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Published in:
Working Paper Series of the Research Network 1989

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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2009

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
van der Poel, S. (2009). Central Europe: between hope and nostalgia. Reflections on a localization. *Working Paper Series of the Research Network 1989*, 31, 1-22.

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Working Paper Series of the Research Network 1989

Working Paper 31/2009

ISSN 1867-2833

Central Europe: between hope and nostalgia Reflections on a localization

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Abstract

The term Central Europe is used with great ease nowadays; however, this is in sharp contrast with the geographical definition of the region. Ask people to point out Central Europe on a map and frowning eyebrows and wavering fingers occur. It is clear that France and Russia are not part of it, but after that doubts arise. Is Germany part of it? And what about Switzerland? Austria? Poland? Romania?

Even if we were to align the borders of Central Europe with those of the former Habsburg Empire we don't solve the geographic riddle as the borders of this empire too were in constant alteration. Or do we need to divide Central Europe in an eastern and western part (East Central Europe and West Central Europe)? But then again: where are the borders?

Apparently, there are other non-geographical reasons to speak of Central Europe – reasons of a more, historical, cultural but above all political nature. And maybe it is predominantly a desire that lies at the heart of its return. Because a 'return' it is, a re-introduction so to speak.

For a long period of time Europe was conveniently divided in East and West and there seemed to be no reason nor need to change this 'surveyability'. This status quo – the order of Yalta – was considered to be of high priority. A Central Europe would just raise difficult questions and stir up nasty memories. Memories of a German 'Sonderweg', the need for 'Lebensraum', ethnic cleansing and other misery. After all, was it not this region where the conflict for two world wars was instigated? Neither Moscow nor Washington seemed to benefit from complicating or straining things unnecessarily. Therefore one had to wait for geo-political changes that could create some air to renew the debate on Central Europe. The disintegration of the Soviet empire was such a change. And with this fall of an empire and the dismantling of the Berlin wall, the terminology was redefined as well. The term 'Eastern Europe' seemed no longer suitable, it turned out to be too broad and spread this penetrating 'cold war flavour' which seemed hopelessly out of time.

To the return of Central Europe was highly contributed by Milan Kundera. With his article 'The tragedy of Central Europe', published in 1984 in the *New York Review of Books*¹ he stimulated a debate that in the meantime – thanks to historical developments – seems to have been settled to his advantage. As where was in the 1970s and 1980s 'Central Europe' was only used in the small circle of dissidents, intellectuals, and literature scientist; nowadays we use the phrase 'Eastern and Central Europe' with a carelessness and confidence as if we always did.

Are we short of memory? Should we indeed be more careful using this dangerous term full of historical connotations? Or is history more of an obstacle and has it functioned too often as a replacement of a true political debate in this eastern part of Europe?

Historical ruptures force us to consider a new self-definition. With the implosion of the Soviet empire ideological barriers have been demolished, the division of Europe has come to an end, our horizon has broadened. East and West are no longer fixed entities and amidst all of these changes Central Europe popped up, like a devil out of a box.

Intensive dealing with the past – by means of remembering and creating stories – supplies us with an identity. And especially in this part of Europe where wars, revolutions, occupations and deportations have defined the 20th century to such an extent, identity and history have become closely attached. One simply can't escape history in this region. However the ethics of memory sometimes also requires us – paradoxical, as it may seem – to forget to make way for contemporary and future developments. A variation on the geographical division of Europe might be, that one part suffers from amnesia – and is able to afford

¹ Milan Kundera, 'The tragedy of Central Europe', *New York Review of Books* (26/4/1984) 33-38.

this kind of luxury – while the other half is stuck in the past in which memories play a very active role. Central Europe certainly belongs to the second category and is inclined to note down every wound that was once brought on to her, and to serve this at any chosen occasion.

Therefore an attempt to place Central Europe in its historical and cultural context, to not only show which meanings this term has been given during the course of time, but also – and foremost – to define which intentions and desires are behind it. By doing so, we automatically arrive in this twilight zone called Central Europe, where in each capital the Central European dream takes a different shape. In Budapest and Vienna the contours of the ancient Habsburg Empire easily spring to mind; in Prague and Warsaw one dreams of a closer alliance with the West for fear of Russia; in Zagreb and Ljubljana one hopes to escape from the Balkan and tries to stretch the distance with Belgrade as far as possible, while in Berlin one gazes very cautiously towards the East avoiding carefully the term ‘Mitteleuropa’. All are more or less prisoners of the past and ‘everyone is someone else’s barbarian from the east’, as to speak with the French-Czech historian Jacques Rupnik.²

The return of Central Europe is not only a return of images from the past, but also stirs up a broad variety of feelings, diverging from hope to fear, from inclusion to exclusion, from multiculturalism to xenophobia, from irony to tragedy, in short, from dream to nightmare. At the same time we project our own wishes and ideals on Central Europe, our ideas about what Europe should look like. In other words: Central Europe that’s us.

The heart of Europe is back in its right place: in the centre. But what does it sound like? And will it last?

Welcome to Central Europe?

Origin

In times of huge geo-political changes the term Central Europe raises its head. This was the case in the second half of the 19th century when growing tensions arose between Prussia and the Habsburg Empire, and the German Empire was established. But the same happened during the First World War and, as mentioned before, during the 1980s when the Soviet Empire started crumbling. At the basis of this reappearance was always the question of power in the region: Central Europe was either used to support claims for territorial enlargement, or as an argument to defend oneself against such claims; in short, there were either offensive or defensive motives involved.

² Jacques Rupnik, *The other Europe* (London 1989) 3-24.

Friedrich Naumann (1860-1919) and Milan Kundera (1929), whose names are most strongly connected with the term Central Europe, fit into this rough subdivision. Naumann wrote his *Mitteleuropa* in 1915 and foresaw a time when the Central Powers would not only fight shoulder to shoulder, but would also close ranks and start co-operating, as much as possible under German hegemony. Kundera's article – 'The tragedy of Central Europe' – originates from 1984 and is written far more from a defensive point of view: a Central European identity that tries to survive amidst Soviet repression. Although his article can also be interpreted as an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of Eastern Europe, and therefore be qualified as less defensive.

German hegemony

As a pure geographical concept Central Europe already existed before the 19th century, be it in different forms. Of particular interest are the political, economic and cultural forms of the concept and therefore I concentrate on the 19th and 20th century. In this sense it would actually be better to talk about 'Mitteleuropa' instead of Central Europe because in this term the political and culture-historical aspects are shown to their full advantage.

Friedrich List (1789-1846), an economist, was among the first in whose work 'Mitteleuropa' appeared. According to List it had to be an integrated economic zone, protected by tariff walls against foreign, especially British, competition. In the 1850s it was the Austrian minister of trade Karl Ludwig Bruck (1798-1860) who continued thinking in the same direction, namely a free trade zone, including not only the Habsburg Empire and the German states, but also parts of Italy. These plans of List and Bruck were a direct consequence of the striving for a united German state, whereby the central question was whether there had to be a small German ('Kleindeutsche') or big German ('Großdeutsche') solution, so excluding or rather including the Habsburg Empire. After the Congress of Frankfurt (1848) it became clear that a small German solution was most likely and from this moment onwards Prussia and Austria became competitors. The Battle of Königgrätz (1866) was won by the Prussians and gave rise to, not only the forming of the North German Confederation, but also the creation of the so-called Compromise ('Ausgleich') in 1867 by which the Dual Monarchy was created. From this moment onwards there existed the Empire of Austria and the Kingdom of Hungary.

Out of the North German Confederation the (second) German Empire was born: in 1871, after the French were beaten at Sedan, this new empire was proclaimed and the Prussian king was promoted to the status of German emperor. The Habsburgs, who for centuries had claimed this throne, were suddenly excluded. Two emperors, two versions of Central Europe: one characterized by German supremacy, the other by Habsburg universalism. Or, in the words of Claudio

Magris, 'Danube versus Rhine'. The Danube as the gathering place of different peoples, a Central Europe marked by German, Hungarian, Slavic, Roman, Jewish influences; the Rhine as the mythical guardian of the purity of the tribe. A historical distinction arising from the forming of the German Empire.³

During the First World War Central Europe was again primarily associated with the German strive for hegemony and not with the Habsburg variegation and supranational identity. It was Friedrich Naumann (1860-1919), a theologian and member of the German parliament for the liberals, who continued the track of List. His book 'Mitteleuropa' appeared in 1915 and was generally considered as the most influential German publication during the First World War. (A French and English version would appear shortly afterwards.) The idea which Naumann proclaimed was that the Central powers not only had to fight side by side on the battlefield, but that this coalition had to be continued after the war in an economic co-operation. Especially now that Germany seemed to lose its territories overseas, compensation on the continent seemed necessary. Naumann was thinking of a coalition between Germany and the Dual Monarchy in the first place, but other countries were very much welcome to join this alliance. Naumann, so to speak, was already focusing on the post war period and hoped that the wartime alliance would be continued.

By his opponents Naumann was quickly branded as a 'Pangermanist' – his book was even used as propaganda material by the Entente to encourage non-German soldiers on the side of the Central Powers to lay down their arms. According to these critics he would only be interested in German hegemony in the region. In reality Naumann exclusively spoke of intensifying economic cooperation within a federal union with strict observance of religious, ethnic en linguistic differences. He had no plans whatsoever to 'germanise' the region and strongly disliked every form of anti-Semitism. But times of war are seldom moments of nuance and subtlety. Furthermore it was the German chancellor Bethman Hollweg who mentioned in his fourth war target (drawn up in September 1914) without any reticence German economic dominance in 'Mitteleuropa' and called upon his government to oppose any further 'slavonisation' of the region. By less accurate readers Naumann was therefore easily labelled as the spokesman of the German government. Not co-operation but domination would be his real aim.

Near the end of the war this more authoritarian aim was almost realized. The treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which the German signed with the Bolsheviks in the Spring of 1918, resulted in complete control for the Germans over huge areas in the east, namely Polish territories, the Baltic area and parts of the Ukraine. A Pax Germania seemed to emerge while the Habsburg influence diminished

³ Claudio Magris, *Donau. Een ontdekkingsreis door de beschaving van Midden-Europa en de crisis van onze tijd* (Amsterdam 1991) 23.

further. Only large-scale American war production and involvement ended these German dreams.

During the interwar years, especially from the 1930s onwards, German nationalists – like the geo-politician Karl Haushofer (1869-1946) – developed these ideas about ‘Mitteleuropa’ in an even more radical way. Notions like ‘Drang nach Osten’ and ‘Lebensraum’ now became closely associated with ‘Mitteleuropa’. Nazi-Germany would change the map of Central Europe beyond recognition. In 1938 the minimized Austrian state was joined with Nazi-Germany (the so-called ‘Anschluß’) although the Treaty of Versailles prohibited this. In the same year Czechoslovakia was dismantled and in 1939 Poland was invaded which marked the beginning of the Second World War. And again a Russian-German treaty cropped up – a so-called treaty of non-aggression and friendship was signed in August 1939 – by which (in a secret clause) the spheres of influence over Poland and the Baltic countries were stipulated. The German occupier made no attempt whatsoever to cooperate with the inhabitants of these eastern Slavic regions; on the contrary it pursued a policy of extermination. Slavic people were inferior (‘Untermenschen’) according to the Nazi ideology. The Second World War discharged into a complete migration of nations by which more than fifteen million people were dislodged and killed. Under Soviet domination, after the war, this replacement of entire communities was initially continued, but this time it were mainly Germans who were driven out of (new) Polish territories, Sudetenland (Czechoslovakia), Hungary, Yugoslavia and Rumania. At the Potsdam Conference (August 1945) the western allies had agreed upon these collective deportations by the Soviets. The only condition they made is that these would be carried out in an orderly and humane manner. Though not only Germans became the victims of Stalin’s population policy, also Slovaks (living in Hungary) and Hungarians (living in Slovakia) had to leave behind all their belongings and settle down on the other side of the border. The variegation of the old Central Europe was replaced by ethnic uniformity.

Return

Kundera published his article ‘The tragedy of Central Europe’ in the *New York Review of Books* in April 1984, but one year earlier it had already been published in French, titled ‘*Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragédie de l’Europe Centrale*’.⁴ At this time Mikhail Gorbachev was still invisible and had not yet entered the political stage and terms like ‘new politics’, ‘perestroika’ and ‘glasnost’ were totally unknown. There was no single indication that mighty changes were in the making. Since 1945 Europe was divided into a capitalistic

⁴ Milan Kundera, ‘Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragédie de l’Europe Centrale’, *Le Débat* xxvii (November 1983) 3-22.

West and a communist East, a cast most people seemed to have reconciled with. Central Europe was just a reminder of less quiet times and seemed to be relegated to oblivion. Only in the 1970s it carefully reappears in different forms whereby one can distinguish three main forms which all share the Cold War as a principal theme.

The pacifist variant

The first form I label was, for convenience sake, known as ‘the pacifist variant’. After the Second World War Germany was split up in an eastern part (GDR) and a western part (FRG) and both halves were highly militarised by respectively the Soviets and the Americans. In fact this German region was the most militarised zone in the world and symbolised the ‘balance of terror’ that had originated during the Cold War. When a war would really break out, Germany would be the first and main battlefield with incalculable consequences. It was this threat that pushed citizens of the Federal German Republic to look for an escape, to search for more peaceful forms of co-operation. They supported the so-called ‘Ostpolitik’ of chancellor Willy Brandt (1969-1974), his ‘*Wandel durch Annäherung*’ (‘change by rapprochement’) differed enormously from the politics of his predecessor Konrad Adenauer (1949- 1963) who seemed to focus merely on the relationship with the West. Brandt’s ‘Ostpolitik’ had to lead to a détente and a peaceful coexistence in the region. Central Europe became associated with disarmament; it was supposed to turn into a nuclear free zone. Some even strove for West-German withdrawal from NATO, hoping that the Soviet Union would react by retreating its troops as well. The idea was that other countries in the region would follow these politics of pacification and a demilitarised Central Europe would be established. This Third Way – namely central Europe as an alternative between a communist East and a capitalist West – would at the same time create possibilities for a society in which the best elements of both systems could be united, believing that a transformation of communism was possible.

The regional variant

At the same time the ‘pacifist variant’ appeared a ‘regional variant’ was given birth. Austria became neutral after Soviet troops left the country (1955). It was neither a member of the European Community nor of NATO. This Austrian neutrality was seen as a model for the region and stimulated mutual co-operation. The shared Habsburg history strongly contributed to this sense of community. From the 1970s onwards a remarkable form of co-operation was established on a cultural, economical and ecological level between Northern-Italy, Northern-Yugoslavia (Croatia and Slovenia) and Austria – also known as the Alpine-Adriatic region. It turned out that the Croatians and Slovenes shared

a common goal with the Northern-Italians, namely a growing dislike towards their fellow countrymen in the south due to economic differences.

Relations improved between Budapest and Vienna mid 1980s. From this period onwards Austrian and Hungarian citizens no longer needed visa to cross their borders. And when in September 1989 the Hungarian government actually dismantled the Iron Curtain between both countries, it marked the end of the Berlin Wall as citizens of East Germany came in huge numbers to pass the Hungarian-Austrian border to travel to West Germany.

The cultural variant

This third variant seems to be the most important one and will be dealt with more extensively, it can be characterised as ‘the cultural variant’. In principal cultural values were at stake and formed the basis of the opposition against Soviet domination. Its exponents were mostly intellectuals from Poland, Czechoslovakia (especially the Czech part) and Hungary, some of who still lived in their country of origin (György Konrád) while others spend their time in exile (Milan Kundera, Czeslaw Milosz). For them Central Europe was first and foremost seen as a cultural concept. An important forum was the magazine *Cross Currents. A yearbook of Central European Culture* that appeared in Michigan (US) from 1982 onwards – a magazine that is quoted in Kundera’s article. In the very first volume Czeslaw Milosz – one of the initiators of this periodical – defines Central Europe in the following way: ‘a cultural unit tied together by historical awareness of a common past and maintaining its own identity even while placed in the eastern orbit by force of arms and by pacts between superpowers’.⁵

His description was considered as a starting-point for later editions of *Cross Currents* and was quoted again at the tenth anniversary of the magazine. Milosz was just one of the many prominent intellectuals who contributed regularly to the magazine, other well known contributors were György Konrád, Danilo Kiš, Claudio Magris, Adam Michnik and Péter Eszterházy. All wrote interesting articles about the character of Central Europe, although some were more specific than others. Especially Konrád's *Antipolitics* and Magris’ *Danube* were of major importance for the debate that evolved.⁶ However, it was Kundera’s article, which brought Central Europe really back on the agenda. ‘The tragedy of Central Europe’ formed the starting point of an actual debate that drew a lot of attention, partly due to the political developments under Gorbachev. The various definitions of Central Europe, which Kundera distinguishes in his article, will be

⁵ Quoted from the preface of *Cross Currents. A yearbook of Central European Culture* 10 (1991) vii.

⁶ György Konrád, *Antipolitics: An essay* (New York 1984) and Claudio Magris, *Donau. Een ontdekkingsreis door de beschaving van Midden-Europa en de crisis van onze tijd* (Amsterdam 1991).

given a closer look as well as the comments it received. Represented schematically Kundera defines the following definitions of Central Europe:

Central-Europe forms the eastern border of the West, which goes back centuries.

Central Europe is situated in the East politically, but in the West culturally.

Central-Europe as a family of small nations surrounded by Germans and Russians which has its own vision of the world, a vision based on a deep distrust of history, while their history is characterised by suppression, victimisation and isolation.)

Central Europe is not a state: it is a culture or a fate. Its borders are imaginary and must be drawn and redrawn with each new historical situation.

Eastern border of the West

Kundera points out that Europe has always been divided, geographically and culturally, into two halves, namely a part that focused on Rome and a part that focused on Byzantium. This division of the Roman Empire into a western and eastern half that goes back for centuries would still have its repercussions to today. Czarist Russia and the Ottoman Empire are as much indebted to the Byzantine tradition as the states that developed from these empires. Kundera does not elaborate upon this distinction any further but instead moves quite easily to the period after 1945 when the Soviet Union was expanding its power across the continent. Kundera, however, does make a (religious) distinction between the Orthodox East and the Catholic West, suggesting – although not mentioned – that the East did not take part in the major developments that have characterised the West to such an extent: the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution. It goes without saying that these developments and movements with its far reaching religious, political and cultural consequences were far more decisive in the West than they were in the territories ruled by the czar or sultan. State and church, and state and society in the East were far more intertwined, while in the West they evolved into separate, independent institutions. (Stalinist communism fits into this tradition of Byzantine autocracy as well.) In doing so, or at least suggestively, Kundera makes a clear distinction between the Western civilization and Russia. He even typifies Russia as ‘an other civilization’ with a different ‘(greater) dimension of disaster, another image of space (a space so immense entire nations are swallowed up in it), another sense of time (slow and patient)’ yes, even ‘another way of laughing, living and dying’.⁷ Or, as Joseph Roth in 1924 described it:

⁷ Kundera, ‘The tragedy of Central Europe’ 34.

‘Behind Lemberg you enter a different world’.⁸ East and West are turned into two almost invariable, unbridgeable entities, a notion we also find back in the famous work by Samuel Huntington *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (1996). According to Huntington political and ideological differences have greatly lost their meaning since the ending of the Cold War and have been replaced by cultural differences. ‘Political boundaries increasingly are redrawn to coincide with cultural ones: ethnic, religious, and civilizational.’⁹ He even discerns a global identity crisis. Who are we? Where do we belong? Who is with and who is against us? Huntington distinguishes between different civilizations and claims that the western borders in Europe end where Islam and orthodox Christianity begin. In other words, borders corresponding to those signalled earlier between the Western and Eastern halves of the former Roman Empire. According to Huntington there is no doubt that Central Europe is part of the Western civilization. When he refers to Central Europe he actually means the territories that used to belong to the Habsburg Empire, the eastern parts of Germany and the whole of Poland. The conflict and struggle of the 1990s in Yugoslavia fit perfectly in his scheme of clashing civilizations: Yugoslavia was situated on a cultural fraction-line par excellence (Western (Catholic), Eastern Orthodox and Oriental (Muslim)).

Just like Huntington, Kundera accentuates the dividing lines between East and West and situates Central Europe, without hesitation, in the Western camp. This straight division might be better for surveyability but is not quite in accordance with the actual situation. Aspects that we identify with the West did not appear clearly in Central Europe. Feudal relationships, economically and politically, lasted much longer in Central Europe than in the Western part. A strong middle class hardly emerged and modernising was mostly the work of outsiders, namely Jews and Germans. In short, Central Europe was far more an area of transition where Western and Eastern characteristics appeared. Endre Ady (1877-1919), a Hungarian poet, once suggested that Hungary was like a ferry between East and West, an image that might apply to the whole of Central Europe, no matter how eager the helms man might be to enter a western harbour.

Politically in the East, culturally in the West

With the ending of the Second World War the border between both halves of Europe moved westwards. Stalin was given the opportunity to seize new territories. The Treaty of Yalta, in which these spheres of influence were stipulated, is sometimes still considered as a ‘second Munich’. Just like in 1938, the West gave in to a dictator at the expense of Central Europe. And in doing so,

⁸ Translated by me from: Koos van Weringh, *Joseph Roth. Waarnemer van zijn tijd. Een keuze uit zijn journalistiek werk (1919-1939)* (Amsterdam 1981) 60.

⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (1996; London 2002) 125.

Kundera continues, it turned out that after 1945 a part of Europe was politically dominated by the East, while culturally speaking this region belonged to the West: Central Europe. The revolts of Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Poland in the 1980s were an expression of the fact that the identity of a people was being destroyed. In other words, it was a struggle for European civilization and more culturally than politically motivated. And here lies part of the explanation for Kundera's use of the word 'tragedy' in his title. Namely the fact that the West hardly seemed to realize what the true motivation of this struggle was. More so – and even more tragic – the West no longer seemed to bother about these 'western values', the very same values that their colleagues in Central Europe were ready to offer their lives for. In the West the spirit of Europe seemed to be replaced by the spirit of the consumer.

Strikingly enough, Kundera places the origin of Central Europe far later in time and leaves Germany out of the picture. He pays no attention to the role of Germany in this region, and the names of neither Naumann, Wilhelm II nor Hitler are being mentioned. The ambivalence of the term Central Europe is absent in Kundera's article. One might conclude that in this sense Kundera clearly was a child of his time. After the war the threat came from the side of Soviet-Russia and not from Germany, and it is the former to whom he points his arrows. But now that the Cold War is over and the Soviet power has disappeared one wonders whether there is still a need for Central Europe? Hasn't Kundera's main argument disappeared?

A family of small nations

Vulnerability is seen as another common denominator, Central Europe as a group of nations, which in the course of history had to struggle continuously for survival amidst large and powerful neighbours eager to expand their empires. The emphasis Kundera puts on the role of the Habsburg Empire shows some resemblance with the earlier mentioned 'regional variant'. He states that with the end of the Habsburg Empire the cultural basis for Central Europe no longer existed. The disappearance of the Dual Monarchy is considered by Kundera to be one of the major events in 20th century Western civilization. This Habsburg Empire could have formed the basis of a federation of small countries, however, this unique opportunity was lost in 1918. The cause of this loss, according to Kundera is to be found – once more – in the East, namely 'pan-Slavism'. This stimulated Slavic nations within the Empire to undermine the existing borders and the internal balance of power that eventually led to the First World War. During the interwar years there was no longer a major power in Central Europe, but only a collection of small, helpless states that turned out to be easy targets for Stalin and Hitler.

The fact that the rise of Prussia (Battle of Königgratz 1866) and the growing ‘Pan-Germanism’ at the end of the 19th century were equally undermining for the Dual Monarchy is not taken into consideration.

The Habsburg Empire as an Empire where different nations and minorities lived peacefully and protected side by side – so no ‘Völkerkerker’ (prison of nations) as it was described round 1900 – where major economical, scientific and above all cultural achievements were delivered, appeals to a widespread contemporary need. The Dual Monarchy can count on a growing interest and appreciation. Taking a respective view, the Habsburg period seems indeed to be an oasis of rest and quietness. Compared to the terror and oppression we had to face in times of fascism and communism, the problems during Francis Joseph (1848-1916) seem small. In short: rather Francis Joseph than Joseph (Stalin). In addition, the Habsburg Empire aligns with the general quest for a Europe as a whole and the desire to live harmoniously within European boundaries. Considered in that sense, was the Habsburg Empire not an early precursor of the European notion of unity? Is it not here that the foundation was laid for a symbiotic multicultural society?

According to Kundera, the Jewish minority played an essential role in the Danube monarchy. He styles the Jews as the ‘intellectual cement’ of Central Europe’, as ‘the creators of its spiritual unity’.¹⁰ They were the true cosmopolitans of the multinational state indeed. Loyal to the emperor, they moved with great ease within the limits of this extensive area and found many ways to develop, economically as well as culturally. Politics, however, remained a toy of the nobilities mainly. The Jewish people thus, were the victims of the collapse of this Empire. Nationalists rose to power and the Jews were at the mercy of the national and political situation of the day. If the word tragedy is appropriate to Central Europe than it fits the fate of the Jews. After Hitler, not a single piece of this ‘intellectual cement’ was left. Anyone visiting Trieste, Lemberg, Chernowitz, Kassa, Vienna or Budapest nowadays, will not only experience that the names of those cities have mostly changed, but will notice above all the transition that took place without mercy during the 20th century. The only reminder of the huge Jewish minorities that once lived here, are the gravestones and often not even that. Kundera therefore rightfully asks himself whether Central-Europe hasn’t lost its soul after Auschwitz.¹¹

A culture, a fate

‘The people of Central Europe (...) cannot be separated from European history; they cannot exist outside it; but they represent the wrong side of this history;

¹⁰ Kundera, ‘The tragedy of Central Europe’ 35.

¹¹ Kundera, ‘The tragedy of Central Europe’ 37.

they are its victims and outsiders', thus Kundera.¹² It is, one could say, a rather negative identity. Fate selected Central Europe to be surrounded by big, powerful neighbours with expansionist tendencies. Central-European identity lived under continuous threat and the resistance against this destructive history became a common and decisive part of this same identity. At the same time we must conclude that this commonly shared fate hardly had any feeling of deeply felt solidarity as a consequence. The treason of Munich 1938 did not lead to notifications of adhesion from either Warsaw or Budapest. On the contrary, both countries carried off the swag and extended their borders at the cost of Czechoslovakian territory. Also during the Hungarian rebellion (1956) or the Prague spring (1968) no words of Central-European solidarity were to be heard. 'But of course', the immediate reaction was: 'we were forced to, we were not free to act, it is our localisation, we are the victim of' – and the sentences can be continued on one's own discretion. The aggressors were always the others – the Turks, Germans, Austrians, Russians – they took the initiatives, they outlined the roads to be taken, they turned the signals green, liquidated borders, placed strong leaders, introduced laws, executed sentences, kept the reins tight, and pulled the trigger: fate makes powerless. Such an identity exempts one from every responsibility and is a licence for future laps.

Future

And with these future laps we arrive in the post-soviet era, a time in which the threat from the East (Russia) has vanished and Germany only produces peaceful sounds. Central European countries are, more than ever before, integrated into Western institutions (EU, NATO) to guarantee their safety and independence. Furthermore, the population has never been as homogenous as it is nowadays, since the German and Jewish presence has been wiped out. This raises the question whether this Central European identity actually still exists now its main characteristics belong to the past? Or has Central Europe again taken a new shape and are there new images and expectations hiding behind the term? The term has returned, but which intensions does it cover? Has Central-Europe not just remained periphery to many in the West? Before the collapse of the wall it constituted the western periphery of the East and nowadays the eastern periphery of the West?

The visible references to the communist era have now been cleared away: statues are removed, street-names changed, flags adjusted; but the less visible aspects – more on a mental level like attitudes and dispositions – still play a decisive role, their disappearance takes more time. Apparently the Central-European 'western identity' (Kundera) seemed not quite immune to the communist surrounding in which it had to 'survive' for more than forty years.

¹² Kundera, 'The tragedy of Central Europe' 36.

Possibly communism even strengthened already existing tendencies, like the pre-war antidemocratic notions. Twenty years after the collapse of communism we at least can notice that the conquest of freedom turned out to be a lot easier than the construction of democracy. This mental and cultural change that has to replace public apathy and develop political consciousness requires much time and patience. The restored entrance to the West does not mean sudden appearance of a democratic civilian population. Just like the construction of socialism after 1945 suffered from the absence of a self-assured working-class, the present market-economy and democracy lacks an independent middle-class. A democracy is not so much based on a – communal – history as on a democratic disposition of its people, fair elections, a constitution and an open and transparent political setting. In Central Europe the past too often functions as an obstacle or even an alternative for politics. Europe might be united; its past definitely is not. Cultural nostalgia offers little ground for a united Europe; more often it is a starting-point for conflicts rather than a meeting-place where one can reconcile.

Still, there are also hopeful developments to be mentioned. Initiated by Václav Havel, Joseph Antall and Lech Walesa in February 1991 the Visegrád-group was founded. Located on the shores of the Danube, north of Budapest and close to the Slovakian border, Visegrád is an interesting location from an historical point of view. In 1335 a meeting was organised between the kings of Bohemia, Hungary and Poland to discuss co-operation on matters of regional concern. In 1991 again high officials gathered together, but this time they were not noblemen but politicians (presidents), who had just left their (communist) prisons.

Their aims were more or less as follows:

- De-sovietisation of Central Europe and the dismantling of the Warsaw Pact and Comecon.

- Coordinating the process of integration into the European Union.

- Stimulating regional cooperation based on common traditions and the completion of a civic society.

The visible unanimity by the three (later four) participating countries vis-à-vis these aims was less clear on the contours of Central Europe and the specific Central European aspects that needed accentuating. The Hungarians prioritised the Danube basin and the scattered Hungarian minorities that lived there, the Poles wanted the Baltic people and the Ukrainians to be given high priority, while the Czechs wanted alignment of the Austrians and the Slovenians with the Visegrád countries. The Central European discord, or rather its variety, accompanied the Visegrád initiative right from the start. Meanwhile we may

conclude that at least two of the three aims have been reached, the Warsaw Pact has been dissolved and the Visegrád countries have become members of the European Union and NATO. As for regional cooperation this was restricted mainly economically – Friedrich Naumann finally had his way – and the creation of funds for cultural purposes. These ‘common traditions’ and the creation of a ‘civic society’ mainly cause concern. Especially since the influence of intellectuals on the Central European political stage has diminished greatly. Their positions have been taken over by people whose ethical concerns and European prospects are less zealous. Politics has become more pragmatic, more down to earth; dissidents were allowed to play the role of president for a while, but are now replaced by ‘professionals’ whilst they have returned to the sideline. (Havel returned to his old profession; writing plays). A certain sense of disillusion can be felt: high intellectual hopes were often not a match for the post-communist reality of increasing poverty and insecurity, ethnical tensions and growing nationalism. But perhaps the burdened term ‘normalisation’ is appropriate here. Weren’t they just occupying these positions by the grace of absence of a democratically chosen government and a public opinion? Was their status therefore not merely born out of necessity?

Visegrád has lost some of its importance. One still comes together, but no longer on a presidential level, for nowadays only high-level officials consult. Furthermore, Visegrád could not prevent the collapse of one of the participating countries: the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia was followed by a Velvet Separation. After the division into a Czech and Slovak part, the already sceptical attitude of the Czech Prime Minister Václav Klaus towards Visegrád became even more outspoken. He called Visegrád a ‘poor man’s club’, an ‘artificial creation of the West’ and ‘empty regionalism’.¹³

The decline of former Yugoslavia however, was less peaceful. Slovenia and Croatia, once part of the Habsburg Empire, declared themselves independent and the first war on European territory since 1945 followed. Croatia and Slovenia both stated that they were Western and differed fundamentally from the other (Orthodox and Muslim) parts of Yugoslavia. Central Europe was used in a normative way, namely as an instrument for in- and exclusion.

This normative element is not a new aspect, but can be found in the works of the earlier mentioned intellectuals. Kundera too refers to Central Europe as a region where the cultural values of Europe are still being cherished and places it not only opposite Eastern Europe – where these values never rooted – but also to Western Europe – where these values are no longer supported. György Konrád in his *Antipolitics* also pleads for a certain attitude to life and the creation of a ‘parallel society’. This attitude is characterised by a dislike for every form of

¹³ Matthew Rhodes, ‘Post-Visegrad cooperation in Central Europe’ *East European Quarterly* 33 (1999) 51-61.

ideological or bureaucratic interference within the public sphere. Tolerance, irony, scepticism, pragmatism and autonomy should all be at the basis of true citizenship. Only in this way, according to Konrád, can one accomplish a real civil society.¹⁴ Furthermore he discerns a bridging function for Central Europe between East and West or, as he puts it in *A feast in the garden*: ‘In Budapest I bring the East closer to the West and reverse. As I find myself in a paradoxical middle-position, I am able to neutralize these warring anti-poles. Those who find themselves in a middle-position also have a message’.¹⁵

And Václav Havel too is in strong support of a moral change of course, an attempt to ‘live in truth’.¹⁶ Amidst a (communist) world in which only corruption, arbitrary rule and empty phrases seemed to exist, a citizen ought to take a sound attitude as an expression of existential opposition. Words needed to regain their original meaning and lies needed to be unmasked as such.

Hope existed after 1989 that also the West might feed upon these Central European perceptions based on these specific historical experiences. But Central Europe as a normative notion can, as the Balkan clearly showed, also degenerate into forms of nationalism and xenophobia. The euphoria that arose with the end of communism easily got mingled with forms of xenophobia, anti-Semitism and nationalism. Undoubtedly growing insecurity and economic setbacks have stimulated this process, but it also shows a certain mentality. The past in Central Europe is determinedly used to avoid responsibilities. It is this cultivation of the past that needs to be ended. The dead finally deserve their rest.

The explanation for the popularity of Central Europe (and above all the Habsburg Empire) in the West has to be considered as a form of cultural nostalgia. The Habsburg Empire is often presented as the Europe that got lost after the European civil war (1914-1945) and the Cold War appeared on stage. A Europe that used to be leading in the spheres of politics, culture, science and economics, in short, a Europe that we are still longing back for.

Central Europe is not a static concept, but a dynamic one reflecting political changes, it rather functions as a projection screen where pictures of hope alternate with pictures of nostalgia. Historically formed and loaded, where the past refuses to become history, a region that seems to be haunted by history. Central Europe at its best is liberal, innovative, critical, humane, and cooperative; at its worst it is xenophobic, militant, nationalist and destructive. This explains why the Germans rather use the terms ‘Ostmitteleuropa’ or ‘Zentraleuropa’ than ‘Mitteleuropa’ – a notion from which the gun-smoke still hasn’t disappeared. Still there is a German magazine named *Kafka. Zeitschrift für Mitteleuropa*. The first edition appeared in 2001 and was titled ‘Auf dem

¹⁴ Gyorgy Konrád, *Antipolitics: an essay* (New York 1984).

¹⁵ Gyorgy Konrád, *Tuinfeest* (Amsterdam 1990) 97 (Own translation).

¹⁶ Václav Havel, *Poging in waarheid te leven* (Amsterdam 1991).

Weg nach Europa' (on the road to Europe). Meanwhile Europe has been reached and nowadays the magazine only appears digitally. What's interesting about this periodical is that it appears at the same time in Hungarian, Czech and Polish and that it focuses, just like *Cross Currents*, on a cultural angle. In the introduction of the first volume the editors explain this as follows:

'We chose for the name of Kafka because the name sounds the same in all the different countries in which the magazine appears. At the same time it reminds us of that part of Central Europe which, during the Cold War, was covered by an icy layer of oblivion and suppression. The name Kafka stands not only for the terror of totalitarianism, but also for the rich Jewish legacy in Central Europe.'¹⁷

In 2002 the Hungarian author Imre Kertész received the Nobel Prize for literature. It was rather remarkable that the reactions in his home country were anything but enthusiastic. This typifies the difficult relationship between Kertész and Hungary. The dislike of his fellow citizens is not based on his stylistic skills but far more on his persistent and returning message. Kertész criticizes the way Hungary drowns in its role of the victim and interprets historical setbacks, as a fate Hungary simply has to carry. To Kertész fate is something we are able to construct ourselves. In his work, which is mostly about his Auschwitz experiences, he tries to refute the idea that man is languid and simply at the mercy of fate. The fact that this criticism is coming from an Auschwitz survivor, makes the contrast with many of his fellow citizens even more painful. 'When this nation [Hungary] is not willing to admit that the destruction of private lives and the disastrous past are to be blamed on themselves, if they prefer to see this as an accident caused by malignant outside powers, as a national curse, fate or even destiny, than Hungary obviously needs anti-Semitism', says Kertész.¹⁸

Hungary, according to Kertész, is a small nation that is unable to find its suitable place in time and space.¹⁹ But isn't this the problem of all these small countries in Central Europe? Isn't the whole idea of Central Europe an attempt to mask the doubts and insecurities of the region? Meanwhile the Nobel Prize winner has left Budapest, his place of birth, because he doesn't feel welcome anymore. Surprisingly his new dwelling place is Berlin, the city where many Central European nightmares started. Is he still in Central Europe? Or has he left the area? Is Berlin the new capital of a new dream called Central Europe? Has Kertész simply exchanged a nightmare for a more peaceful dream? Somewhere between hope and nostalgia lies Central Europe.

¹⁷ *Kafka. Zeitschrift für Mitteleuropa* 1 (2001) 4 (Own translation).

¹⁸ Imre Kertész, *Ik, de ander* (Amsterdam 2001) 64 (Own translation).

¹⁹ Imre Kertész, *Ik, de ander* (Amsterdam 2001) 64 (Own translation).

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