The year 1721 was in many ways a turning point for the history of central Europe. It saw the end of the Great Northern War (1700–1721), which marked the end of the often near-genocidal religious wars between Catholics and Protestants in the Holy Roman Empire. It also signaled the conclusion of the similarly near-genocidal wars between Catholic Poland-Lithuania and Orthodox Muscovy, on the one hand, and between the Habsburgs and the Ottomans, on the other. This warring Central Europe of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was the theater in which Sweden launched vast military expeditions against and across the Holy Roman Empire, Poland-Lithuania, or Muscovy, even reaching the Ottoman Empire. Muscovy defeated Sweden, putting an end to the latter country’s dream of a Central European Empire. Even Sweden’s Baltic littoral provinces of Ingeria, Estland, and Livonia were lost to Muscovy, alongside Karelia; for the time being Muscovy returned Finland to Sweden. Tsar Peter the Great had gambled on the permanence of his military victories and had ordered the construction of the port city of St Petersburg in Ingeria already in 1703. A decade later, the Muscovian capital had been moved from Moscow to this brand new city, built in a European style. The 1721 Treaty of Nystad (now Uusikaupunki in Finland) reestablished peace between Muscovy and Sweden. In the same year, Peter the Great’s renamed Muscovy as the Russian Empire, though Sweden only somewhat recognized this claim two years later in 1723. Prussia, which had become a kingdom securing its independence from Poland-Lithuania in 1701, acknowledged this change in Muscovy’s official name immediately in 1721. Of its former continental empire, Sweden retained only the Scandinavian province of Scania (gained from Denmark) and a cluster of possessions in the north of the Holy Roman Empire. Poland-Lithuania remained independent, but continued losing territory to Russia and found itself in the latter polity’s sphere of influence. In 1772, when the Habsburgs, Prussia, and Russia partitioned the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth for the first time, the Polish-Lithuanian monarch had no choice but to recognize Muscovy under its novel name of the Russian Empire, and also the change in the Prussian monarch’s title from “King in Prussia” to “King of Prussia.” Now the Prussian King was fully equal to all other monarchs of the royal rank.

The southward expansion of Muscovy-turned-Russia toward and around the Black Sea replaced Poland-Lithuania as the Ottomans’ main Christian adversary power in this corner of Central Europe. After the lifting of the Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683, the Ottoman Empire gradually lost territory both to the Habsburgs and Poland-Lithuania. In 1699 Poland-Lithuania regained Podolia from the Ottomans, while by 1718 the Habsburgs had reconquered all of historical Hungary, alongside southern Walachia and northern Serbia. The vast depopulated steppe border region, in what today is eastern Ukraine, known as the “Wild Fields” in Polish historiography or Zaporizhia (literally, “land beyond the rapids” on the Dniester River) in its Ukrainian counterpart, was a buffer zone between Poland-Lithuania, Muscovy, and the Ottomans. It was populated first by Turkic-speaking pastoralists and later increasingly by runaway serf peasants from Poland-Lithuania and Muscovy, along with some fugitives from the Crimean Khanate. In the early modern period they gave rise to the militarized population of Cossacks, who were predominantly Slavophone and Orthodox. From the sixteenth century through 1820s, they established a series of republican polities centered on successive saxes, or fortified riverine island-capitals, in the Dnieper and the Danube delta. Cossacks switched alliances between all the neighboring powers, as it suited them, but eventually most threw in their lot with Orthodox Russia, increasingly successful in its wars against the Ottomans. In the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (Kaynardzha, in today’s northeastern Bulgaria), St Petersburg compelled the Ottoman Empire to recognize Russia as an empire, alongside the independence of the Crimean Khanate, soon to be annexed by Russia in 1783. By 1792, the Russo-Ottoman boundary had moved to the Dniester River and in 1812 Russia gained a third of Moldavia east of the Prut River, that is, Bessarabia (or today’s Moldova). Meanwhile, in 1795 Poland-Lithuania had been extinguished in the third and last partition carried out by the Habsburgs, Prussia, and Russia. These events limited Ottoman control to the territories south of the Danube and Sava rivers. In 1829 Russia occupied both Danubian Principalities of Walachia and Moldavia. The Russian occupation lasted for half a decade until 1834 and left these two nominally Ottoman polities with much broader autonomy than they had enjoyed previously. This 1828–1829 Russian war on the Ottomans was fought in support of the Greek Rebellion or War of Independence (1821–1829). The independent Orthodox Kingdom of Greece was founded in 1821. This event bolstered the autonomous status of the Ottoman Principality of Serbia, founded in 1815 in the wake of the two Serbian Rebellions (jointly known as the Serbian Revolution) in 1804–1817. The Ottoman Sultan, under the pressure of Russia and the Austrian Empire, had no choice.
but to fully recognize autonomous Serbia in 1830. Although since the turn of the seventeenth century Montenegro had de facto been an independent ecclesiastical principality, and some European powers engaged in relations with it (especially after the 1852 secularization of this polity), its independence, alongside Serbia’s, was de jure confirmed only in 1878.

The political shape of Central Europe’s western half remained largely unchanged until the French Revolutionary wars (1792–1802) and Napoleonic wars (1803–1815), which ended the relative period of peace in the region that had lasted since 1721. The only exceptions were the two Silesian wars (1740–1742, 1744–1745) fought by Prussia against the Habsburgs. As a result, Prussia annexed the Habsburgs’ richest province of Silesia. Napoleon extinguished the merchant republics of Venice and Ragusa (Dubrovnik) in 1797 and 1808, respectively, and under his pressure the Holy Roman Empire was dissolved in 1806. This was Central Europe’s largest and most stable polity that had survived for almost one millennium, functioning as the region’s pillar of stability. Two years earlier, in 1804, the Habsburgs, fearing such an outcome, had overhauled their hereditary lands into an Austrian Empire. The northern half of the defunct Holy Roman Empire was made into France’s satellite of the Rhine Confederation. For the first time in the modern period, Napoleon put a Kingdom of Italy (1805–1814) on the map. He also created a staunchly pro-French Duchy of Warsaw (1807–1815, or today’s central Poland) from the Polish-Lithuanian lands that had been annexed in the last (third) partition. The northeastern Adriatic littoral (or present-day southern Austria, Slovenia, northeastern Italy, and most of Croatia) was made into the Illyrian provinces, which were directly incorporated into France. The French invention of nationalism as the basic (“infrastructural”) modern ideology of statehood creation, legitimation, and maintenance translated into the beginnings of Illyrian (Croatian and Slovenian, and later Yugoslav) nationalism and Polish (noble) nationalism in the Warsaw Duchy. Reaction against French domination led to the emergence of German nationalism in the Rhine Confederation, the Austrian Empire, and Prussia.

Following the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, which saw Russian troops move as far west as France, the postwar Congress of Vienna passed the Duchy of Warsaw, renamed as an (autonomous) Kingdom of Poland, to Russia. Cracow and its vicinity were removed from the Duchy and made into a Free City of Cracow under the joint control of Austria, Prussia, and Russia (or the original three powers that had partitioned Poland-Lithuania in the late eighteenth century). Earlier, Russia, when allied with Napoleon, had fought a war against anti-Napoleonic Sweden (1808–1809), leading to the annexation of Finland, made into an autonomous Grand Duchy within the Russian borders. Furthermore, the Congress of Vienna punished pro-Napoleonic Denmark with the loss of Norway, which in turn was given to anti-Napoleonic Sweden, as a kind of indemnification for the earlier loss of Finland. The former territory of the Holy Roman Empire was overhauled into a German Confederation, with Prussia and Bavaria considerably enlarged, though with the Austrian Emperor still in charge.

Following the War of the Polish-Lithuanian Succession (1733–1735), the Habsburgs lost control of the kingdoms of Naples and Sicily, which passed to the Spanish Bourbons, who continued ruling them as separate monarchies. In 1806 Napoleon seized the former realm, while the British established control over the latter. Both kingdoms were reestablished in 1815 at the Congress of Vienna and were united the following year (1816) into a single Kingdom of Two Sicilies. As part of their tactic of blockading Napoleonic Europe, in 1807 the British seized the former Venetian territory of the Ionian Islands, subsequently made into a United States of Ionian Islands in 1815.

What is not remembered well enough is that the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars had a profound influence on the Ottoman Empire, mainly due to Bonaparte’s Egyptian campaign of 1798–1801. The Western ideas of nation, revolution, progress, and modernity became part and parcel of the Ottoman politics and intellectual world via Egypt. This land nominally remained part of the Ottoman Empire, but de facto the Sultan lost his richest province to the Albanian warlord, Muhammad Ali Pasha, originally tasked with reestablishing Ottoman control over Egypt. He successfully overhauled his newly gained realm into a Middle Eastern empire, with its lands extending from the Peloponnesus and Crete in the north to present-day Southern Sudan and Somalia in the south, and in the east to Cyprus, Palestine, and Lebanon, and deep into the Arabian Peninsula (including Mecca and Medina). Muhammad Ali claimed the title of Khedive (or Viceroy) for his dynasty, which the Ottoman Sultan finally recognized in 1867. This dynasty Westernized the country’s army, administration, economy, and culture, making Egypt into a nation-state. A program of translations from French and Italian (and later from English) into Arabic transformed this ecclesiastical-cum-juridical language into a Western-style Einzelsprache as we know it. Numerous Albanian specialists migrated from Rumelia (the European section of the Ottoman Empire) to Egypt from the early nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. In 1952 the monarchy was abolished and Egypt was made into a republic. The last king of the Muhammad Ali Dynasty was expelled, together with his predominantly Albanian (in ethnic origin) court. The 4,000 families, or about 20,000 persons, found refuge in Western Europe and the United States.

The upheaval of the French incursion into Egypt, followed by the rise of the Muhammad Ali-led Egyptian Empire, distracted the Ottoman administration’s attention from other parts of the Ottoman Empire. An effort for the “New Order” (Nizam-ı Cedid) reforms in 1789–1807 came to an abrupt end when the Janissaries deposed the Sultan. Subsequently, Russia—in formal alliance with Napoleonic France since 1807—waged a long war against the Ottomans (1806–1812), until Napoleon’s attack on Russia in 1812. In this context, the rebellious disturbances in Serbia and Montenegro’s engagement with enemy Christian powers were too minor for the Ottoman government to deal with them decisively. This relative lack of reaction, additionally fueled by the example of the rise of de facto independent Egypt, only encouraged the Serbs and Montenegrins, and later the Greeks. All of them learned
that in order to get European support and approval they needed to clothe their demands for autonomy or independence in the terms of the novel ideology of nationalism.

All the religious wars and political changes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did not alter Central Europe’s dialect continua much. At that time the logic of expulsions or exterminations was (ethno-)religious in its character, not (ethno-)linguistic. In 1620, the Protestant Estates of Bohemia lost to the Catholic Habsburg Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Subsequently, those predominantly Slavophone nobles and burghers of Bohemia who refused to convert to Catholicism had to leave the Habsburg lands, in total 150,000 to 200,000 people. They were replaced with loyal Catholic nobility who were predominantly Germanic-speaking. In 1627 German was made into a co-official language, alongside Czech, and soon became dominant in administration. Afterward, the Habsburgs’ central territories of Bohemia and Moravia that previously had been homogenously Slavic-speaking became increasingly mixed (bilingual), or Slavic and Germanic in their linguistic character. Likewise, the Khmelnytsky Uprising (1648–1657, known as the National-Liberation War of the Ukrainian People in Ukrainian historiography) of Poland-Lithuania’s Slavophone Orthodox Ruthenians and Cossacks (ancestors of today’s Ukrainians and Belarusians) against the commonwealth’s Slavophone Catholic nobility did not change anything in the North Slavic dialect continuum. However, because the Cossacks specifically targeted Yiddish-speaking Jews, their diasporic presence became less pronounced. This resulted in a lower number of Germanic-speakers in the southeastern corner of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

In the wake of the Great Northern War, the boundary between the North Slavic dialect continuum and its Finno-Ugric counterpart changed in the former’s favor across Ingria, which Russia seized from Sweden. This change was connected to the construction of St Petersburg and moving Russia’s capital to this new port city. The influx of Slavophones swamped Finno-Ugric-speakers in this previously sparsely populated region. Similarly, Russia’s conquest of the northern Black Sea littoral, often entailing flight and expulsion of the Muslim population, who tended to be Turkic-speaking, led to the expansion of the North Slavic dialect continuum there at the expense of the Turkic dialect continuum. In the Ottoman Empire’s European section (Rumelia), the development of trade and cities caused an increase in the diasporic presence of Muslim Turkic-speakers across the South Slavic and Albanic dialect continua, well into today’s Bosnia. Following the Habsburg reconquest of Hungary and the reestablishment of peace, the diasporic presence of Indic-speaking Roma grew in this kingdom. It is interesting to remember that this diaspora of these Indic-speakers is connected to the Indo-Iranian dialect continuum, which today continuously extends from the Kurdish areas in eastern Turkey and northern Iraq to Iran, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and across northern and central India to Bangladesh.