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Intellectuals and the “National Question” in Post-1918 Central and Eastern Europe (An Introduction)

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Abstract

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This article provides introduction and context for the papers published in the current issue. Seven case studies examine the conceptions of “nation,” national existence, national history and national art in the writings of influential intellectuals active in a variety of fields—historians, literary critics, artists and art critics, and a philosopher—in Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and their successor states throughout the 20th century. Individual cases are analysed within the context of period nationalist discourse and policies of nation-building with special attention devoted to various aspects of the intellectuals’ strategies in adapting concepts and theories from foreign sources and appropriating them to domestic national(ist) ideological contexts and doctrinal needs via assimilation, bending existing doctrines or deconstruction. The articles presented here provide readers an opportunity to learn about the intellectual’s relationship to the ruling powers, and about their efforts to legitimise or delegitimise regimes, national ideologies and policies, construction of narratives about nation-states’ deeply historical origins and the nature of national art and literature.

The rise of ethno-centric nationalism in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe¹ sparked another intense debate on the role of national imagination in the legitimization of sovereign states and the appropriation of a subjectively felt right to self-rule. An underlying tension began to grow between the nationalists, which saw many prominent intellectuals arguing for the long-term essentialist, inherently ethnic and cultural-linguistic view of “their” nations, and social scientists who, drawing on methodological innovations from mostly western sources, reconceptualized the “nation” as a socially constructed community. Within the regions of Central and Eastern Europe, the debate unfolded in different forms and with differing intensity, producing a range of political and public outcomes. In some countries, such as Slovakia, this debate did not develop properly at all and all cautious attempts to draw attention to constructivist approaches to the study of nationalisms were marginalized or openly ignored. However, in other countries, methodological nationalism still represented a dominant interpretative framework through which “the past” was approached and understood. Given this almost incontestable position of a national imagination in social and political practices of the region, an examination of the intellectual roots of this state of affairs must be sought.

1 CORDELL, Karl – JAJECZNIK, Konrad (eds.) *The Transformation of Nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe. Ideas and Structures*. Warsaw : University of Warsaw, Faculty of Journalism and Political Science, 2015.

Throughout the larger part of the 20th century, the “nation” in Central and Eastern Europe functioned primarily as a fundamental political and cultural category that was understood by most as referring to a substantial reality of deeply historical and natural collective social entities. Historians and scholars had asked questions regarding the ontological and epistemic status of a “nation” only to a limited extent—questions concerning the mode of existence and knowability of “nations” had had appeared marginally and almost exclusively within the context of controversies concerning different notions of the national existence, national culture and language, and national territory.

Particularly in the case of the two polyethnic states on which the authors of this issue have focused, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia (and their successor states), the debates were framed in terms of the genuineness or artificiality of nations, or those concepts of “nation”. This was primarily a (de)legitimizing discourse, not a critical analysis of the nature of the existence of “nations”. Any assumed distinction between the “real,” “original” and “historical” Slovak or Croatian, Slovenian etc. nations on the one hand, and the “artificial,” “constructed,” “ahistorical” Czechoslovak and Yugoslav nations on the other framed, to a significant extent, the underlying theoretical ontological and epistemological points of departure in the debates.²

Participants in the debates on both sides sought to “primordialise” and profoundly historicise “their” nations. However, on the side of the “Czechoslovakist” and “Yugoslavist” authors, these attempts were hardly convincing and failed to effectively counter the basic political argument by the representatives of particularist nationalisms, according to whom the notions of Czechoslovak and Yugoslav nations were in fact “proxy concepts” of Czech and Serbian “national imperialisms.” Despite the particularistic nationalisms gaining dominant ground after the Second World War, the statist concepts of the Czechoslovak and Yugoslav nations did not disappear altogether and discussions on the authenticity and deep historicity of the “real nations” and “artificiality” of the constructed notions of composite “state nations” came to a definitive end with the demise of state socialism in both federations, only to be replaced with an intensification—rather than resurgence, as is often suggested—of nationalist motives in the national histories in the early 1990s, now removed of Marxist jargon and terminology.

2 For more details on both cases see: HUDEK, Adam – KOPEČEK, Michal – MERVART, Jan (eds.) *Czechoslovakism*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York : Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2022; BAKKE, Elisabeth. Czechoslovakism in Slovak history. In TEICH, Mikuláš – KOVÁČ, Dušan – BROWN, Martin D. (eds.) *Slovakia in History*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 247–268; LASS, Andrew. “What are we like?” National Character and the Aesthetics of Distinction in Interwar Czechoslovakia. In BANAC, Ivo – VERDERY, Katherine (eds.) *National Character and National Ideology in Interwar Eastern Europe*. New Haven : Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1995, pp. 39–64; DJOKIĆ, Dejan (ed.) *Yugoslavism: Histories of a Failed Idea, 1918–1992*. London : Hurst & Co., 2003; DJOKIĆ, Dejan – KER-LINDSAY, James (eds.) *New Perspectives on Yugoslavia: Key Issues and Controversies*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York : Routledge, 2010; BELLAMY, Alex J. *The Formation of Croatian National Identity: A Centuries-Old Dream?* Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2003; BANAC, Ivo. Historiography of the Countries of Eastern Europe: Yugoslavia. In *The American Historical Review*, 1992, vol. 97, no. 4, pp. 1084–1104.

In the recent scholarship on nationalism, there is a broad agreement that the perceived reality of “nations” is an outcome of social practices, institutionalised education and indoctrination, symbolic representation (both material and discursive) and cultural production.³ The role of intellectuals—and particularly historians and scholars from other disciplines of humanities—in the production, reproduction and corroboration of ideas, theories and narratives that have made “nations” appear to be substantially real, tangible entities have been instrumental in the past one or two centuries.⁴ Though at the phenomenal level, the transfer, translation or rendering of ideas from a narrow scholarly and professional discussions to the various public discourses that inform social practices is an immensely complex, multifaceted and multifactorial process, the importance of intellectuals in their role as “guarantees of truth” in modern societies should not be overlooked.

In recent years, quite a heated debate has occurred among academics on the status and continual relevance of intellectual history as a distinct field of inquiry, a discipline contested over the last half-century. First, it was considered consumed by other, more fashionable approaches, namely cultural and social history. Then after the linguistic turn, it was suddenly returned to the spotlight with an unheard-of enthusiasm as, according to its most ardent proponents, everything could now be read as “text.”⁵ For the purposes of this volume, the broadest definition of intellectual history will be embraced, which can be summarized as “the study of intellectuals, ideas and intellectual patterns over time.”⁶ From the wide range of approaches available to be attached to the realm of intellectual history, inspiration will be drawn mainly from the methods of linguistic contextualism (Q. Skinner) and perspectives

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- 3 For reference, a selection of the most influential works the social constructivist arguments on “nation-building” are based upon: GELLNER, Ernest. *Nations and Nationalism*. Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1983; HOBSBAWM, Eric – RANGER, Terence (eds.) *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1983; ANDERSON, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London; New York : Verso, 1991; BILLIG, Michael. *Banal Nationalism*. London; Thousand Oaks : Sage, 1995; SKEY, Michael – ANTONSICH, Marco (eds.) *Everyday Nationhood: Theorising Culture, Identity and Belonging after Banal Nationalism*. London : Palgrave Macmillan, 2017; BRUBAKER, Rogers. *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. Cambridge; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1996; BRUBAKER, Rogers. *Ethnicity Without Groups*. Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 2004.
- 4 Cf. BAÁR, Monika. *Historians and Nationalism East-Central Europe in the Nineteenth Century*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2010; DELETANT, Dennis – HANAK, Harry (eds.) *Historians as Nation-Builders Central and South-East Europe*. Houndmills; Basingstoke; Hampshire : Macmillan Press, 1988; BERGER, Stefan – LORENZ, Chris (eds.) *Nationalizing the Past: Historians as Nation Builders in Modern Europe*. New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; BERGER, Stefan – DONOVAN, Mark – PASSMORE, Kevin (eds.) *Writing National Histories: Western Europe Since 1800*. London; New York : Routledge, 1999.
- 5 For a brief overview, see MÜLLER, Jan-Werner. European Intellectual History as Contemporary History. In *The Journal of Contemporary History*, 2011, vol. 46, no. 3, p. 574–590. For more on the subject, see McMAHON, Darrin, M. – MOYN, Samuel. Introduction: Interim Intellectual History. In McMAHON, Darrin, M. – MOYN, Samuel (eds.) *Rethinking Modern Intellectual History*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 3–12; COLLINI, Stefan. The Identity of Intellectual History. In WHATMORE, Richard – YOUNG, Brian (eds.) *Companion to Intellectual History*. Oxford : Willey Blackwell, 2015, p. 7–18.
- 6 GORDON, Peter, E. What is Intellectual History? A Frankly Partisan Introduction to a Frequently Misunderstood Field. Unpublished essay, The Harvard Colloquium for Intellectual History, 2012. Available at https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/history/files/what_is_intell_history_pgordon_mar2012.pdf.

of cultural history, also with respect to the cultural efficacy of the ideas dispersed by intellectuals.⁷

Instead of gathering evidence on the spread and role of nationalist discourse in Central and Eastern European political practice, it is thus aimed to address the human agency behind the seemingly a priori existing national symbolism and imagining. The authors in this issue explore what Mark Beissinger calls the “quiet politics of nationalism,”⁸ in which intellectuals play an indispensable role as consolidators of national ideologies and cultures. As demonstrated in these pages, their agency was crucial in shaping the national consciousness, in the propagation of values they projected as characteristic for the particular “nation,” in disciplining the people internalizing these envisioned values and in describing the boundaries of who could and could not be considered part of a community. The studies presented here thus testify to the continual relevance of intellectual history as a lens through which contemporary European history can be studied and understood.

In the present issue, we look at the intellectual history of nationalistic thinking in Eastern and Central Europe after the First World War. This framework, from which the period of inward-looking romantic nationalisms of the 19th century was deliberately omitted, allows for a focus on different phases of the debate on “nation” and “state,” which sought to simultaneously identify elements of “national” and “universal,” and make sense of the relationship between them. The “national question” is understood to convey primarily the patterns of thinking about and working with the idea of “nation” developed by intellectual groups in diverse political contexts over time, stretching from the interwar period until the 1990s. Given this chronological and thematic scope, the focus is centred on those intellectual groups who proved to be instrumental in defining the social knowledge which is constituted part and parcel of nationalist discourses.

The current research sample includes predominantly historians, journalists, literary critics, artists and art critics, and a philosopher. By this approach, it is hoped to broaden the understanding of nationalism particularly in two dimensions—to examine the particular individual agency in the creation, legitimization, dissemination and preservation of national culture (national values); and to point out the diversity and scope of intellectual work involved in the production and invention of a national tradition. Such a perspective also enables to address a broader question of “cultural politics” behind particular nationalist discourses. As Katherine Verdery argued in her seminal work on national ideology under socialism: “Intellectuals engage in contests over different definitions of cultural value, competence and authority; they strive to impose their definitions of value and to gain recognition for their version

7 SKINNER, Quentin. *Visions of Politics. Vol. 1. Regarding Method*. Cambridge; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2002.

8 Particularly in regimes that officially proclaimed to be anti-nationalist, helped to define symbolic repertoires in which states and peoples might operate. See BEISSINGER, Mark, R. *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*. Cambridge, UK; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 26.

of social reality.”⁹ The centrality of intellectuals in the process of nationalization of societies was emphasized by anthropologists Dominic Boyer and Claudio Lomnitz, who challenged the exclusively epistemological readings of nationalism and proposed a more phenomenological approach in which the schemes of national knowledge are linked with concrete aspirations and the social imagination of intellectuals themselves.¹⁰

The cases assembled in this volume provide an opportunity to reflect on what qualities were thought to constitute a “nation” in the minds of intellectuals within different political climates, on the aspiring visions of “national peculiarity” and regional variants of thinking about “national character.” The answers to these questions could contribute to our understanding of the establishment and maintenance of communitarian relations based on social practices informed by nationalist history and culture narratives. By adopting this perspective, novel ways of understanding the contemporary history of Central and Eastern Europe are introduced and attention is brought to the shared as well as diverging patterns of operating and reframing the notion of “nation” in intellectual thought in this region.

By centring the analysis on “intellectuals,” there is a conceptual difficulty to define such a group as an analytic category. Any attempt to make sense of the intellectual’s work in a given period of time must start with the recognition that all knowledge developed during the process is the product of a “situated, motivated and gendered intellectual whose writing reflects a specific time, place and position in intellectual culture.”¹¹ To reconcile the tension between “intellectuals” as an analytic category and as a category of social distinction, we draw on the observations of Boyer and Lomnitz, who proposed to perceive intellectuals as social actors who have “a differentially specialized engagement with forms of knowledge and their social extensions,” rather than as carriers of a fixed set of attributes and characteristics.¹²

In what follows, nationalism mostly takes the form of an “imaginary universe,”¹³ to borrow a phrase from Harry Harootunian, rather an aspiration of a group or individual than a materialized reality. However, the studies here demonstrate extensive patterns of reproduction of the “national idea” in a variety of political and social contexts.

Matej Harvát analyses the evolution of the discursive construction of the rulership of the medieval historical figure Pribina. Representations of Pribina as an alleged sovereign prince of the 9th century Nitra principality were produced and reproduced throughout the 20th century by generations of Slovak nationalist intellectuals, historians and archaeologists to legitimise the right

9 VERDERY, Katherine. *National Ideology under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu’s Romania*. Berkeley : University of California Press, 1991, p. 18.

10 BOYER, Dominic – LOMNITZ, Claudio. Intellectuals and Nationalism: Anthropological Engagements. In *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 2005, vol. 34, p. 113.

11 BOYER – LOMNITZ 2005, p. 106.

12 BOYER – LOMNITZ 2005, p. 107.

13 HAROOTUNIAN, Harry, D. Commentary on Nationalism in Japan: Nationalism as Intellectual History. In *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 1971, vol. 31, no. 1, p. 59.

to independent Slovak statehood. Harvát studies the process of appropriation of this enigmatic historical figure portrayed as the “first ruler” of ethnic ancestors of contemporary Slovaks to serve current political needs. This case demonstrates the intellectuals’ indispensable role in the dissemination of the official “state-building” narrative, by supporting it with supposed historical evidence—despite misinterpreting available sources—as well as credibility to win over the masses for the desired political project.

Silvia Seneši Lutherová investigates the construction of Slovak “national specificity” in modern applied art in the works of two proponents of artistic modernization reform, Josef Vydra and Antonín Hořejš. She explores their attempts to reframe the traditional conception of Slovak “national art” as strictly “folk” against the background of artistic innovation from abroad. Their endeavours could thus be viewed as an attempt to “modernize” the attributes of Slovak national culture to be more in tune with the latest international developments, which in their eyes, would help to culturally accredit the Slovak “nation.” Interestingly, in the late 1920s, Vydra embraced the official Czechoslovakist discourse—abandoning his prior thinking focused on Slovak nation specifically—in order to, as Lutherová argues, gain political support to his own project of aesthetic reform (anti-folklorism). This case exemplifies the intellectuals’ pragmatic relationship to power, able to switch sides to pursue and enforce their own visions.

Viliam Nádaskay explores the concepts of “Slovakness” in the works of three literary critics, each of whom is considered a proponent of a different stream of contemporary ideology – nationalist/autonomist (Stanislav Mečiar), Czechoslovakist (Andrej Kostolný) and communist (Michal Chorváth). Situating them in the midst of a Slovak battle with Czechs over the right to self-rule, he illustrates how their thinking on the Slovak “nation” shaped the symbolic language and themes of literary culture that would come to be characterized as typically Slovak and reveals a self-perceived duty to use their work to discipline recipients in national awareness, make them internalize the proper values and in effect, to legitimize the political right to national self-determination. Interestingly, what differed in the three conceptions was not as much whether to advocate or oppose the right to self-determination, but in their attitudes to “wordlines.” That is, whether the national literature should speak exclusively to the Slovak people, carrying a rather national-educational function (Mečiar), or should it also possess some universal validity and thus be able to communicate to a broader international audience (Kostolný). For some, this would earn Slovak literature international recognition and legitimize it as a sovereign form of national literature.

Michaela Lenčéšová explores the shifting conceptions of the “nation” in the works of Slovak Catholic philosopher Štefan Polakovič during the wartime Slovak republic (1939–1945). She analyses Polakovič’s inspiration from the German national-socialist concept of *Volksgemeinschaft* which he adapted to the local context, particularly in terms of its reconciliation with the official

Catholic critique of racism and chauvinism as expressed in the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* issued by Pope Pius XI in 1937. Lenčėšová demonstrates the effort to enroot particularly the cult of Cyril and Methodius and the theory of the Svätoplukian crown into the broader national consciousness in order to manifest the ancient Christian origin of the Slovak state as well as to compensate for the otherwise missing tradition of Slovak statehood. Interestingly, Lenčėšová interprets Polakovič's historical constructions and flirtations with a notion of *Volksgemeinschaft* in purely pragmatic terms, against Hungarian nationalism and territorial ambitions, to enforce the revision of the Vienna Award which he saw as a violation of the—God-given—natural right of the Slovak nation to its national territory. This was also the reason why he later embraced the concept of “Slovak living space” and even predicted that deportations of Magyars would follow after Jews and Czechs. The study shows one of the ways Catholic intellectuals strived to come to terms with large geopolitical changes and take new positions in the changing world.

Lucija Balikić explores how the “national question” operated in the imagination of two camps of post-war Croatian historians; one group more receptive to the methodological inspiration from abroad, particularly the Annales School, and another who harboured more positivistic and teleological approaches, whether Marxist or nationalistic. Still, both groups were mainly preoccupied with the themes of Yugoslav and Croatian national movements. A focus is placed particularly on the work of Mirjana Gross who, although advocating for a more constructivist approach towards the study of Croatian nationalism and the ideology of Yugoslavism, left yet a rather contradictory legacy of giving ammunition to the nationalist-oriented narratives that gained momentum in Croatia during the 1990s. Particularly, it was her work on a 19th century Croatian writer and politician, Ante Starčević, which was misused by Croatian politicians, refashioning Starčević to a position of “Father of the Homeland.” This example demonstrates how intellectual work sometimes took unpredictable trajectories and new meanings once it landed in public discourse. Historians' works were frequently used to legitimize the Croatian statehood and denounce the Yugoslav legacy, which went hand in hand with the rehabilitation of the Ustaša movement and Croatian rightism. The strong political pressure to provide a more “Croatian” reading of history for the purposes of state-building and legitimacy eventually marginalized the voices of those few historians who, like Gross, advocated for more constructivist approaches.

Adam Hudek's study considers the evolution of nationalistic thinking among Slovak communist intellectuals from the early 1920s until the late 1960s. He focuses on the diverse attempts of several generations of communist writers turned politicians and historians to reframe the Marxist-Leninist doctrine to be more in line with their own nationalistic narrative, which eventually crystallized into the programme of Slovak national communism. This study shows that for many communist intellectuals, the integration of nationalist discourse into their political project was not only a strategy of legitimization

and earning popular support, but also a manifestation of their own ideological self-identification with the—imagined—national community. Their program of linking the political project of social transformation with the pre-communist era tradition of national awakening demonstrates again how persistently the idea of national emancipation is encrypted in the modern history of Central and Eastern Europe, and how vividly the nationalist thinking operated, even in minds of proclaimed “internationalists.”

Tjaša Konovšek analyses a debate by prominent Slovene historians—Janko Prunk, Peter Vodopivec and others—in 1993 on the pages of one of the most read newspapers in Slovenia, *Delo*, concerning the conception of Slovene national history and the notion of the Slovene “nation.” Prunk advocated for a rather primordialist understanding of the “nation,” projecting a linear historical path of the Slovenes through centuries of hardships until national independence—using the fact that Slovenes eventually reached an independent national existence as confirmation and justification of his theory. This notion was challenged by Vodopivec who, on the contrary, argued that the emergence of the Slovenian nation-state is not a culmination of a decades-long effort, but rather an abrupt discontinuity with traditional political thinking in the Slovenian space that was forever inclined to forming federations. Vodopivec thus viewed the Slovene nation as an “abrupt” formation with an unknown future, not as an entity that “completed” itself with the establishment of independent state. This debate occurred immediately after establishment of the independent Slovenian nation-state, when the concepts of nationality and statehood were not yet consolidated and soon after years of mobilization of national sentiment from the late 1980s. Both actors became politically active later, with a direct impact on school syllabuses and many generations of history students.