Words in Space and Time

Kamusella, Tomasz

Published by Central European University Press

Kamusella, Tomasz.
Words in Space and Time: A Historical Atlas of Language Politics in Modern Central Europe.
Project MUSE. doi:10.7829/9789633864180.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/97875

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3024961

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Scholars and commentators writing about the modern history of Central Europe frequently remark that ethnic or ethnolinguistic nationalism is typical of this region. However, most authors do not venture beyond emphasizing the importance of national languages (Einzelsprachen) for Central Europe’s nationalisms, meaning specific actualizations of the ideology of ethnolinguistic nationalism. This remark is often combined with the commonplace assertion that prior to the Great War the political scene of Central Europe was dominated by empires, which are qualified with the labels “multinational,” “multietnic,” or “polyglot.” This situation basically leaves the reader alone to interpret what the practices of ethnic nationalism were, and still are, in Central Europe, and how ethnolinguistic nations and their nation-states are created, legitimized, maintained and dismantled. This dilemma is deepened by the continuing methodological quarrel between primordialists (often nationalists themselves, that is, supporters of ethnolinguistic nationalism) and modernists (constructivists, and at times anti-nationalists). The former believe that nations (or the ethnic groups underlying them) are “eternal” (as emanations of nature or a divinity’s will) or at least “centuries-old,” while the latter stress that nations have been built, each constructed from a myriad of micro-ethnic groups, in Europe during the last two centuries, or only in the modern period, so there is no evidence for the earlier existence of nations or even the very concept of the nation. In reply, primordialists criticize modernists for paying too much attention to nation-states, which are seen as secondary to nations in the Central Europe of ethnolinguistic nationalism. They agree with modernists that there is no evidence available for any pre-modern existence of nation-states, but claim that the lack of such evidence does not deny the fact of the premodern existence of nations as “emanations of nature, a divinity’s will,” or of some unspecified “national destiny.” In this line of reasoning, it is proposed that nations existed earlier than the technology of writing, statehood, and scholarly research; that scholars with their concepts and theories only now are able to catch up with such “eternal” characteristics of nations by describing them and “(re-)discovering” their “centuries- or millennia-old” history. In this stance, primordialists confuse historiography with national history (or national master narrative), and mistake nationalism for scholarship. But their “research” is of much use as a potent instrument of statehood legitimization for the governments of Central Europe’s nation-states, so it is lavishly financed. In turn, university professors’ monographs written in the primordialist vein become the much needed “scientific proof” and basis for writing history textbooks for schools. As a result, the primordialist self-perception of a given nation housed in its own nation-state is fortified and reproduced, passed from one generation to another. Typically, such a self-perception (often indistinguishable from self-deception) was constructed and codified no earlier than a century or two ago.

However, it is viciously difficult to breach the resultant socio-political feedback loop, because with time, national historiography becomes impervious to facts and evidence. Those whose research refutes some cherished myths of national history are often branded as “unpatriotic,” or even as “traitors.” They have problems securing grants for research projects or even university posts in their nation-states of origin. When foreigners from outside Central Europe put themselves to the task of probing into (and often debunking) some elements of the region’s national master narratives, national historians “patriotically fight back” by opining that such foreign scholars are “naturally” incapable of “understanding properly” a given nation’s history, because they have an imperfect command of the national language, or—which is an argument of the last resort—that they are not (born, native) members of the nation under scrutiny. In this manner the primordialist (often emic) view of national history wins hands down in Central Europe’s nation-states, often influencing the constructivist (often, outside, or etic) approach. On the plane of international research, this situation yields a widespread myopia, which consigns the existence of nationalism as a modern ideology of statehood formation, legitimization, and maintenance to Central Europe only. It is so, because after the Great War the victorious Allies under the leadership of the United States President, Woodrow Wilson, consciously overhauled the political shape of Central Europe, replacing this region’s non-national polities with ethnolinguistic nation-states. Such a concentrated international effort at destroying non-national polities and building nation-states in their place was never repeated anywhere else in the world. (Obviously, the breakup of the Soviet Union produced 15 nation-states of this type, but until the moment of this split it had been a domestic Soviet affair, not an international effort at remolding the non-national communist polity of the Soviet Union into national polities.)

The aforementioned Central European myopia makes the world appear, as though, in the wake of decolonization in the mid-twentieth century, nationalism had not become the entire globe’s sole universally accepted infrastructural ideology of
statehood building, legitimization, and maintenance. Perhaps this myopia is also a result of the Central European insistence that the nation, construed as a group of people speaking their national language (that is, a speech community), is separate from and primary to the nation’s nation-state. This conceptual peculiarity of ethnolinguistic nationalism lets Central European nationalists claim that nations created in a civic manner (that is, by non-national polities redefining their populations as nations, and thus becoming nation-states themselves) are not “real.” Many external observers of Central Europe take it as a sign of “strong nationalism” in the region, entailing (for them) that nationalism elsewhere in the world either does not exist, or is weaker or even much more “benign.” Hence, the majority of classical studies on nationalism (with the notable exception of Benedict Anderson’s 1983 seminal essay *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, or Michael Billing’s 1995 insightful study *Banal Nationalism*) draw at Central European case studies. In turn, this scholar’s self-limitation reconfirms primordialists’ opinion that “real nations” exist only in this region, while constructivists and non-Central European students of the region accept this fallacy, which makes it difficult for them to see that nationalism is the present-day world’s sole infrastructural ideology of statehood building and maintenance.

* * *

In the case of statehood, ethnolinguistic nationalism can be usefully defined through a set of a limited number of practices observed in the construction of polities in Central Europe during the last two centuries, which are popularly recognized as nation-states by their own elites and external observers alike. As a result, such a definition may be applied to a variety of cases across the region and the world in order to establish whether a given polity was (is) an ethnolinguistic nation-state, when it acquired such a character, and whether other (non-national) polities in a given period aspired to overhaul themselves in accordance with the tenets of ethnolinguistic nationalism, or not. What is more, such an operational definition of ethnolinguistic nationalism differentiates the Central European type of nationalism from other types of this ideology extant elsewhere in the modern world, without denying the existence of nationalism outside Central Europe. This intimation shows that instead of focusing on Central Europe when striving to understand the “nature” of nationalism, researchers should rather take samples from all around the world and analyze them in a comparative manner.

In Central Europe the observable implementation of ethnolinguistic nationalism at the level of state-building follows the principle of the normative isomorphism (or tight spatial and ideological) overlapping of language (Einzelsprache), nation, and state. This principle may be also given in a slogan-like algebraic equation, namely, Language = Nation = State. In the socio-political practice of building nations and their polities across Central Europe, this means, that all the speakers (speech community) of language A are defined as nation A, and the territory, which they inhabit in a (preferably) compact fashion is presented as the “proper territory” of the proposed nation-state A. When an ethnolinguistic nation-state A has already been successfully founded, its sole official language must be the national language A. This national language in question must be also unique, meaning that it may not be shared with any other nation or polity. In addition, should any autonomous entities be proclaimed within the boundaries of nation-state A, no other languages but the national language A should be allowed in such territorial autonomies. By the same token, language A should not be employed in any official function in autonomous regions located in other polities. These are the necessary conditions of achieving the ideal of the normative isomorphism of language, nation, and state in a “truly ethnolinguistic” nation-state. However, ethnolinguistic nationalists aspire to the ideal of full ethnolinguistic homogeneity, entailing that native-speakers of other languages than the national language A, should be removed from nation-state A. Likewise, native-speakers of language A residing outside the boundaries of nation-state A should be “gathered” in (or coaxed to “return” to) “their homeland.” But in most cases, nationalists stop short of carrying out this absolutizing program because its implementation would mean multilateral expulsions of millions and practically never-ending wars with all nation-state A’s neighbors.

However, even short of the ethnolinguistic ideal, the actualization of the necessary conditions of the normative isomorphism of language, nation, and state is onerous enough on its own. Map 14 takes stock of the actual use of ethnolinguistic nationalism for statehood building, legitimization, and maintenance in 1910, about a century after the formulation of this ideology. Only three national polities fully fulfilled the structures of this normative isomorphism, namely, Norway in Scandinavia, alongside Bulgaria and Romania in the Balkans. In Norway, Norwegian was the nation-state’s sole national and official language, while the same function was fulfilled by Bulgarian in Bulgaria and Romanian in Romania. None of these three languages was shared with any other nation or autonomous region located in another polity.

Although textbooks of European history propose that the Kingdom of Italy and the German Empire were created as nation-states for the ethnolinguistically defined nations of Italians and Germans in 1861 and 1871, respectively, none of these two states fully complied with the normative isomorphism. Italy shared its national language with Switzerland, while the German Empire with Austria-Hungary and Switzerland. Hence, at most, Italy and Germany were nation-states “aspiring to fulfill the isomorphism.” In 1910, in Central Europe, this category included five national polities, namely, Austria-Hungary’s Kingdom of Hungary, Montenegro and Serbia, besides the aforementioned Italy and Germany. The Kingdom of Hungary (Transleithania) did not fulfill the conditions of the normative isomorphism because Croatian was employed in official capacity in Hungary’s autonomous provinces of Croatia and Slavonia. In the case of Serbia and Montenegro, both nation-states shared the very same national language of Serbian, which was also employed at the local and regional level in the “Austrian half” (Cisleithania) of the Dual Monarchy.
The logic of ethnolinguistic nationalism was also present in some other politics, but not as a leading ideology of the day for statehood creation and legitimization. Five states belonged to the category of these "other ethnolinguistic polities" in 1910, namely, the Cretan State, Cyprus, Denmark, Sweden, and Switzerland. Denmark retained its all too little known worldwide maritime empire, where either other languages than Danish were employed in official use, or colonials, even if Danish-speaking, were not seen as "real" members of the Danish nation. A similar "imperial compulsion" kept Sweden from becoming a straightforward ethnolinguistic nation-state, though this Scandinavian kingdom lost most of its Central European empire during and after the Great Northern War in the early eighteenth century. Until 1809 Sweden had ruled over Finland, which then Russia wrenched away from Stockholm. Afterward, in 1814, the anti-Napoleonic coalition rewarded the Swedish Kingdom's loyalty with Norway, summarily detached from pro-Napoleonic Denmark. As a result, until Norway gained independence in 1905, Norwegian had been a second national and official language in Sweden-Norway. After Norway parted ways with Sweden, Swedish continued to be shared in official capacity with Russia's autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland. After the 1847 civil war, briefly fought between Catholics and Protestants, Switzerland was reinvented as a confederation of ethnolinguistically and ethnoreligiously homogenous cantons, yielding a nation-state with three official languages (French, German and Italian) and its official name rendered in the neutral language of Latin, that is, the Confoederatio Helvetica.

The situation was different in the cases of the Cretan State (1898–1913) and the British-Ottoman condominium of Cyprus (1878–1914). In the former, Greek and Osmanlica (Ottoman Turkish) were in official employment, while in the latter both these languages and English. Greek ethnolinguistic and ethnoreligious nationalists saw both polities as "unredeemed territories" of the Greek nation-state. The Ottoman Empire, non-national in its character, disagreed with this logic and sought to protect both islands' mainly Turkic-speaking Muslims, while Britain used the continuing Greek-Ottoman enmity for its own imperial interests. None of the great powers intervened when Greece de facto seized Crete in 1908, when the Ottoman Empire was in the throes of the Young Turk (nationalizing) Revolution. However, the great powers did not recognize this annexation until the conclusion of the First Balkan War in 1913.

However, in 1910, the majority of Central Europe’s population lived in non-national polities, be it empires (Austria-Hungary’s Cisleithania, Ottoman Empire, and Russian Empire), the tiny secular polities of Liechtenstein and San Marino, or their ecclesiastical counterparts of Mount Athos and Vatican. The Vatican City was what de facto the Holy See was allowed by Italy to retain after the 1870 annexation of the Papal States. This arrangement was formalized only in 1929, when Rome officially recognized a Vatican City State.

Prior to the Great War, ethnolinguistic nationalism was a growing force of statehood construction and destruction, but it was still secondary to Central Europe’s non-national empires. The situation changed dramatically after 1918 when the victorious Allies, under the leadership of the United States, overhauled the region’s political shape in accordance with the normative isomorphism of language, nation, and state. The hope that ethnolinguistically homogenous nation-states would ensure stability and lasting peace in Central Europe was not supported by any evidence to this end.