**Ethnic Cleansing in Central Europe During the Balkan Wars, World War One, and in the Aftermath**

It is common knowledge that millions were exterminated across Central Europe in genocides and massacres during World War Two, that tens of millions were expelled, resettled, evacuated, or fled across the region or from it during the war and in the latter half of the 1940s. This awareness of the human and demographic tragedy effectively overshadows quite similar developments during, and in the wake of, the Balkan Wars and the Great War. Indeed, the Second World War’s bloodbath and ethnic cleansing were on a larger scale, but not extremely so, hence the question arises why the tragedy of the Balkan, Caucasian, Eastern, and Sontig (Soča, Isonzo) fronts of World War One is so much neglected and forgotten. Perhaps, part of the answer is the fact that all of the main states (empires) which underpinned the political reality of Central Europe prior to 1918 were subsequently destroyed and replaced with radically novel ethnolinguistic nation-states after the Great War. On the other hand, the interwar nation-states that were equally obliterated or radically overhauled during the Second World War were mostly recreated (even if in somewhat changed territorial and political forms) after 1945. After 1918 there was no Austria-Hungary, Ottoman Empire, or Russian Empire left to commemorate the wartime tragedy of their inhabitants, while following World War Two, Central Europe’s nation-states, the non-national communist polity of the Soviet Union (with its component national in their character Soviet socialist republics), and the newly founded Jewish nation-state of Israel were at hand to ensure such remembrance and commemoration of the victims.

Map 19 seeks to redress this silence about the scale of human tragedy, which wrecked lives and livelihoods of tens of millions during and after the Balkan Wars and the Great War, in line with the tenets of ideologically informed “demographic engineering.” It should be consulted in conjunction with Map 11, which offers an overview of earlier expulsions, deportations, and genocides, with a clear focus on the nineteenth century when demographic engineering became a consciously wielded instrument of politics. Map 11 debunks the common Western preconception that the long nineteenth century (1815-1914) was a period of stability and peace in Europe after the earlier bloodbath of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars (1792-1815). The creation of the Balkan nation-states and the Russian imperial expansion toward and around the Black Sea, and in the Caucasus and the Balkans left hundreds of thousands of victims in their wake, and generated similar numbers of destitute refugees, expellees and deportees. The story is as much forgotten as the even starker reality of ethnic cleansing, mass murder and genocide in the course of the Balkan Wars and the Great War. From the Central European perspective, from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, every generation of the region’s inhabitants suffered ethnic cleansing and genocide. Even later, during the Cold War, some populations that were deemed nationally or ideologically unwanted continued to suffer a similar awful and inhuman fate, though curbed to a degree by the nuclear stand-off between the two superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union. The strategic doctrine of MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) prevented Washington and Moscow from taking any unilateral decisions in Europe that could trigger a worldwide nuclear Armageddon of a feared World War Three.

But warfare forcing millions of refugees away from their homes, ethnic cleansing, and genocide did not disappear after 1945. The West exported these phenomena to the colonial world in the throes of decolonization, which subsequently was made into a theater of hot proxy wars between the Cold War world’s two ideological blocs. Earlier, the methods and instruments of demographic engineering for perpetrating genocide and ethnic cleansing had been first invented and trialed in the West’s colonies, and resulted in wiping out numerous ethnic groups (alongside their speech varieties and languages) across the Americas and Australia. Afterward, at the turn of the twentieth century, the first-ever now fully recognized instances of genocide had taken place in (Belgian) Congo and Germany’s South West Africa (today’s Namibia), costing the lives of 10 million and 150,000 victims, respectively. This strain of colonial demographic engineering, combined with its Russian imperial counterpart employed along the Black Sea’s northern littoral, had exported genocide and ethnic cleansing to the Europe of the Balkan Wars and both world wars, before “outsourcing” it to the postcolonial (“Third”) world in the wake of World War Two.

In Map 19’s time period, the dynamics of ethnic cleansing and genocide were conditioned by warfare, state destruction, and border changes carried out in accordance with imperial, national, and revolutionary goals. A fine-grained picture of this process is offered in Map 18, which sketches the sheer intensity and speed of state destruction and building through the lens of short-lived polities. Despite their brief existence of days, weeks, months, and a couple of years, these polities set the stage for ethnic cleansing and genocide, or importantly added to this stage, in some cases facilitating these processes, while
in others hindering. A detailed story of what happened at the grass-roots level during this tragic time in Central Europe still needs to be researched and written, otherwise most available accounts give snapshots of the situation, selected to fit a given national master narrative or an ideological stance.

Initially, in the course of the Balkan Wars, the nineteenth-century tradition of expelling or destroying unwanted populations as defined in terms of religions (and the “holy scripts” connected to them) continued across the Balkans, in Anatolia, and around the Black Sea. But the 1912 founding of Albania as an explicitly ethnolinguistic nation-state was a game changer. It rapidly added “a language” (Einzelsprache) to this definitional equation of demographic engineering, in emulation of Italy and Germany, established as ethnolinguistic nation-states half a century earlier (see Map 19b). Immediately prior to the outbreak of the Great War and during it, foreign aliens (or subjects of other monarchs) were removed from the border areas into the hinterlands of the empires, alongside some “untrusted populations.” In the case of the Russian Empire, the latter group was composed mainly of Jews and German(ic)-speakers simplistically seen as “Germans.” To quite a few, Jews’ “jargon” of Yiddish also appeared to be “a kind of German.” Likewise, Austria-Hungary mistrusted Orthodox Slavic-speakers, especially Rusyns, many of whom had converted from Greek Catholicism (Uniatism) to Orthodox Christianity at the turn of the twentieth century. The period’s largest removal of population was caused by St Petersburg’s 1915 order to evacuate the entire civil service (typically, ethnic Russians), and as many Orthodox Christians (that is, Belarusians and Ukrainians) as possible prior to the occupation of Russia’s western provinces (today’s Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland) by the Central Powers (see Map 19a).

At the close of the Great War and during its aftermath, the destruction of the empires and the founding of ethnolinguistic nation-states in their stead across Central Europe left numerous groups in ethnically (nationally) “foreign” countries, even if they had lived in their regions and localities for centuries. The concept of ethnolinguistic homogeneity as the basis for legitimizing these national polities turned, overnight, some ethnolinguistically defined groups into unwanted populations that had to be removed to their “kin countries,” or assimilated, often by force. Some, especially if they had been part of the imperial elite or privileged social stratum, tended to leave these new “foreign” nation-states of their own accord. What is more, the revolutionary fervor (be it communist, fascist, or nationalist) caused further millions to flee, when the political change endangered their traditional way of life, religion, socioeconomic position, or if the new political situation was at variance with their espoused values.

Millions of these expellees, deportees, evacuees, émigrés, or survivors of ethnic cleansing and genocide did their best to restart normal lives in their new kin states or emigrated to North America and Western Europe. This was especially true in the case of Jews, who after a millennium in Central Europe were left with no state of their own, “foreigners” in the region’s nation-states, at the mercy of growing anti-Semitism. Similarly, all too rarely discussed in literature, Roma—with no state to call their own—found themselves at mercy of rife anti-Tsiganism. The interwar Soviet Union’s promise of accommodating ethnolinguistic difference, alongside cultural and linguistic autonomy for Jews and Roma was a false dawn, a short-lived policy, decisively replaced with “Russophone internationalism” in the early 1930s. But apart from the peaceful majority resigned to their fate as survivors of ethnic cleansing and genocide, many organized state-supported revanchist groups and movements that sought to redress the postwar peace treaties, which they deemed unjust. These groups and attitudes fueled generalized populism, underpinning the rise of fascism and illiberal parties, which between the mid-1920s and the late 1930s, overhauled Central Europe’s democracies into dictatorships and totalitarian states, with the partial exception of Scandinavia and Czechoslovakia. With the privilege of hindsight, it can be said that the region was primed for yet another bloodbath, namely World War Two, following the United States’ withdrawal from Europe, the Great Depression, and subsequently the Entente’s and the League of Nations’ fateful decision not to guarantee and enforce the postwar peace settlement in Central Europe.