

RETURN TO DIVERSITY

A POLITICAL
HISTORY OF
EAST CENTRAL
EUROPE
SINCE WORLD
WAR II

Joseph Rothschild

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*A Political History of
East Central Europe
Since World War II*

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*The struggle of man against power
is the struggle of memory
against forgetting.*

MILAN KUNDERA

This book is dedicated to Sir William Deakin and to the memories
of Henry L. Roberts and Hugh Seton-Watson, teachers who
introduced me to the study of East Central Europe.

Preface

The main challenge in writing a basic general survey such as I attempt here is distillation. And distillation inevitably entails the omission or condensation of material that specialists would prefer to include or to develop. But a basic book cannot be a comprehensive chronology, nor a heavily footnoted research monograph, nor a deeply searching analysis. While I, too, regret the absence from the following pages of many interesting episodes, important personalities, and suggestive arguments that I would have liked to include, I must nevertheless ask the reader to judge this volume by the criteria that are appropriate to its own genre—that of a general survey—and not by standards alien to it.

A word is in order as to why this book does not include a consolidated analysis of the political history of East Germany comparable to my extended probing into those of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania. The (East) German Democratic Republic is indeed a state, but it is not a nation and is less than half a country. Before World War II it was not even a state (unlike my other cases), but simply a part of Germany and hence not in East Central Europe. Since I view this book as a continuation of my *East Central Europe Between the Two World Wars* (1974), those are valid reasons for omitting East Germany here. More important, however, is the consideration that East German domestic and foreign politics are so overwhelmingly a part and a function of “the question of divided Germany” on the Great Power agenda, that any serious effort on my part to explore them in this book would have burst its perimeters and muddled my professional waters. Greece, in turn, is omitted because it is essentially a Mediterranean, not an East Central Euro-

pean, country in its cultural, economic, and political perspectives and because it was not subsumed into the Communist orbit after World War II. Analogous reasons account for the omission of Austria. Finally, the three Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are left out because their brief interwar period of formal independence did not survive World War II.

It is conventional for the author of a professional book to list a number of colleagues who have helpfully read all or parts of the prepublication manuscript, to thank them, and to avow a pious acknowledgment that any residual flaws and errors are nevertheless the author's own responsibility and are not to be imputed to these readers. Deeming this convention to be saccharine and somewhat hypocritical, I do not abide by it. My expressions of public, and very sincere, gratitude are here reserved for my supportive family; my splendid typist, Audrey McInerney; and the helpful officers of two valued institutions who invited, encouraged, and generously subsidized my work: Drs. Enid C. B. Schoettle and Paul Balaran of the International Division of The Ford Foundation and Dr. Jason H. Parker of the American Council of Learned Societies.

New York
January 1988

J. R.

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RETURN TO DIVERSITY



1

The Interwar Background

1

At the close of World War I, the four defeated empires that had dominated and ruled East Central Europe—the German, Habsburg, Ottoman, and Russian empires—were replaced by a dozen new or restored or enlarged would-be nation-states, all of which based their asserted legitimation on the then reigning politico-moral principle of national self-determination. Though the territorial arrangements of 1919 to 1921 still left a number of additional nations in East Central Europe stateless and created problems of aggrieved minorities allocated to states toward which they felt little or no affinity (conditions that induced revisionist apologists for the territorial losers of World War I to charge that the territorial arrangements were merely a cynical and unprincipled victors' fiat), for all their admitted flaws, they still freed three times as many people from nationally alien rule as they subjected to such rule. The real political weakness of the interwar effort to implement the principle of national self-determination in East Central Europe lay not in its alleged hypocrisy, but in the impossibility of reconciling it with three other important aims of the peacemakers of 1919 to 1921: the permanent diminution of German power, the permanent containment of Russian power, and the permanent restoration of international order in Europe. In other words, the geopolitical map of interwar East Central Europe, with its plethora of new, restored, and enlarged *soi-disant* nation-states, was not congruent with the real distribution of power in Europe.

Germany and Soviet Russia embodied the two basic revisionist

threats to the territorial and social settlements of the interwar years. Though most East Central European regimes of the time were more mesmerized by the Bolshevik threat, Germany proved to be the more active menace and for that reason we focus on it first.

The defeat of Germany in 1918 was deceptive. Neither in absolute nor in relative terms had Germany been weakened to any thing like the extent that was often assumed in the 1920s. In absolute terms, Germany's industrial and transportation resources had been left largely intact because World War I had not been fought on its territory. In relative terms, a territorial settlement predicated on the national principle, such as that popular in 1919 to 1921, ipso facto left Germany as Europe's second largest country after Russia. Relative to East Central Europe, Germany gained through the replacement of the Habsburg Empire, which for all its infirmities had still been a major power, as a neighbor by a large number of frail and mutually hostile successor states in the Danubian area to the southeast, and through the substitution of Poland and the Baltic States for Russia as its immediate eastern neighbors. Germany's geographical position in the center of the Continent was only enhanced by these developments. The very existence of the newly independent but highly vulnerable states of East Central Europe, endorsed by the victorious Western Allies, proved on balance a political and diplomatic asset to Germany. It (1) initially buffered Germany against a spillover of the Bolshevik Revolution, (2) then tempted Soviet Russia to collaborate with Germany throughout the 1920s and in the partition of this area in 1939 and 1940, and (3) ultimately frustrated efforts at Soviet-Western cooperation to halt Nazi Germany in the late 1930s, as the West was then inhibited by its commitments to the successor states from paying the Soviet Union's price for such cooperation—the sacrifice of East Central Europe's effective independence to Soviet hegemony.

The governments of Weimar Germany pursued a "Prussian" policy of directing the brunt of their revisionist pressure against interwar Poland, in the hope of recovering at least a substantial part, if not all, of the prewar Reich frontiers there. Hitler, on the contrary, contemptuously dismissed as inadequate such a limited program. Setting his sights on the conquest of all East Central and Eastern Europe, he temporarily froze the German-Polish revisionist issue with the bilateral Non-Aggression Statement of January 26, 1934, and launched his program of virtually limitless conquest by first following the "Austrian" pattern of establishing hegemony over the Danube Valley. Austria and

Czechoslovakia, rather than Poland, thus became his initial international victims.

It has often, and correctly, been pointed out that the Nazi concept of race was politically incompatible with the existence of independent East Central and Eastern European states. Less attention has been given to the at least equally sinister concept of space in Hitler's politico-ideological armory. While racial rhetoric was occasionally used by certain Nazis (other than Hitler) to flatter the supposedly "young" and "vigorous" peoples of East Central Europe into deserting their allegedly "decadent" and "enfeebled" Western allies and patrons, the political language of space always implied conquest and reduction to peonage of the peoples to Germany's east and southeast. Indeed, the capacity for such spatial expansion was defined as the test and measure of racial vitality.

Given his maximalist program of expansion and conquest, Hitler was tactically correct in identifying Czechoslovakia, rather than Poland, as the keystone of Germany's "encirclement" that would have to be dislodged first to collapse that arch. Territorial revisionism against Poland was likely to be more limited in its political effect, since it would initially have to be coordinated with Soviet Russia; it implied shared influence rather than exclusive domination. Against Czechoslovakia, Hitler's ally would be a Hungary conveniently revisionist but too weak to present a serious obstacle to further German expansion. Furthermore, the German officer corps, still heavily "Prussian" in its political outlook and self-image, might be satisfied with the defeat of Poland and thereafter reluctant to be used for further Danubian, Balkan, and Russian conquests, toward which it was historically conditioned to be either indifferent or even unfriendly. Finally, Czechoslovakia, unlike Poland, could be conveniently tarred with the phony but propagandistically effective brush of serving as "Bolshevism's Central European aircraft carrier" by virtue of the Czechoslovak-Soviet Pact of May 16, 1935, which supplemented the Franco-Soviet Mutual Assistance Treaty of May 2, 1935. Though this pair of agreements had been made in response to Hitler's reintroduction of German conscription on March 16, 1935, in violation of the Versailles Treaty, and though they were soon to be tested and found wanting by Hitler's remilitarization of the Rhineland on March 7, 1936—again in violation of treaty obligations—which rendered France's military commitments to its several East Central European allies strategically worthless, the German propaganda assault on Czechoslovakia proved successful. Its victim stood isolated,

friendless, and shunned by all its neighbors at the time of the Munich tragedy in September 1938.

East Central European anti-Communism and fear of Soviet ambitions thus benefited and were manipulated by Germany—to such an extent, indeed, that the international politics of the 1930s were fatally skewed by fundamental misjudgments about the source of the immediate threat to the area's independence. A number of the local states owed all or much of their territory to Russia's weakness between 1917 and 1921; the ruling elites in all of them feared Communism. Hence they were understandably reluctant on the eve of World War II to grant the Soviet army access to their countries as their contribution to collective security against Nazi Germany. They feared that once in, the Soviets were unlikely to depart, least of all from lands that had been part of the Russian Empire. The Western governments, in turn, sharing many of these ideological and political anxieties and committed to the principle of the integrity of small states, were reluctant to press them into such a hazardous concession. Stalin, however, could scarcely be impressed by the West's assertion against the Soviet Union in mid-1939 of a principle—the territorial inviolability of sovereign states—that it had indecently sacrificed to Hitler at Munich less than a year before.

A circular dilemma thus arose: the East Central European governments were unwilling to accept Soviet assistance against the Nazi threat lest it either provoke the German invasion that collective security was intended to deter or simply become a Soviet occupation; the West now refused to cap its abandonment of Czechoslovakia in 1938 by coercing Poland and Romania into abdicating their sovereignty to the Soviet Union in 1939; Stalin was unwilling to expose his country to the risk of bearing the brunt of a war against Germany unless he could at least reduce that risk by forestalling Hitler in a military occupation of East Central Europe. Underlying the failure to resolve this dilemma were a set of interlocking misjudgments: (Stalin was skeptical of the West's readiness finally to stand up to Hitler, underestimated Britain's military competence, and overestimated France's military prowess. The Western governments depreciated the Soviet Union's military value and presumed that ideological incompatibility would prevent any Nazi-Soviet rapprochement. All miscalculated. The upshot of the unresolved dilemma was the German-Soviet Pact of August 23, 1939, and World War II, in which the *Wehrmacht* quickly disposed of the Polish and French armies and thus destroyed that Continental second front for

which Stalin was to implore his allies when that same *Wehrmacht* was later turned against him. A moral of this sad tale is that the balance of power is never automatic but requires rationality, perceptiveness, judgment, and perhaps even wisdom for its proper recognition.

The ease with which Germany, and later Russia, regained control over interwar East Central Europe was based on more than just ideological and psychological manipulation, important though that was. They also capitalized on the abdication of the other Great Powers and on the profound politico-demographic and socioeconomic weaknesses and conflicts within the area itself. On the morrow of the peace settlements closing World War I, the United States withdrew into isolation, the United Kingdom turned to a policy of encouraging the revival of Germany in order to “correct” a supposed, but actually illusory, French Continental preponderance, Italy entertained its own dreams of hegemony in the Balkan Peninsula and the Danube Valley, and France adopted a self-contradictory stance of making far-ranging political and military commitments to several states in East Central Europe but simultaneously undermining these commitments with defensive and isolationist strategic and economic postures. France, though granting them some loans, traded very little with its East Central European protégés, protected its own agriculture from their surpluses, and sought to veto their industrialization programs for refining their own mineral resources owned by French concessionaires. Simultaneously, France’s Maginot strategy—a function of the multiple trauma of having been bled white during the war and then deserted by one ally (the United States) and persistently restrained by the other (the United Kingdom) after its close—eroded the credibility of its alliance commitments in East Central Europe. That credibility was finally flushed away with its passive acceptance of Hitler’s remilitarization of the Rhineland, after which he could direct the bulk of the *Wehrmacht* against selected East Central European victims without fear of French counteraction in western Germany.

Thus East Central European hopes of achieving security by bringing the weight of benevolent, if distant, Great Powers to bear against the area’s rapacious and immediate neighbors proved abortive. During the 1920s, only Germany’s and Russia’s temporary postwar and postrevolutionary exhaustion had provided East Central Europe with a respite, despite their ominous diplomatic collaboration. In the 1930s, though both countries were rapidly reviving, their ideological and political enmity briefly extended this reprieve to the lands between them, until their fateful reconciliation at the area’s expense in 1939.

2

Given this constellation of predatory, indifferent, and ineffective Great Powers, a constellation that it could neither prevent nor even control, East Central Europe might have attained at least a minimum power credibility if it had been able to achieve internal regional solidarity and some system of mutual assistance. But this alternative, too, was negated by the multiple divisions and rivalries that were born of competing territorial claims, ethnic-minority tensions, socioeconomic poverty, mutually irritating national psychologies, and sheer political myopia. These factors transformed the area's internal relations into a cockpit and facilitated Hitler's program of conquest. It is scarcely an exaggeration to suggest that as a general rule in interwar East Central Europe, common borders entailed hostile relations. Thus the "blame" for the demise of the region's independence must be charged to its own fundamental weaknesses, the instability of its institutions, and its irresponsible governments, as well as to the active and passive faults of the Great Powers.

Simply to list the area's internal irredentist disputes may convey an impression of their cumulative complexity, though not of their bitter and well-nigh paralyzing intensity. Lithuania and Poland quarreled over Wilno (Vilnius, Vilna), which the former claimed on historical and the latter on ethnodemographic and strategic grounds. Poland and Czechoslovakia were mutually alienated by (1) their dispute over Teschen (Těšín, Cieszyn), where the former's sounder ethnodemographic claims clashed with the latter's economic needs; (2) their contrasting perceptions of Russia's and Hungary's proper roles in the European balance, each regarding the other's *bête noire* with some benevolence; (3) the conviction of each that the other had doomed itself by greedily incorporating too many unabsorbable, and hence inflammable, ethnic minorities; and (4) their contrasting social structures and national psychologies—that is, Polish gentry versus Czech bourgeois. Czechoslovakia was also under revisionist pressure on historical and ethnodemographic grounds from Hungary. Hungary, as the biggest territorial loser of World War I, nursed territorial claims on historical and/or ethnodemographic grounds against all four of its neighbors; Czechoslovakia in regard to Slovakia and Ruthenia; Romania over Transylvania; Yugoslavia with reference to the Vojvodina and perhaps Croatia; Austria over the Burgenland (this last, less intensely than the others). Yugoslavia coveted the Slovene-populated portion of Austria's Carinthian province, and Yugoslavia and Romania were, in turn, the objects of Bulgarian irredentist resentments over Mace-

donia and Southern Dobruja, respectively. In addition, Bulgaria directed similar pressures against Greece over parts of Macedonia and Thrace. Bulgaria's revisionist rationale was the characteristic combination of historical, ethnodemographic, economic, and strategic arguments. As regards Albania and Austria, finally, the major problem was not that irredentist aspirations were harbored by and against them—though they, too, existed—but that their very existence was challenged and their survival seemed doubtful during the interwar era.

As though these quarrels within the region were not enough, a number of its states were under even more ominous pressures from the Great Powers. Weimar Germany remained unreconciled to the loss of the Pomeranian “Corridor” and of southeastern Silesia to Poland, and Hitler was to add to these revisionist grievances his claims to Czechoslovakia's highly strategic, German-populated, Sudeten perimeter and to all of Austria. Less pressing was Germany's suit against Lithuania for the retrocession of the city and district of Klaipėda (Memel). The Soviet Union remained openly unreconciled to Romania's incorporation of Bessarabia and harbored designs on Poland's eastern borderlands, with their large Belorussian and Ukrainian ethnic populations. Its attitude toward the Baltic States was more complex but still ambivalent. Italy craved Yugoslavia's Dalmatian littoral on the Adriatic Sea and schemed to fragment the entire Yugoslav state into its ethnoregional components. It also aspired to control Albania directly and to intimidate Greece into subservience. Indeed, Italy's ambitions also included the establishment of diplomatic protectorates over Austria, Hungary, and Bulgaria, in order to redouble the pressure on Yugoslavia. But in contrast to Germany and the Soviet Union, Italy lacked the economic and military muscle to realize its political designs.

Thus each state of interwar East Central Europe had one or more enemies within the area, and each of the “victor” states among them also had a Great Power enemy—Poland even had two. Its numerous “internal” enmities, alas, rendered the region even weaker than it need have been with respect to the “external” ones, and all efforts at reconciling the former were aborted by rampant chauvinism. The spirit of the age was not supranational, as had been naïvely predicted during the war, but ultranational. Indeed, it appears that the only really potent international ideology in the area at that time was neither Marxism, on the left hand, nor dynastic loyalism, on the right, but anti-Semitism based on both conviction and expedience. This, in turn, provided a bond and precondition for eventual collaboration with the Nazis, including the administration of wartime genocide.