Words in Space and Time
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In literature it is often erroneously maintained that between the two world wars no major cases of "population transfer" (ethnic cleansing) or "massacres" (genocide) were observed in Central Europe. By the mid-1920s, the various continuing legs of the Great War in Central and Eastern Europe had come to an end, while the region’s destroyed or territorially curtailed empires had been firmly replaced with ethnolinguistic nation-states and the communist (non-national in principle, but nationally organized) polity of the Soviet Union. This gigantic overhauling of the political shape of Central Europe generated waves of millions of refugees and expellees. Similarly, millions had earlier been forced out of their homes during the Balkan Wars, World War One, and the follow-up conflicts; many died in orchestrated bloodbaths, out of which the 1915 genocide of Armenians and Assyrians is the best known (see Map 19).

The prime goal of nation-states built in accordance with the ideology of ethnolinguistic nationalism was homogeneity. All inhabitants were expected to speak and write the national polity’s official and national language, including minorities. Despite the League of Nations’ extensive minority protection system, Central Europe’s nation-states excelled at not observing the seemingly treaty-protected rights of the minorities residing within their boundaries. During the interwar period, often falsified censuses indicated a constant decrease of such minorities as a share of a given state’s population, and frequently also in absolute numbers. Schools with a minority language as the medium of education were forced to close, the state’s official language was added as a second medium of instruction, and subsequently made into the sole medium of instruction at the cost of the minority language, which was turned into a mere school subject. This suppression of ethnolinguistically defined minorities was facilitated by the rise of authoritarianism, which during the two interwar decades gradually replaced democracy with dictatorships across Central Europe. Map 26 illustrates the policy of national homogenization with the case of ethnically Polish military and civilian settlers dispatched from central and western Poland to the eastern half of the country, predominantly populated by Belarusians, Jews, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians. What is more, growing authoritarianism, which increasingly morphed into totalitarianism, sent a wave of political refugees from fascist Italy. Meanwhile, in the early 1930s, concentration camps became increasingly popular as the place where political opponents (including leaders of minorities) could be removed, tortured, and often murdered.

Outside the area covered by the League of Nations’ minority treaties protection system, the Soviet Union engaged in its own version of demographic engineering in a quest for the ideological purity (homogeneity) of socialist (communist) classless society. The classes of aristocracy (dubbed “former people”) and bourgeoisie were liquidated through expropriation, incarceration, expulsion, and summary execution. Subsequently, the liquidated pre-revolutionary elite was replaced with the communist party’s leadership, doubling as government and managers of the economy. A new communist society was built from the “fraternal” classes of peasants and workers “united in a socialist alliance.” In turn, “uncertain elements,” or peasants and workers who stuck to the “prejudices” of religion or nationalism were “re-educated” in the vast network of forced labor concentration camps. The totalitarian (that is, extremely repressive) character of the Soviet system methodically crushed any effective opposition. In this situation, the communist party-state enjoyed monopoly in all aspects of public life and control over many spheres of private life.

The interwar years saw a growing popularity of eugenics, also known as “racial hygiene,” in Germany, Austria, and Scandinavia. This biologization of ethnolinguistic nationalism spawned a theory of “racial purity,” readily adopted by many scholars who developed a new field of research, known as the “science of race” (Rassenkunde). Unfortunately, from these scholars’ perspective, craniometry or other “methods” employed in their field did not allow for sorting members of an approved “higher” or “better” race from those belonging to “inferior” or “foreign” ones. Time and again, practitioners of Rassenkunde and the state administrators financing their research had no choice but to fall back on religion and Einzelsprachen as tools of identifying members of “scientifically defined” races. Somehow, when applied for the sake of social engineering, “science of race” did not differ in its methods from traditional national movements. However, the presumed and then widely accepted “scientific character” of Rassenkunde allowed for legitimizing the implementation of more drastic and unilateral policies than under this or that nationalism, whose proponents typically saw it as part of politics, not of science. Hence, not only were members of “inferior” or “foreign” races slated for marginalization and expulsion, but also for wholesale extermination. This was the fate meted out in Germany to the ethnoreligious group of Jews, to the ethnic group of Roma, and otherwise to the disabled, homosexuals, and opponents of national socialism, mostly communists.
and social democrats. The genocidal part of this program, with the ample use of concentration camps, was experimented with during the second half of the 1930s and implemented in full during World War Two. Map 26 depicts the beginning of this process, marked by the flight (“emigration”) and expulsions of Jews and political opponents from Germany and Austria, annexed by the former state in 1938.

The Third Reich’s totalitarian policy of marginalization, expulsion, and extermination was mirrored in the Soviet Union by the communist leadership’s program of hastened progress toward “full socialism.” In the marxist-leninist view, the Russian Empire was a feudal polity. Since in the ideology’s dogmatic (“scientific”) interpretation of history it is impossible to jump over marxist stages of human development, capitalism had to first be built in the economic sphere, while in the field of social organization the population had to be molded into ethnolinguistically defined nations. For the sake of the latter, the policy of korenizatsia (nativization or indigenization) was implemented with an eye to building Einzelsprachen and employing them as languages of publishing, education, and regional administration. Additionally, the New Economic Policy (NEP) ushered a form of limited capitalism into agriculture and industry across the Soviet Union. With these concomitant stages of social and economic development achieved by the turn of the 1930s, the Kremlin pressed on to another social stage of multiethnic socialist society with the leading “Soviet socialist language” of Russian and to the socialist stage of planned economy. But most did not want to give up their private farms and shops to the state, or to abandon their newly standardized and now valued languages in favor of Russian.

In the early 1930s the opposition to the collectivization of agriculture was broken with the genocides of Ukrainians and Kazakhs, known as Holodomor (death by starvation). Their protracted mass execution was carried out through administratively created hunger, which lasted for several years in the respective republics and led to millions of deaths by starvation. Opponents of collectivization during the Holodomor, and afterward, some survivors, whom by default the authorities did not trust, were thrown into concentration camps, or exiled to Siberia and Central Asia. During the latter half of the 1930s, the national elites (writers, journalists, scholars, and party leaders) of the Soviet Union’s recently constructed or revived ethnolinguistic nations were liquidated, be they Armenians, Azeris, Belarusians, Georgians, or Ukrainians. For the sake of securing its western border, Moscow ordered the eastward expulsion and decimation of borderland populations with their co-ethnics living across the state frontier. Massacres of genocidal proportions were meted out especially to Soviet Poles, but also to Soviet Germans and Greeks, alongside other ethnolinguistically defined groups of Soviet citizens.

Prior to the outbreak of World War Two, Germany, Hungary, and Poland annexed the adjacent parts of Czechoslovakia in 1938, triggering flights and expulsions of Czechs, Jews, Slovaks, and Rusyns to rump Czechoslovakia. The following year, when Germany and Hungary annexed most of what remained of Czechoslovakia, the rest was turned into the nation-state of Slovakia. Subsequently, many Czechs and Jews fled or were expelled from independent Slovakia to the Czech lands, made into Germany’s Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. The stage was set for wartime ethnic cleansings and genocides of a scale unprecedented in Europe (Maps 27 and 28). Ethnic cleansers and genocidaires drew upon methods of mass expulsion, incarceration, and extermination, as developed in colonial lands. For instance, between 1864 and 1867, the Russian armies expelled over 90 percent of the Circassians from their north Caucasian homeland. In 1864 alone half to three-quarters of the Circassians were exterminated. In Belgian Congo the colony’s 20 million inhabitants were de facto made into slave labor of companies producing rubber. In the process, between 1885 and 1908, half of the population, or 10 million, were killed. In Germany’s South West Africa, the German army rounded up the colony’s inhabitants, the Hereros and Namas, and exterminated 80 percent of them between 1904 and 1907. A clear course for Western-style modernity was set.