some became victors; others became willing or unwilling satellites of Germany¹⁰. Austria's enthusiasm at the *Anschluss* and the lack of any resistance to Hitler was forgotten and forgiven. Czechoslovakia's passive resistance paid, the country (as an ally of Britain and the U.S.) was not bombed and escaped serious suffering during the war. Although Slovakia was (until the summer of 1944) a loyal puppet state of Germany, deporting its Jews by 1942, at the end of the war it was treated as a victor. Poland proved a true hero, putting up strong resistance at home (by the Home Army and the "Underground State") and providing the fourth largest Allied armed force abroad. The price was 6 million dead, half of them Jews. The Katyn murders and the tragic betrayal of the Warsaw Uprising (August-October 1944) by Stalin should never be allowed to be forgotten. Just like the Holocaust, the attempted genocide of all the Jews. The heroism of the Soviet soldiers – coming from all the national groups of the Empire – should also be noted, as well as the tens of millions of Stalin's innocent victims. Hungary really became "the unwilling satellite" of Germany by joining the war against the Soviet Union, but remained a safe place for Jews and escaped POWs until Germany invaded it in March 1944 (to prevent its leaving the war). That led to the deportation of most of the Jewish Hungarians, half a million killed in the gas chambers. The thwarted attempt at an armistice (October 1944) was followed by the rule of the pro-Nazi Arrow Cross rabble, and a devastating war fought over the country until April 1945¹¹. Romania repudiated the British territorial guarantee in June 1940, lost Bessarabia to the Soviet Union and Northern Transylvania to Hungary at the same time, and Marshal Antonescu became the dictatorial leader and the favourite of Hitler. It participated in the war against the Soviet Union with large forces, brutally murdered 3–400 000 Jews, but on 23 August 1944 the young King Michael arrested Antonescu and changed sides, thus recapturing Transylvania. Bulgaria was allied to Germany, controlled Macedonia during the war. Although it did not join the war against the Soviet Union, was nevertheless occupied by the Red Army in September 1944, and communized in a few months. Following a coup by anti-Nazi officers Hitler attacked and defeated Yugoslavia in April 1941. Croatia declared its independence and became a Nazi puppet state run by the notorious *Ustashi*. Communist and patriotic resistance fought both each other and the Germans, but there was also a collaborationist regime in Serbia led by General Nedic. All sides committed war crimes. The Allies eventually endorsed Tito, "since he killed more Germans." Albania was annexed by Italy in April 1939, but after the fall of Yugoslavia was allowed to administer Kosovo. Communist partisans took over the territory in November 1944. Greece threw back the October 1940 attack of Italy, but was crushed by Germany in 1941. It had a strong, partly communist resistance movement.

It was undoubtedly right for Britain and later for the United States to make an alliance with Stalin following the 1941 attack: the West had a strong interest in helping the Soviet Union to survive and to fight Nazi Germany. It was, however, a serious mistake to give Stalin a kind of unconditional support, like acquiescing in the annexation of the Baltic States and eastern Poland as early as December 1941, during British Foreign Secretary Eden's talks in Moscow¹². His accommodating mood encouraged Stalin to persist in his ambition to conquer as large part of the eastern half of Europe as possible. The entire tenor of the British–American–Soviet discussions from 1941 on led Stalin to believe that he had a free hand at least to resurrect the Soviet frontiers he agreed with Hitler before 1941. It was characteristic that President Roosevelt asked Stalin at the Teheran conference that Soviet claims to Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia should not be reasserted immediately following re-occupation and that the Baltic peoples should be given an opportunity to express their will through some sort of referendum, although he expressed his confidence that the Baltic peoples would choose to remain part of the U.S.S.R. When Stalin firmly rejected any internationally supervised plebiscite and commented that the Soviet constitution provided ample opportunities for the expression of public will, the President merely asked for "some public declaration in regard to the future elections to which the Marshal had referred"¹³. This new policy of appeasement was first practised by *The Times* of London – the same paper that became notorious for advocating an accommodation with Nazi Germany in the 1930s. On 1 August 1941, in one of its characteristically thundering leaders, it called for the befriending of Stalin and it suggested that in Central and Eastern Europe the Soviet Union had special interests.

During the war the U.S. was not willing to make any commitments about post-war borders, being confident of its crucially strong position at the end, and Roosevelt thought he could handle Stalin. At the decisive conference of Teheran (November 1943) he accepted a Soviet sphere of influence in the eastern half of Europe, the territories which the Soviet Army looked likely to occupy, in exchange for a pledge from Stalin to enter the war against Japan within three months after victory in Europe.

Until 1943 the idea of creating federation(s) in Central Europe was very popular among the anti-Nazi public, but Stalin vetoed it, since he knew how easier it would be to establish his control over the whole area one by one. With Anglo-American acquiescence in Soviet preponderance over Central and Eastern Europe at Teheran it is not

surprising that the Head of the Czechoslovak Government-in-Exile, E. Beneš, made a special deal with Stalin in December 1943, dropping the idea of a Confederation with Poland and possibly other states, in return for a green light to expel the three million Germans and the close to a million Hungarians after the war¹⁴. Finally it was neither the conduct nor the will of the nations of Central Europe which counted at the end of the war. Neither were the intentions of the United States and Britain which mattered. It was the advance of the Soviet Red Army which settled the fate of Central Europe. This region was important for the Soviet Union, not really for reasons of security but with the aim of economic exploitation and also for the reconstruction of the damages caused by the war. Central Europe was also looked upon as a bridgehead for spreading Communism. No serious opposition was envisaged: Germany was the enemy to be defeated, France was under German occupation, and Britain had little interest in the fate of Central Europe. The U.S. had even less. As Walter Lippmann, the well-known author wrote in 1943: “the region [Central Europe] lies beyond the reach of American power.[...] We should [not] be promising these nations a protection we are unable to provide. [...] Does this mean that Poland and the Danubian states and Balkan states have no prospect of assured independence, and that they are destined inexorably to become satellites of Russia or to be incorporated into the Soviet Union? The question cannot be answered categorically at this time”¹⁵. That attitude was reflected in the discussions at the war-time conferences about the future of Europe. F. D. Roosevelt often spoke about the need for “four policemen” to maintain peace, and he assigned East-Central Europe to the Soviet Union. Stalin had three aims: to maintain the wartime alliance with the U.S. and the U.K. for economic and political benefits, to create a zone of security made up by countries under his total control, i.e. communized ones, and, thirdly, to gain a foothold in Western Europe through communist parties there, which may eventually help a communist takeover there, too. We don’t know for sure if he ever considered a military advance on Western Europe, and as long as the U.S. had a monopoly of atomic weapons he could not take such a risk, but there is much evidence (the large tank divisions, military equipment left in the GDR, training of Hungarian and other Warsaw Pact soldiers for invading neutral Austria) that he was not averse to that.

Both Britain and the United States, and especially the press in those countries, thought that the lands between the Germans and the Russians were dependable, not essential for their own sphere of influence, consequently accepted Soviet policy as a guiding line on Central and Eastern Europe. Nobody was willing to risk the displeasure of Stalin by standing up for the independence of any nation in Central or Eastern Europe. Perhaps the Anglo-American line on the future of Central Europe is more obvious if we look not at their attitudes towards Hitler’s and Stalin’s smaller victims, like Hungary, but rather at their attitudes towards Poland, their ally. It may have been easy to sacrifice Germany’s minor partners, but to do so with Poland, a valiant ally, who provided them with the fourth largest military contingent, was more than a blunder: it was an invitation which Stalin would have been a fool not to seize. Following the 1943 revelations about the Katyn murder of Polish officers by their Soviet captors, which led to a break between the London-based Polish Government-in-Exile and Stalin, Left and Right in Britain, particularly in the press, joined in increasingly loud criticism of Polish intransigence, even questioning the “practicality” of Polish independence. From the *New Statesman* to the *Tribune* and the *Evening Standard*, and of course, *The Times*, the line was basically the same. Perhaps the most frightening was a series of articles in *The Times* in March 1943, which questioned the idea of “total independence” for “smaller nations” and talked of “the danger” of an independent bloc emerging between the Germans and the Russians. It is interesting how Barrington-Ward, the Editor of *The Times* explained this line to a young Pole, who just arrived from the Polish underground as a courier.

“As for the division of Europe into zones of influence, he [Barrington-Ward] pointed out that what mattered was a realistic understanding of the post-war possibilities of Great Britain. ‘Influence’, he said, was not the same as ‘control’ or ‘domination’. Soviet influence in Eastern Europe after the war would be a logical outcome of geography and the balance of power.” E. H. Carr, who was the author of these leading articles, did not mean, according to Barrington-Ward, “that Poland would cease to be an independent country. At most, it would remain like the other East European countries, a junior partner of Russia, tied to its powerful neighbour by treaty. ‘Benes and Czechoslovakia did not fear a partition of Europe into spheres of influence’, he said.” The Editor of *The Times* tried to calm the young Pole with a smile: “You Poles remind us of the Irish. You possess too long a historical memory, too many prejudices and attitudes inherited from the past. Under the influence of war, and the alliance with the western nations, Russia is undergoing a tremendous revolution. For the moment there is no reason to disbelieve Stalin when he says he wants a strong and independent Poland. You will see, my friend, that your fears are groundless”¹⁶. Was this wishful thinking, hypocrisy or naiveté, or all combined?

The Soviet refusal to help or allow others to help in the Warsaw Uprising of August 1944 showed who was ultimately correct, the English journalist or the Polish hero of the resistance. George Kennan, the U.S. diplomat, writer and historian, quite rightly said that “the Warsaw Uprising was the moment when – if ever – there should have been a full-fledged and realistic showdown with the Soviet leaders: when they should have been confronted with the choice of either changing their policy completely and agreeing to collaborate in the establishment of truly independent countries in Eastern Europe or forfeiting Allied support for the remaining phase of the war”¹⁷. It is conceivable that Stalin, who still feared an “unholy alliance” between the West and Hitler, would have modified his stance. But we know that there were much stronger Western fears of another, really unholy alliance: the revival of the Hitler-Stalin partnership. Such a change sounds impossible, and probably it did not enter Stalin’s mind when victory was so near.

Swallowing Stalin’s line towards the Warsaw Uprising was indeed next to betrayal; Churchill’s percentage agreement with Stalin in October 1944 was not. The British Prime Minister meant it only as a temporary arrange-

ment for salvaging as much of Central Europe from the Soviet Union as was possible. However, even the modest British influence promised by Stalin was not kept. But it was not only an American preoccupation with the hopeful entry of the Soviet Union into the war against Japan that dictated the policies smacking of appeasement. There was also the issue of post-war collaboration with the Soviet Union, a legitimate, albeit naïve aim. That guided Roosevelt and Churchill at the Yalta Conference held in February 1945.

Contrary to widespread belief Yalta was not the cynical division of Europe, was not the conscious betrayal of Central Europe, only concessions were made following from Teheran and especially from the actual military situation. The “Declaration on Liberated Europe” adopted at Yalta was a new version of the high-sounding phrases of the Atlantic Charter. ‘The Big Three’ promised to assist the liberated peoples “to form interim governmental authorities broadly representative of all democratic elements in the population and pledged to the earliest possible establishment through free elections of Governments responsive to the will of the people; and to facilitate where necessary the holding of such elections”¹⁸. The problem was that the Soviet Union never lived up to the Declaration and acted contrary to the pledges made at Yalta. It took quite some time for the American public to realize that ‘Uncle Joe,’ who was made really very popular by the American media, was in fact a cynical tyrant bent on subjugating as much of Europe as he was capable.

Already in March 1945 Sir Orme Sargent, a senior official in the British Foreign office minuted on the alarming signals arriving from Soviet behaviour in the “liberated” countries. But instead of alarm he proposed acquiescence. “If we insisted on trying to enforce our own principles, we should endanger our fundamental policy of post-war cooperation with the Soviet Union for an issue which was not vital to our interests in Europe”¹⁹. Justification for appeasement (more harshly: betrayal) was always easy to find, as in this very minute: “We had ...to remember that our form of parliamentary democracy with free elections, a free press, and freedom of discussion, had never established itself in central and south-eastern Europe. [...] They were unlikely to fight for parliamentary institutions which in any case they had never learned to rely on or respect”²⁰. Such a mistaken and condescending attitude has very strong roots in the West and it has often resurfaced in the last decades.

Following the death of Roosevelt the new president, Truman, sent the pro-Soviet Hopkins to Moscow to ensure further cooperation (mainly against Japan) and made no serious objections to the Polish government being composed mainly of Soviet puppets, key positions given to the communists. At the Potsdam Conference (July 1945) agreement was reached about Poland’s western borders, pushing the whole country westward with hundreds of kilometres. Authorization was given to the expulsion of Germans from Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary.

It would be a mistake to deny that communism had an appeal for many people, and not only for naïve intellectuals in the West. The need for radical changes in Central Europe was obvious. In 1945 Social Democrats and Centre-Left parties thought that their time had come, but few wished for a Soviet-type shortcut for ‘catching up with the West.’ The few ‘home communists’ were joined by the ‘Muscovites’ (those who survived Stalin’s purges) – broken and servile agents of Soviet rule. Small-fry pro-Nazis and other opportunist turncoats hurried to join the Communist parties. They were welcomed to swell the ranks. But the bravest patriots, who had resisted the Nazis, suffered enormous losses both during and after the war. The destructions of the war decimated the middle class, many fled from the Red Army, the Jews were murdered in the gas-chambers, society was atomized and broken – all that helped the communists. The conduct of the Red Army (large-scale looting, mass rape of women) did not make the Soviets more popular, but they could arrest anyone, and in the defeated countries sovereignty rested with the Soviet heads of the Allied Control Commission. On the other hand Soviet policy helped the Poles and the Czechs to realize some old territorial and national dreams, and that was welcomed by most members of those nations. Most of the Jews who survived the Holocaust had illusions about the Soviet Union, believing that communism was a guarantee against anti-Semitism. But without Soviet military occupation and frequent direct political intervention communism would have had no chance to be adopted anywhere in Central Europe. By the end of 1948, however, all the countries of that region were run by Communists imposed on them by the Soviet Union and its agents, using brutal and unlawful methods. It had nothing to do with the serious social problems that existed there; it was not the result of a real revolution²¹.

Soviet behaviour was a clear violation of the Atlantic Charter and the Yalta Declaration, but the takeover took place in instalments. George Kennan’s ‘long telegram’ in February 1946 was an eye-opener for the Administration, and Winston Churchill’s warning speech at Fulton in March 1946 made it public that “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an Iron Curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia; all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject, in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and in some cases increasing measure of control from Moscow.” Truman, that honest and down-to-earth President in the doctrine named after him promised support in Greece and Turkey against aggression by “armed minorities”, (12 March 1947), and Secretary of State John Marshall announced the Plan for European Reconstruction. The Soviet Union did not take up the offer and ordered all the countries falling under its control also to turn it down. The Soviet blockade of West Berlin in 1948 meant that the Cold War was now raging, and the creation of NATO in the Washington Treaty (4 April 1949) made sure that Western Europe remained free and in the coming years could prosper. Could have Central Europe been saved from becoming submerged in the Soviet Bloc? With radically different policies pursued between 1941 and 1944 it most probably could have. After victory, between 1945 and 1949, with the huge Soviet Army stationed in the heart of Europe and the western public understandably opposed to a new war, only the threat or use of the

atomic bomb could have forced Stalin to give up Central Europe. Such an option was never contemplated in Washington or London.

The myth of liberation exposed

The West recognized Soviet interests from 1941 on, only hoped that it would not mean total Soviet control, and expected the Soviet system to mellow. After a slow wake-up the policy of containment protected Western Europe but did not promise anything for Central and Eastern Europe. General Eisenhower, the victorious commander of the war, won the Presidency in 1952 with the promise of “rollback” and the “liberation” of the captive nations, but it proved to be only a slogan, a myth – as demonstrated over Hungary in 1956.

The American handling of the 1956 uprising and revolution in Hungary was another case of appeasement. Documentary evidence shows that despite all the talk about liberation and all the propaganda efforts to undermine the Communist governments, the U.S. did not plan or organize the anti-communist uprising. When it broke out the American administration was at a loss how to react. It had no plans, military or political, to carry out „rollback”, to help liberation with armed force. Admittedly, it was not even possible physically to provide material military support to Hungary, since NATO was separated by neutral Austria and Warsaw Pact countries. Despite all their sympathy for the Hungarians, the Austrians would have on no account consented to military help passing through Austrian territory or airspace. On 26 October, in the first and last discussion of the Hungarian situation in the National Security Council, presidential adviser Harold E. Stassen came up with the idea of assuring Moscow that the U.S. did not intend to exploit the turmoil in Poland and Hungary in order to threaten the security of the Soviet Union but would offer an enlarged zone of neutral buffer states. Thus the Soviet Union could safely accept the internal changes in Hungary²². Eisenhower instructed Dulles to explore the idea with the Soviet leadership. That led to the Secretary of State's speech in Dallas on October 27. He offered economic help to the captive peoples, without any political conditions. Most important, he added: “We do not look upon these people as potential military allies. [...] We are confident that their independence, if promptly accorded, will contribute immensely to stabilize peace throughout all of Europe, West and East”²³. That message, also conveyed to the Soviet leaders through the U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union Charles Bohlen, can be seen as well intentioned. But the U.S. failed to speak about neutrality, the relevance of the Austrian model; it did not contain either any threat or a *quid pro quo*, a bargain, a call for negotiations. But despite these serious shortcomings, if the Soviet Union had been truly concerned only with its own security and had been genuinely seeking *rapprochement* and cooperation with the West, this reassurance would have been an important argument for letting Hungary go and becoming another Austria. But Moscow interpreted the message differently, as an assurance that the U.S. had no intention of changing the *status quo*, no plans to intervene in any way in Hungary. In Soviet eyes it was practically a green light for acting as they pleased²⁴. It was during the brief interval between the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Budapest and the attack on Suez that the U.S. could have tried to do something for Hungary, preferably in the U.N., without the risk of war. “Washington might have instructed Charles Bohlen, the ambassador in Moscow, to call on the Soviet foreign ministry, preferably with his British and French colleagues, and declare in unmistakable terms that the Big Three had accepted Nagy's declaration of neutrality and advise the Soviet Union to do likewise. Would it have worked? It might, or it might not, but certainly there was little risk in such a diplomatic move. But Bohlen received no such instructions from Washington”²⁵. For such an initiative to succeed the action in Suez should have been cancelled or postponed, and talks over the reduction of NATO forces in Europe (or some other confidence-building measures) should have been proposed. The most apt summary and judgment of American policy in the 1940s and 50s is the statement: “Never in the history of America's foreign relations have good intentions reaped such a bitter harvest”²⁶.

The erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961 showed the mutual acceptance of a divided Europe, and that was dramatically reaffirmed with the muted reactions to the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact in 1968, and to the “Brezhnev Doctrine” justifying intervention to prevent any diversion from the policy of Moscow. The emergence of the grass-root working class movement in Poland, the Solidarity free trade union, was also not tolerated by the Soviet Union, and that, too, did not call for strong reactions in the West.

Should one condemn the U.S. and the other democracies for their conduct in 1944–45, 1956, 1968, and 1981, always swallowing the brutal conduct of the Soviet Union, letting down Central Europe and betraying the hopes of its citizens? It is entirely justified to criticize and deplore how the West handled those crises and the opportunities. But one should not forget for a second that it was the Soviet Union which did not respect the right of its own citizens and that of the satellites to decide what kind of government and policies they preferred, and when the people showed what they wanted the response was aggression. When the Soviet reaction was different, as in 1989, Soviet communism collapsed like a cardboard castle.

In 1956 the United States did not attempt to push back the Soviet system because they overestimated its strength and underestimated the geostrategical significance of Central Europe. The late József Antall, himself a freedom fighter in 1956 and elected Prime Minister in 1990, remarked on September 2, 1993, at the Budapest meeting of the European Democratic Union, in his last public speech: „There are moments in history that never return. There are events that can be prepared for, but when the moment comes, it must be seized. [...] Sometimes crucial, tough decisions must be taken, and that there is no time to hesitate”²⁷.

Between 1989 and 1991 Central Europe regained its freedom. Credit for that goes to several insightful political (and thinking of Pope John Paul II religious) leaders, but without the Poles and Hungarians, later joined by the East Germans, Czechs, Slovaks and Romanians, the European communist system would have survived. Without following the example of the Baltic nations the Russians and the Ukrainians would have remained captive nations. In the

1990s the West embraced Central and even Eastern Europe, but the economic and political help was insufficient to facilitate the transition from the command economy to the market economy, to lift the population of the eastern half of Europe from poverty even to modest prosperity. But it would be a grave mistake to blame for that only, or mainly the West. The leaders and the peoples of independent Central and Eastern Europe are still the masters of their own fate. If they cannot make good use of their freedom they must bear most of the responsibility.

¹ Seton-Watson, Hugh: *The "Sick Heart" of Modern Europe*. University of Washington Press, Seattle & London, 1975.

² Snyder, Timothy: *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. Basic Books, 2010.

³ *The New York Review of Books*, 11 November 2010.

⁴ *The New York Times*, 26 November, 2010. That is an allusion to a history of Poland by Norman Davis: *God's Playground*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1979.

⁵ Macartney, C.A. and Palmer, Alan: *The Lands Between: A History of Eastern Europe, 1815–1968*. London, 1962.

⁶ That theme is elaborated in the famous essay by the renowned Hungarian political scientist István Bibó: "The Distress of the East European Small States." In Bibó, István, *Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination. Selected Writings*. Ed. by Károly Nagy. Boulder, Colo.: Atlantic Research and Publications, 1991. Also available in French: *Misère des petits États d'Europe de l'Est*. L'Harmattan, Paris, 1986.

⁷ Churchill, Winston: *The Gathering Storm*. London, 1948. 14.

⁸ Seton-Watson, Hugh and Christopher: *The Making of a New Europe: R.W. Seton-Watson and the Last Years of Austria-Hungary*. London: Methuen, 1981. 435.

⁹ Hinsley, F.H.: *Power and the Pursuit of Peace. Theory and Practice in the History of Relations between States*. Cambridge, 1963. 282.

¹⁰ A remarkably objective account is Deák, István: *Europe on Trial. The Story of Collaboration, Resistance and Retribution during World War II*. Westview Press, 2015.

¹¹ The latest reliable account of that is Cornelius, Deborah S.: *Hungary in World War II. Caught in the Cauldron*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011.

¹² Eden, Anthony: *The Reckoning*. Boston, 1965. 269; Kovrig, Bennet: *The Myth of Liberation. East-Central Europe in U.S. Diplomacy and Politics Since 1941*. Baltimore and London, 1973. 7.

¹³ *Foreign Relations of the United States, III. The Teheran Conference*, 595. <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/FRUS/FRUS-idx?type=goto&id=FRUS.FRUS1943CairoTehran&isize=M&submit=Go+to+page&page=595>

¹⁴ Mastny, Vojtech: *Russia's Road to the Cold War*. New York, 1979. 132–144.

¹⁵ Lippmann, Walter: *U. S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1943. 149–150.

¹⁶ Nowak, Jan: *Courier from Warsaw*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982. 251–252.

¹⁷ Kennan, George F.: *Memoir, 1925–1950*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1967. Vol. I. 211.

¹⁸ <http://www.hungarianhistory.com/lib/newce/15newce.htm>

¹⁹ Woodward, Sir Llewellyn: *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War*. London, 1962. Vol. 3, 564–5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ The first, classical account was Seton-Watson, Hugh: *The East European Revolution*. New York, 1951. The latest is Applebaum, Anne: *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944–1956*. New York, 2012.

²² Békés Csaba: *Az 1956-os magyar forradalom a világpolitikában*. [The 1956 Revolution in Hungary in World Politics]. Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 2006. 56–57.

²³ Kovrig, Bennett: *The Myth of Liberation. East-Central Europe in U.S. Diplomacy and Politics since 1941*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1973. 182.

²⁴ Büky Barna: *Visszapillantás a hidegháborúra*. [The Cold War. A Retrospect.] Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2001. 115–116.

²⁵ Marton, Endre: *The Forbidden Sky. Inside the Hungarian Revolution*. Boston: Little Brown and Co, 1971. 28.

²⁶ Kovrig, Bennett: *The Myth of Liberation. East-Central Europe in U.S. Diplomacy and Politics since 1941*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1973. X.

²⁷ Antall, József: *Selected Speeches and Interviews*. Ed. by Géza Jeszenszky. Budapest: József Antall Foundation, 2008. 360.

Summary

Géza Jeszenszky. Central Europe – the Stepchild of the West?

This short survey of the major features in the history of Central Europe tries to answer the perennial question: is this region a part of the West, but the scene of endless internal and external conflicts, a permanent war zone? There are many common themes in the history of the smaller nations in the middle of Europe: ignorance about its past in the West, the richness and variety of overlapping languages and ethnic groups, the simultaneous adoption of Christianity, loss of independence for centuries, agrarian society until recently, large Jewish populations before the Holocaust, strong cultural traditions, bloody battles in the world wars followed by many border changes, and imposition of Russian communism. The essay provides a personal interpretation of the dramas of the 20th century from a Hungarian viewpoint.

Key words: Central Europe, Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Hungary, communism, multi-national States, Jews, nationalism, peace treaties, appeasement, World War II, Cold War, Hungarian Uprising in 1956.