Words in Space and Time

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By the turn of the 1950s, the postwar political shape of Central Europe had been largely settled. The Iron Curtain cut through the region until the fall of communism in 1989. Presumably, the Cold War “froze” any conflicts and the closed and tightly guarded borders between the Soviet bloc countries and the West prevented any substantial population movements. Hence, the popular opinion maintains that no instances of ethnic cleansing (“population transfers”) were observed during the time in Central Europe. Map 30 seeks to problematize this stereotypical and simplistic view. In the communist period, expulsions, forced migration, and flights of populations were governed by two factors: first, ethnolinguistic nationalism, and second, many Central Europeans’ continuing dislike and distrust of communism and the Soviet Union. With time the latter was deepened by a clearly visible inefficiency of the Soviet bloc’s planned economies, which failed to provide for the population at large. In contrast, the “economic miracle” (Wirtschaftswunder), facilitated by the United States’ postwar Marshall Plan of vast economic and financial aid, beginning in the 1950s produced an unprecedented level of general prosperity in West Germany, Austria, and elsewhere in Western Europe. Due to the arms race between the West and the Soviet bloc, the difference in standards of living continued to widen. The stagnating Soviet bloc economies were unable to catch up with their Western counterparts. As a result, a growing share of the bloc’s GDP had to be spent on armaments in order to maintain a parity in nuclear warheads and conventional arms with the West.

After the war, Jewish survivors faced rife anti-Semitism that often prevented them from returning to their home villages, towns, and cities. In most cases they had no chance to regain their real estate, let alone movable property. What is more, Jewish survivors had no choice but to meet, on an everyday basis, wartime neighbors who often had betrayed their families to Germans. Others found it psychologically impossible to stay in places where most of their family and neighbors were killed. Central Europe’s countries looked to them like one big Jewish cemetery. Hence, when Israel was founded in 1948, many left for this Jewish polity, which is none other than a Central European ethnolinguistic nation-state in the Middle East. Others left for the United States and Western Europe. Unlike the cases of other ethnic populations, the Soviet bloc countries (with the partial exception of the Soviet Union in the 1960s–1980s) did not to try to stop the departing Jews. Soon afterward, an anti-Semitic campaign unfolded in the Soviet Union in 1952–1953, and the Soviet satellites in Central Europe dutifully followed suit through the 1950s. The last anti-Semitic campaign of this kind took place in Poland in 1968. The communist states’ governments, administrations and elites were cleansed of “rootless cosmopolitan” Jews. In accordance with the interwar and wartime practice of ethnolinguistic nationalism, there was no acceptance for treating Jews as full-fledged co-citizens, in spite of any constitutional and legal guarantees to this end. For the first time in its one millennium-long history, Central Europe was almost utterly deprived of any Jewish communities. The departure of Jews from the Soviet Union (mainly, the Baltic republics, Soviet Belarus, Soviet Ukraine, and Soviet Moldavia) continued through the 1970s, before stalling due to the 1979 Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, which terminated the decade-long East-West détente.

Between the founding of West Germany and East Germany in 1949 and the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961, almost three million East Germans left for West Germany and West Berlin. Despite the subsequent strict militarized and weaponized guarding of the borders of East Germany and West Berlin, almost half a million East Germans managed to leave for West Germany and West Berlin prior to the fall of communism in 1989. During the moments of decreased tension between East and West, and especially during the period of détente in the 1970s, West Germany’s burgeoning economy convinced the Soviet bloc countries to negotiate with Bonn the future of their remaining German(ic) minorities. The quid pro quo was that as long as West Germany agreed to some loans or direct payments in hard currency, the Soviet bloc countries conceded to “their” Germans leaving for West Germany. In essence, it was Western hard currency ransom money paid for the release of co-ethnics from the closed Soviet bloc nation-states. In this manner, hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans were permitted to leave Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia for West Germany. Ironically, many of these Germans officially were non-Germans in their communist polities of residence, as in the case of Kashubs, Mazurs, and Silesians in Poland, or that of Saxons and Swabians in Romania. Like with the departure of Jews, the forced emigration-cum-expulsion of ethnic Germans further deepened the ethnolinguistic homogeneity of the Soviet bloc’s nation-states.

Apart from this homogeneity, the ideological homogeneity of unqualified belief in Soviet communism also had to be instilled in the population at large. Detractors, dissidents and “uncertain elements” who stuck to their condemned old na-
nitional values, religion, or private ownership were sent to concentration camps, which were founded in each Soviet bloc country, alongside Albania and Yugoslavia, in the close emulation of the Soviet and wartime German examples. After the 1950s, most of these camps were closed and replaced with a network of special prisons and “psychiatric hospitals” for dissidents. Unsurprisingly, anti-Soviet or seemingly anti-Soviet uprisings, summarily suppressed, sent hundreds of thousands to the West, namely, in the wake of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, the 1968 Prague Spring, or the 1980–1981 anti-communist mass Solidarity movement in Poland. Many of those seen as detractors or dissidents, who nevertheless chose to remain in their countries, were subsequently imprisoned or suppressed. Finally, in 1986, the disaster in the Soviet nuclear power plant in the Ukrainian town of Chernobyl, close to Belarus, led to the forced evacuation of those in the vicinity. The exclusion zone, which straddles both Belarus and Ukraine, remains officially uninhabited to this day. The clearly ecological dimension of the tragedy rapidly delegitimized Soviet rule, which showed no respect for ordinary people. Subsequently, state-sanctioned ecological movements and organizations became the source of growing legal opposition to the communist party.

Meanwhile in the Balkans, the well-established pattern of ethnic cleansing, carried out in an ethnoreligious manner, continued unabated. The last remaining Greeks (that is, Orthodox Christians) were expelled from Turkey in the mid-1950s, and Greece replied in kind with the expulsion of Turks (or Muslims) from Greece. Similarly, Turks (that is, Turkic-, Albanian, and Slavic-speaking Muslims) continued to be periodically expelled from Yugoslavia and especially from Bulgaria, as they had been since the nineteenth century. In 1974, the heavy-handed Greek attempt at unifying Cyprus with Greece (or annexing it, which was the Turkish interpretation of the events) evoked a swift Turkish counterattack, finally leading to the division of this island. A mutual ethnic cleansing swiftly followed. Greeks (Orthodox Christians) from the Turkish-dominated north left for the Greek south, while Turks (Muslims) from the south to northern Cyprus. In 1984, Turkey’s undeclared war against the country’s Kurds commenced, sending tens of thousands of Kurdish expellees to western Turkey. In the 1990s the number grew quickly to hundreds of thousands, even millions. However, the largest postwar act of ethnic cleansing in Europe during the Cold War was the 1989 expulsion of 370,000 Turks and Muslims from Bulgaria to Turkey. What is often forgotten is that this act of ethnic cleansing was the most important cause of the end of communism in the former country.

The communist period commenced with ethnic cleansing and genocide and finished with ethnic cleansing. Later, at the turn of the 1990s, the breakups of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia generated more waves of refugees, expellees, and re-settlers. For instance, practically all remaining Jews left the late Soviet Union and the post-Soviet countries for the West and Israel. In 2017, 1.5 million Russophone Jews accounted for almost one-fifth of Israel’s Jewish population (Zadka 2006). Arguably, the most tragic situation was observed during the wars of Yugoslav succession marked by hundreds of thousands of casualties and millions of expellees. These wars actually introduced the term “ethnic cleansing” to the lexicon of international law and international relations. This term firmly replaced the former euphemism of “population transfers.” The latter term normalized expulsions as legal and supposedly conducive to human rights, while the former outlawed them as illegal crimes against humanity. The post-communist period in Central Europe did not commence only with democratization and the transition from a centrally planned to market economy. Its beginning is also steeped in the ethnic cleansings and genocides of the post-Yugoslav wars.

The employment of ethnolinguistic nationalism as the region’s sole legal and popularly espoused ideology of statehood construction, legitimation, and maintenance continues unabated, despite the fact that it has produced periodic bouts of ethnic cleansing and genocide since the early nineteenth century. Many thought that the project of European integration, as epitomized by the Council of Europe and the European Union, may finally change for the better the rules of the political game in Central Europe. The holy grail of ethnolinguistic homogeneity and national egoism might be replaced with the model of open society, which thrives on inclusion. But it appears that after 2015 this hope has been dashed, due to the rise of ethnolinguistic populist movements with strong authoritarian leanings, which gained power from Poland to Bulgaria and from Austria to Slovakia. As a result, “illegal immigrants,” “Islamists,” the “insufficiently patriotic,” and national minorities have become the brunt of these populist-cum-nationalist governments’ criticism and “preventive actions,” which in no time may morph into renewed acts of ethnic cleansing and even genocide. Worryingly, the number of instances of discrimination against, murders, and pogroms of Roma has increased sharply. The combative xenophobic rhetoric works because it generates votes so that illiberal and undemocratic parties may soon solidify their hold on Central Europe’s ethnolinguistic nation-states.