Words in Space and Time

Kamusella, Tomasz

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Isomorphism of Language, Nation, and State in Central Europe, late 1918

It is commonly proposed that the Great War lasted for four years, from 1914 to 1918. But this is a Western perception (or even preconception), which unfortunately dominates to this day, obscuring the dramatic and lasting effects that World War One visited on Central and Eastern Europe. Paradoxically, this war is best remembered in Belgium, Britain, France, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, because the conflict on the western front removed none of these polities from the political map of Europe. On the contrary, the much longer and extremely mobile eastern front (including the related Balkan and Caucasian fronts) destroyed or dramatically overhauled all Central Europe’s polities. Furthermore, the Great War lasted much longer in this region. The two Balkan Wars of 1913–1914 were a prelude to the almost seamlessly spilled over into the First World War across Central Europe, and the conflict was not over until the Russian Civil War petered out in late 1922, and the Turkish War of Independence a year later, in the summer of 1923. What is more, the follow-up population transfers, as the then legal instrument of ethnic cleansing was known, continued throughout the interwar period, effectively merging the Great War and World War Two into a single protracted conflict, which subsequently morphed into the Cold War. Central and Eastern Europe suffered an eight-decade-long “hot” and “cold” conflict from 1912 until the end of communism in 1989. But even the last cesura does not mark any definitive end of this prolonged twentieth-century warfare; the Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988–1994), the wars of Yugoslav succession (1991–2001), and the Transnistria War (1992) were a post-1989 “hot spillover” that extended this dark century across the threshold of the twenty-first century. In many respects it has continued with the Russo-Georgian War (2008) and the Russo-Ukrainian War (2014).

And the reverberations are still felt to this day in the form of the “frozen” Armenian-Azerbaijani (that got “defrosted” in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War), Transnistrian and Kosovan conflicts, and the Greek-Turkish conflict over Cyprus. Furthermore, if the post-Ottoman Anatolia and Near East are taken into account, it appears that the dark twenty century continues unabated there, rapidly becoming an equally dark twenty-first century. The undeclared Turkish-Kurdish civil war that broke out in 1978 rages on to this day. The conflict’s origins go back to the Great War, when the Allies proposed but failed to secure an ethnolinguistic nation-state for Kurds. On the other hand, London’s 1918 promise of a Jewish nation-state resulted in a similarly intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict, both ethnoreligious and ethnolinguistic in its character. In 2014, Russia added to this toxic mix, first, with the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War, and a year later (2015) by supporting the governmental forces in the Syrian Civil War (2011). From the longue durée perspective, it seems almost a case of wishful thinking to propose that the Great War ended in 1918. In many places in Central and Eastern Europe, the conflict-driven cycle(s) of statehood destruction, overhauling and (re)-creation, commenced by the Balkan Wars and the Great War, has not come to an end yet. The only constant in this upheaval is the ideology of ethnolinguistic nationalism in the name of which all the aforementioned series of interconnected conflicts have been fought. Other ideologies—be it anarchism, communism, democracy, ethnoreligious nationalism, fascism, national socialism, royalism, or the program of a worldwide caliphate—have had walk-on roles, but came and went, while the normative isomorphism of language, nation, and state still seizes the political imagination of the region’s populations, as it did a century ago.

Map 14 shows the shy rise of ethnolinguistic nationalism as an incoming ideology of statehood creation and legitimation, taking a snapshot of the three fully ethnolinguistic nation-states in 1910, and six more polities just aspiring to this ideal, while the majority of states (with the majority of the region’s populations) remained firmly non-national. The Balkan Wars and the Great War destroyed this long-established non-national order. First, a plethora of national, revolutionary, and other statehood projects were tried out mostly between 1917 and 1922 (Map 18), adding to the economic and political commotion and collapse. Second, the Balkan Wars and World War One, and their aftermath, were marked by vast forced evacuations, expulsions, and population transfers—or, in the present-day parlance—by successive waves of ethnic cleansing and even acts of genocide as in the case of Armenians and Assyrians in eastern and central Anatolia (Map 19). Moving borders and peoples opened the space for radical political and demographic engineering. While in 1910 only a handful of Central Europe’s polities were nation-states, eight years later, in 1918, most of them were already self-declared and internationally recognized national polities.

Bulgaria, Norway, and Romania, which were fully isomorphic (fulfilling the necessary conditions of the normative isomorphism of language, nation, and state) nation-states already before the Great War, were joined now by the short-lived independent Belarus, alongside Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and
Poland, which survived throughout the interwar period. The prewar nation-states of Greece and Italy that had aspired to the full normative isomorphism of language, nation, and state, were joined by many more, mostly emerging from the ruins of Austria-Hungary, the Russian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire. Albania was founded in 1912 as the Ottoman Balkans’ first-ever ethnolinguistic nation-state, that is, without using religion in the process of statehood formation and legitimation. However, during the Great War this nation-state was occupied and striven with a series of semi- or non-national statelets, which stripped Albania of full isomorphic status. In 1917, in the crumbling Russian Empire, Ukraine was founded as an ethnolinguistic nation-state. It was fully isomorphic only for a year, because in 1918 a second Ukrainian polity was established when Austria-Hungary split, namely, Western Ukraine. Both Ukraines united in 1919, so the short-lived single Ukrainian nation-state rejoined the “isomorphic club.” The Rusyns proclaimed a series of national councils-cum-polities along the east Galician-Hungarian borderland. Most were located in Carpathian Ruthenia, which survived in interwar Czechoslovakia as the country’s province of Subcarpathian Ruthenia (nowadays, Transcarpathia in Ukraine). Out of Galicia’s Rusyn councils-cum-polities, the Koman’cha Republic (presently in Poland) was best known. But no coherent Rusyn nation-state was formed. Although Finland announced its independence already in 1917, the process of ethnolinguistic national statehood construction was stopped in its tracks by the near-genocidal war between communists and nationalists in the first half of 1918. The latter won but needed to accept Swedish alongside Finnish as the country’s two equal official languages. In 1918, quite similarly, Czechoslovakia was not yet an ethnolinguistic nation-state, because it was still devised for the two separate ethnolinguistic nation-states of Czechs and Slovaks, speaking the two separate national languages of Czech and Slovak. Only later that year was a unitary Czechoslovak nation proclaimed, which two years later, in 1920, was endowed with the single national and official language of Czechoslovak. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, composed from the southern provinces of Austria-Hungary, alongside Serbia and Montenegro, was a tri-national polity with three official languages until 1921, when Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian were melded into the unitary national language of Serbo-croatoslovenian. However, only much later, in 1929, the kingdom’s tripartite name was changed to Yugoslavia and its three nations rolled into a single Yugoslav nation. The Allies at the Peace Conference in Paris denied ethnolinguistically defined national self-determination to the defeated Central Powers and their successors, namely to German-Austria, Germany, and Hungary. German-Austria (including, German Bohemia, German South Bohemia, German South Moravia, and Sudetenland) was prohibited from uniting with Germany and using its preferred name, instead it had to become known as “Austria.” Unlike the “Austrian half” of the Dual Monarchy, Hungary wanted to retain all of its ethnically non-Hungarian borderlands, and to this end fought wars with all its neighbors except Austria. Budapest also propped up the short-lived pro-Hungarian polities of Carpathian Ruthenia and Eastern Slovakia, before Hungary was defeated. The country was engulfed by a Soviet-style revolution, and finally shorn of its border regions containing one-third of all Hungarian-speakers, in line with the Treaty of Trianon that came into power in 1921.

The non-national Ottoman Empire, deprived of most of its territories in the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa, limped under repeated Allied and Greek attacks until 1923, when its Anatolian core was overhauled into a pronouncedly secular nation-state of Turkey. With its official and national language of Turkish, Turkey would have almost fulfilled the normative isomorphism of language, nation, and state but for the continuing use of Osmanlica/Turkish in the British colony of Cyprus. Likewise, the employment of Greek as an official language in this colony did not permit Greece to become a fully isomorphic ethnolinguistic nation-state, either. The ethnically Russian core of European Russia, in the wake of the October (Bolshevik) Revolution of 1917, was overhauled into a communist polity of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic. In late 1922 it became the largest constituent of the then founded Soviet Union. Italian and French territories-cum-polities in the Balkans were evacuated by the early 1920s, though Rome retained its outpost of the Aegean Islands (occupied in 1912) until 1947.

Map 20’s snapshot of the political situation in late 1918 clearly indicates the rise of ethnolinguistic nationalism as Central Europe’s dominant ideology of statehood formation, legitimation, and maintenance. It was only rivaled in the east by the Soviet-style universalism of communism. The Bolsheviks hoped for a swift victory of the revolution(s) across Europe and Asia, leading to a global communist universal state for the entire world, that is why they opted for a highly unusual name of their state, which did not include a single ethnic or geographic reference, so that this name could comfortably fit any place in the world, or ideally, the entire world. In the three subsequent years, the Bolsheviks’ hopes for a worldwide revolution were dashed in the wake of the harrowing multi-front Russian Civil War, which among others, involved the militarily very successful self-defense anti-ideological peasant non-polity, known as the Free Territory (Makhnovia), only later reinterpreted as an “anarchist state.” The defeat of the Red Army in the Polish-Soviet War (1919–1921) stopped the westward expansion of communism and liquidated the independent nation-states of Belarus and Ukraine, subsequently split between Poland and Bolshevik Russia. What is all too often forgotten, however, is the fact that the Soviet Union was not the interwar period’s only communist polity. Unlike in Europe, the Bolsheviks successfully spread communism in Asia. They transformed imperial Russia’s former protectorate of Uriankhai and (Outer) Mongolia (temporarily controlled by Russian Whites in 1920–1921) into the Soviet-style communist polities of Mongolia and Tannu-Tuva, which also functioned as ethnolinguistic nation-states. Hence, between the two world wars, three communist polities existed, the Soviet Union and its de facto Asian satellites of Mongolia and Tannu-Tuva.