

## *Mittleuropa as a lieu de mémoire*

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The formation of *Mittleuropa* can be traced back to the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation and to the first Germanic settlements east of the empire. In a direct line with Austro-Prussian dualism, entrenched at the time of Maria Theresa and Frederick II, two empires—the German *Reich* proclaimed in 1871 and the Habsburg monarchy—succeeded the Holy Roman Empire (abolished at the time of Napoleon, partially restored in 1815 in the form of the German Confederation, irrevocably destroyed by the Austro-Prussian War in 1866). In the twentieth century, the mental map of German Central Europe is marked by the geopolitical concept of *Mittleuropa*, which is linked to the liberal nationalist ideology of Friedrich Naumann, which defined the German war aims in 1915. Naumann's ideas attenuated the pan-Germanic program by limiting it to the area of Central Europe. As a result, German-speaking historians and political scientists today tend to avoid the word *Mittleuropa*, preferring the terms *Zentraleuropa* (closer to the French “*Europe central*” and the English “Central Europe”) or *Mittelosteuropa*.

Why are *Mittleuropa*, *Zentraleuropa*, and *Mittelosteuropa* of contemporary interest for the history of *lieux de mémoire*? Because from the Enlightenment to the Second World War, this area has, through the individual national identities, provided the center of the European continent with its identity. The twentieth century has striven to dismantle and deform *Mittleuropa*: the First World War, Nazism and the Shoah, the Second World War, Stalinism and Neo-Stalinism. One can say that since the peace treaties of 1919-1920 and since 1945, *Mittleuropa* as a whole has become a *lieu de mémoire*, a space of memory (*Erinnerungsraum*).

The dissemination of German culture formed a space which, from the end of the eighteenth century on, became the site of confrontation between, on the one hand, German *Kultur* and other cultural identities and, on the other hand, the German-Slavic, German-Jewish, German-Hungarian, German-Rumanian mixture. Cultural *Mittleuropa* is thus an ambiguently defined notion. In certain contexts, it evokes the catastrophic path of Europe's destiny during the time of nationalisms and imperialisms. In other contexts, it designates a civilization of cultural mingling at the intersection of Northern and Southern Europe, halfway between Occidental Europe and Oriental Europe.

In the “center” of the European continent, other *lieux de mémoire* older than *Mittleuropa* retain a subliminal presence, always ready to become

current again. The distinction between Byzantine Europe and Central Europe, and later between Islam and Christianity, created religious and cultural borders separating the Orthodox peoples from the small islands of Islam which still exist in the Balkans, and Catholics from Protestants. These borders are *lieux de mémoire* which have often served to justify discourses of rejection (Russophobia or anti-Serbian), or to explain conflicts in the post-Communist era, particularly in the territory of the former Yugoslavia. However, the secularization of European culture renders it impossible to reduce contemporary conflicts to religious wars. These religious borders are *lieux de mémoire* manipulated by neo-nationalistic propaganda. Yet forgetting them would also be unfortunate: For example, considering attempts to define “fundamental values” and Europe’s cultural identity, *Mittleuropa* is a reminder that both Islam and Judaism have left an indelible mark on Europe, and that Byzantine Christianity is not only to be found on the Oriental edge of Europe, but instead also in its geocultural center.

Two other borders, present earlier and still existent, belong to the *lieux de mémoire* of *Mittleuropa*. The first is that separating Russia from Central Europe. For the Slavophile Russians, the Catholic, Protestant, and non-religious Slavs of Central Europe were an exception to the rule which identified the Slavic soul with the Orthodox church. For Russian Occidentalists, Central Europe was merely a connecting passageway one had to traverse to get to Germany, France, Italy, or England. Poland, lastly, seen from the Russian perspective, occupied a place apart, as it could, after all, to a certain degree be seen as an integral part of the Russian empire. *Mittleuropa* certainly defined itself most often in opposition to Russia, whose political and cultural regression appeared threatening from the Central European point of view. This *lieu de mémoire*, namely the border between *Mittleuropa* and Russia, could possibly reemerge, if the question of closer ties between Russia and the European Union were to be broached.

The other long-standing border which exists as a *lieu de mémoire* in Central Europe is that dividing the “Balkans” from the population of Central Europe. The *homo balkanicus* is a caricature originally conceived of by Westerners to denote a primitive European, merely picturesque within his folklore tradition but barbaric when he takes up arms. European discourses regarding “the Balkans” highlighted an Orientalism without positive characteristics. They originate from a cultural colonialism which expects Western civilization to bring a bit of order and rationality to the fragmented and underdeveloped territories. “The Balkans” were contrasted with the Southeast Central Europe of the Habsburgs. Still today, the expansion of the European Union to include the “Balkans” remains

incomplete and faces difficulties, of which the symbolic constraints are not the least important.

The Western borders of Europe are not any simpler to define than its Eastern borders. Do the German-speaking countries belong to Central or Western Europe? When the German *Reich* and the Habsburg monarchy were in contact with Russia and the Ottoman Empire, they undoubtedly were a part of Central Europe. Between 1949 and 1990, the Federal Republic of Germany belonged to Western Europe, whereas the German Democratic Republic was a part of “Eastern Europe” and under Soviet influence.

In 1990, after the dissolution of the U.S.S.R., the emancipation of the Central European republics, and German reunification, Central Europe seemed to be coming to life again. After the consolidation of the European Community, the center of Europe was no longer the Berlin-Prague-Vienna-Budapest axis, but rather the axis Rotterdam-Milan. Would the Eastern enlargement of the European Union allow Europe to recover its historical center? Or would it become clear that the Central Europe in question is no longer in the center but rather at the margin of the Europe of the Treaty of Rome, and that *Mittleuropa* now only has the status of a *lieu de mémoire*?

This *lieu de mémoire* had been the talisman of certain intellectual, anti-Soviet dissident groups. In the 1980s, György Konrád in Budapest and the Czech Milan Kundera and the Yugoslav Danilo Kis in Paris revived the discussion about *Mittleuropa*. Kundera’s text, first published in Paris in November 1983, became famous under the title of the American version from April 1984: “The Tragedy of Central Europe.” Members of the anti-Soviet resistance of November 1956 in Budapest, Kundera writes, were fighting for their fatherland and for Europe. It took the repression of the Prague Spring in 1968 to awaken once again the memory of Central Europe, the myth of a Golden Age, the end of which was the time around 1900 and the 1920s.

However, the memory of Central Europe also includes fateful episodes which line the history of the “small nations” that were exposed to mortal threats. The nations of Central Europe know the experience of downfall and disappearance. The great Central European novels, namely those by Hermann Broch, Robert Musil, Jaroslav Hasek, and Franz Kafka, are meditations on the possible end of European humanity. The tragedy of Central Europe is, in short, the tragedy of Europe. When the Iron Curtain falls, Kundera concluded in his text of 1983-84, the peoples of Central Europe will realize that the culture of Europe (scientific, philosophical, literary, artistic, musical, cinematographic, audio-visual, educational

and universalist, multilingual) has ceased to be of value in the eyes of Europeans themselves, and constitutes at best only a *lieu de mémoire*.

Almost at the same time, in June 1984, the Hungarian writer György Konrád published the German version of his essay, “Der Traum von Mitteleuropa” (“The Dream of Central Europe”), first presented at a conference in Vienna in May 1984. *Mitteleuropa* for him evoked the memory of Austria-Hungary during the Belle Époque. The Central European spirit, he wrote, is a view of the world, an aesthetic sensibility that allows for complexity and multilingualism, a strategy that rests on understanding even one’s deadly enemy. The Central European spirit consists of accepting plurality as a value in and of itself; it represents “another rationality,” Konrád affirmed, an anti-politics, a defense of civil society against politics.

In Central Europe, the “literary republic” was long near to the heart of the *res publica*. The first configuration of the cultural identity of Central Europe appeared when Renaissance and Baroque were spreading via Vienna, Prague, Krakow, and Buda (in Hungary). This “delayed” Renaissance fused with the art and zeitgeist of the Baroque period and significantly influenced the entire Central European region. The primary factor determining the establishment of a literary republic in Europe was the reaction to the Ottoman threat, which led to the founding of the “Sodalitas litteraria Danubiana” by Conrad Celtis around 1500, unifying German, Hungarian, Slavic, Bohemian, and Wallachian humanists.

At the time of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, a new cultural system emerged in Northern and Central Germany, which broke with Latin and Italian Central Europe, and the Reformation called forth the first stirrings of a consciousness of national cultures, for example among the Czechs or Slovaks. In contrast, the Counter-Reformation elevated Baroque to the official style and it would be two centuries before Josephinism at the end of the eighteenth century achieved the first synthesis of German Enlightenment and Baroque, all the while endeavoring to establish German as the lingua franca in *Mitteleuropa*, after Latin, Italian, and French, which incited as a reaction the inexorable protest of the nations against this Germanization.

The production of the national through philology, which exalts the oral and written literary traditions, and through linguistics, which codifies the spelling, grammar, and vocabulary, corresponds to a German model one could call “Herderian.” The diffusion of Herder’s theoretical system among the peoples of Central Europe constitutes an essential stage in the formation of the cultural *Mitteleuropa*. Hungarian, Romanian, Polish, Czech, Serb, Croatian, Slovenian, etc. intellectuals, through exposure to Herder’s texts, forged the conviction that love for one’s fatherland is impossible without love for one’s mother tongue, and that the poet is the

true father of the nation, far more than the rulers who scoff at linguistic borders and only recognize dynastically defined territories.

*Mittleuropa* is one of the *lieux de mémoire* that was of decisive importance in the way the “literary republic” constituted cultural and national identities. One could say that *Mittleuropa* is the *lieu de mémoire* par excellence of a model of the production of the national through the cultural, against the pure reason of the political and military state.

Delayed by their coercion into the collectivity of the German and Habsburg empires, since the nineteenth century the historical nations of Central Europe have been demanding their emancipation, and striving to connect to earlier epochs of independence and greatness. During the twentieth century, at the time that the central empires disappeared, representations of a federal order and a cosmopolitan culture resurfaced, generally in connection with the Austrian tradition. “Central Europe is just a term which symbolizes the needs of the present,” Hugo von Hofmannsthal wrote in December 1917 in his lecture on “Die österreichische Idee” (457-58). And in his notes for an article about the idea of Europe we find this definition of the *lieu de mémoire Mittleuropa*: “Millennial struggle for Europe, millennial mission by Europe, millennial belief in Europe. For us, the Germans and Slavs and Latins who dwell on the soil of two Roman empires, chosen to bear a common destiny and inheritance—for us Europe is truly the fundamental color of the planet” (54).

Faced with the shock of the Third Reich, the Habsburg myth and, beyond that, the memory of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation are transformed by Joseph Roth or Stefan Zweig into a retrospective utopia of the coexistence of nations in a cosmopolitan cultural space, into a literary republic covering a vast Central European territory from Italy to the coast of the Baltic Sea.

The history of the Habsburg monarchy from this time can be interpreted as a political and socio-cultural process of harmonization of the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural plurality. Thanks to institutions which managed conflict and structured the pluralism in the form of the “Compromise” (*Ausgleich*) within the framework of each “crownland” (*Kronland*), the liberal Empire founded in 1867 on the basis of new principles attempted to improve the relationships among the nations. This is the meaning of the “Habsburg myth,” which Claudio Magris has spoken of so masterfully. This ideology of the state, brought to the fore by the Habsburgs since the time when Prince Eugene referred to the monarchy as a *totum* and particularly emphasized during the time between 1866 and 1871 when Austria, removed from the Holy Roman Empire which it had long dominated and in competition with the German Empire, newly proclaimed in 1871, had to invent a new geo-political identity for itself, based

on that which was left over: the territories in the East and Southeast. The Habsburg myth of a pluralistic society and a pluralistic state which provided all peoples the *Heimat* entitled to them was merely a propagandistic disguise for the battle between two hegemonic peoples, the German Austrians and the Hungarians, both fighting to defend and expand their privileges and their advantages, a struggle presented as being of general interest and “supranational” reasoning.

The comparison (flattering for Austrian Cisleithania) with the policy of Germanization pursued by the German *Reich* in its Eastern, Polish regions is an integral part of the “Habsburg myth.” One also has to distinguish between the Austrian part of the Danubian Empire and the Hungarian Transleithania. The integrative force of the Habsburg model, characterized by its cultural pluralism, is incontestable in Cisleithania (even allowing for a confusion of myth and reality), but did not function in Hungary. The Slavic regions that belonged to the Hungarian part of the monarchy undoubtedly never had the feeling that they were part of a Slavic-Hungarian cultural community. The same can be said of the Romanians in Transleithania. It is Cisleithania that has romanticized the “Habsburg myth” and made it a *lieu de mémoire* of a cosmopolitan *Mittleuropa*, in which the cultural plurality was able to form itself into a harmonic pluralism.

Since World War II, *Mittleuropa* has become the *lieu de mémoire* of Jewish Central Europe, destroyed by the Shoah. The Jewish culture of the shtetl, the contemporary renaissance of Yiddish, and the spreading of Hasidism have drawn new maps of Central Europe. This Jewish culture of *Mittleuropa* was also that of the Jews assimilated into the national cultures. In Prague during Kafka’s time, assimilated Jews were part of both the German and the Czech cultures; in Lemberg, intellectual capital of Galicia and birthplace of Joseph Roth, they were divided between German and Polish culture; in Czernowitz, metropolis of Bukovina, the territory made famous by Paul Celan, they hesitated between assimilation into the German culture and Rumanization.

The Austrian-Marxist tradition constructed the *lieu de mémoire* of a Central Europe of the working class. The Austrian social democracy of the Habsburg era found it difficult to overcome the contradiction between “class” and “nationality.” Victor Adler led a supranational, official discourse and wanted his party to become a *Reichspartei*, in opposition to nationalist currents. But from the 1890s on, even for him the nationalist arguments prevailed over internationalist class solidarity. In the Cisleithanian parliament, the Social Democratic fraction was divided into five national clubs. The trade unions tried to unite the nationalities within a factory, one branch of industry, one organization. In sum, the Austrian social

democracy was a mirror image of the Habsburg monarchy: supranational in its “political myth,” but in reality divided along national lines.

*Mittleuropa* is a European space of memory which combines two constitutive elements of European identity: first, cultural and linguistic plurality and second, the difficulty to structure this plurality without giving in to the “holistic” temptation of a homogeneous society, the course usually followed by nationalism.

Until the 1920s, German, the lingua franca of *Mittleuropa*, is added in some linguistic regions as an international language alongside the “national” language, occasionally in competition with another international language such as French. Gradually, with the growing sense of national consciousness and the affirmation of literary languages, German is reduced to the status of a “second language” which allows for international communication within the Central European region.

The phenomenon of true multilingualism, combining two or three languages of the Central European region, is generally limited to certain zones of contact, the children of mixed marriages, and the elites of certain metropolises (such as Trieste, Prague, Bratislava, Czernovitz, or Lemberg). It should be mentioned that cases of Polish-Lithuanian, Slovakian-Hungarian, or Austrian-Italian-Slovenian multilingualism, to name just a few possible combinations, are far less numerous than cases of multilingualism in which a Central European national language is combined with German or French. An intellectual from *Mittleuropa* who chooses a language other than his native tongue for his literary or scholarly works seldom chooses another language of the region; only German, English, or French come into consideration.

As a *lieu de mémoire* of cultural plurality which allows multilingualism and “hybrid identities” to flourish, *Mittleuropa* is also a *lieu de mémoire* of the degradation of nationalism, as analyzed by Gumplowicz, who depicted Central Europe as the theater of a “struggle of races” (*Rassenkampf*), a war between the various social and ethnic groups. The “race” theories of this professor at the University of Graz are dominated by a pessimism that would be worthy of Hobbes, and form the other interpretative framework for the plurality of Central Europe.

In Cisleithania, the Habsburg system had attempted to guarantee the cultural autonomy of the nationalities through constitutional compromises which controlled the balance between the ethnic-linguistic groups in each territory. In Moravia, for example, one could not simultaneously be both Czech and German, but had to choose one or the other. A majority of the Jews chose a German linguistic identity. In Cisleithania, this cohabitation without cohesion did not lead to “supranationality,” but rather to a curious alloy of Habsburg citizenship and Czech, Polish, Serb, Croatian,

Slovenian, Italian, Romanian, Ruthenian, or German “private nationality.” Were the Jews of the Habsburg monarchy “supranational” as well, as Joseph Roth suggested? In reality, the Jews of Austria-Hungary were swept along with everyone else in the movement affirming the individual nations and took on the language of the dominant nationality in their province.

Regarding the notion of *Mittleuropa* from the perspectives of the different societies of the Central European region, profound divergences are evident. For most Poles, memory of *Mittleuropa* is inextricably bound up with the successive divisions of Poland among three empires. The Poland that existed between the two world wars refused the restoration of a Central European federation and drew inspiration for being a major regional power from its own national historical references, by challenging the German enclaves within Poland maintained by the Treaty of Versailles, yet also nourishing great territorial ambitions in the East.

In Bohemia, did the national independence achieved in Saint-Germain-en-Laye do away with the nostalgia for the old Danubian order, and did Czech intellectuals in the 1920s forget the “Austroslavism” of Frantisek Palacky, that liberal Czech who insisted after 1848 that had the Habsburg monarchy not existed, it would have had to be invented, in the interest of Europe and of all mankind? In fact, the empire of the Habsburg Bohemians, which belonged to the old Holy Roman Empire, offered the best protection against Russian imperialism. The high degree of economic and political modernization achieved in Bohemia before the Second World War confirms that the Czech nationality was able to flourish in the heart of Cisleithania. But the First World War destroyed the faith that the peoples of Central Europe had in the Habsburg *Mittleuropa*. After the summer of 1914, the Habsburgs, having betrayed their historical mission, were merely the “shining representatives” of Germany, which reduced the small nations of Central Europe to the status of oppressed peoples, as highlighted by Jaroslav Hasek’s novel *The Good Soldier Švejk*.

In Hungary, a historical nation in Central Europe recaptured from the Ottomans by the Habsburgs, *Mittleuropa* has remained a positively connoted *lieu de mémoire*. Budapest, capital of the dual monarchy after the Compromise of 1867, experienced in the last third of the nineteenth century and up until the First World War one of its most splendid periods, politically, economically, and culturally. The Treaty of Trianon, for the Hungarians a traumatic experience, is part of the reason for the idealization of the memory of *Mittleuropa*.

*Mittleuropa* is also a *lieu de mémoire* of French-German and French-Austrian tensions and conflicted relations with Italy, which, going by the “mental map” of German imperialism, was the decisive party in the fate of *Mittleuropa*, based on the Italian territories first belonging to the Holy



Roman Empire and then the Habsburg monarchy. Since the end of the nineteenth century, French historical thought, primarily committed to the cause of the Slavic peoples, has criticized the “prison of the peoples.” One of the most systematic deconstructions of the term *Mittleuropa* comes from Ernest Denis, an expert in Czech history, friend of Benes and Masaryk, advocate of the idea of Czechoslovakia and also a defender of the idea of Yugoslavia. These negative interpretations of *Mittleuropa* as an imperialistic German and Habsburg project corresponds to the majority opinion in France at that time. The geographer Emmanuel de Martonne, who played an eminent role in the committee that paved the way for the peace conference of 1919-20 (he suggested the borders of Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, Poland, and the Polish corridor), published in 1930-31 volume 4 of *Géographie universelle*, dedicated to *L'Europe Centrale*. This French concept of Central Europe, in contrast to the idea of *Mittleuropa*, influenced the peace treaties of 1919-20 and inspired the politics of the “small entente” in Central Europe.

From the Italian perspective, the term *Mittleuropa* evokes a debate carried out in Northeastern Italy in the time leading up to the First World War, about attempts to bring together Italians, Germans, Austrians, and Slavs in a regional community, held together by deeper links than the dynastic connections of the Habsburgs. In the 1920s, Trieste remained a hub for Austrian-Italian-Jewish-Slavic cultural contact. Under fascism, Italy tried to play a role in the foreground of Central Europe and the Balkans, but was unable to penetrate Nazi domination (see also Isnenghi, this volume).

In the years following German unification, the dissolution of the Soviet system, and the emancipation of the nations of Central Europe, one could expect *Mittleuropa* to reconstitute itself. The French and perhaps the English might well worry that this negative *lieu de mémoire* could gain currency again and a zone of German (and Austrian) influence be re-established. In the lands that belonged to the Habsburg monarchy until 1918, *Mittleuropa* remained the Belle Époque, a fashionable topic re-discovered in the 1980s.

Paradoxically, at precisely the point that the expansion of the European Union to include Central Europe has been completed, *Mittleuropa* seems to have lost its importance. But does not precisely the forgetting of this *lieu de mémoire* of Central Europe show that Europe itself has lost its memory and the markers of its identity? In the new member states of the European Union, will the feeling of being European be engulfed by the return of national emotions, by the appetite for economic and cultural globalization after decades of being trapped in the Soviet bloc, and by strategic considerations that would seem to be better guaranteed by

NATO than by Europe? Does not neo-Nazi and xenophobic populism highlight the fact that the suppression of *Mittleuropa*—*lieu de mémoire* of the great catastrophes which nationalism and racism led to—does not contribute to a democratic political culture? Indeed, it is instead witness to the atrophy of historical consciousness, without which it is likely impossible to strengthen the European Union.

*Translated by Anna-Lena Flügel*

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