

Cultural Heritage of East Central Europe. A Historical Outline

East and Central Europe is a complex phenomenon. Its political history shows some of the main differentiae of the region. However, having written a concise social, political and economic history of the region the author of the present work found it insufficient to characterize the specificity of the region. What was really lacking was the main currents of the cultural development of its countries. Therefore, a brief overview of this development is offered in this book.

Anyone who goes through this history may ask the fundamental questions such as what constitutes the cultural identity of the region or whether the culture of the region has any common features at all. Outside observers usually tend to stress similarities of the region's national traditions. However, inhabitants of this part of Europe rarely feel they belong to any wider commonwealth of East and Central Europe. They rather feel Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Hungarian, or any other nationality of the region, than believe in a community of Eastern and Central Europe. It is partly the result of foreign domination and conflicts between these nations, but it is mostly the result of the subjective necessity to nurse native traditions at the cost of hearing each other's stories. There were times when some Slavonic nations of the region thought of a common identity and followed the Pan-Slavist prophecy, but the Russian and Soviet policies made them reconsider the idea of a Slavonic unity. Otherwise, there were very few historical, political, and cultural links between such distant nations as Estonians and Bulgarians, Latvians and Montenegrins, Poles and Slovenes or Hungarians and Albanians.

The traditional approach to nationality which is a result of three factors, i.e. language, religion and history, seems confirmed in this study. Unlike the unique case of Switzerland in the West, in East and

Central Europe the national language was and is in all cases a decisive factor. It helped formulate ideas and feelings and it helped reach other members of the same community. A word in the native tongue was a social binder especially in times of external oppression. Those sons of Polish landlords from the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania who chose to speak Lithuanian at home became Lithuanians. Those Polish Jews who used perfect Polish and sometimes even adopted Christianity became champions of Polish identity. Religion has always been important but not only as a factor influencing individual convictions but mostly as a sociological factor. This was so because of the political struggles over religious beliefs in Europe and because of the cultural impact of certain denominations. In recent times, as a result of Communist atheization policies and secularization, religion was often a pretext of conflict which had deeper historical, social and political roots.

Political history seems also important here since the changing political fates often mean changing national influence. The political history of individual countries was presented here only as a general background, but in all cases external control and the struggle for liberation was an important factor. In modern times the Estonians and Latvians struggled with the German economic and cultural domination and Russian political control, the Lithuanians had a problem with the Polish economic and cultural domination and the Russian control. The Poles, who felt they had lost a vast, multicultural commonwealth, could not handle this tragedy and could not reconcile with the emancipation of non-Polish nationalities. In the 19th century they also had a reason to perceive themselves as victims of German, Austrian and Russian oppression. The Czechs struggled against the Austrian German control and the Slovaks against the Hungarian control. Unlike the Poles, they both saw Russia as a natural ally. The Romanians wanted freedom from the Turkish rule and from the Hungarian domination in Transylvania but did not trust Russia because of the Russian occupation of Bessarabia. The Slovenes struggled against the Austrian German domination, while the Serbs, Bulgarians and other Balkan nations fought against the Turkish oppression. While the Poles were struggling against Russia, the Southern Slavs though Russia to be an ally against Turkey.

Special attention was paid in this book to the national cultures in the region. However, the history of culture, also in East Central Europe, is more complicated than that. This concerns mostly the Jewish component of East and Central European culture. These writers who wrote in Yiddish, such as Sholem Aleichem in Ukraine or Isaac Singer

and Sholem Asch in Poland, created a unique Jewish culture across national borders of the region. These Bohemian Jews who stuck to the German language, such as Franz Kafka, although a famous native of Prague, can hardly be rated as integral parts of the Czech culture. But they do belong, just like Marc Chagall from Belarus, to the universal culture. In literature the language speaks for the national character of a piece of work, but music and visual arts are more international in their essence. People like to listen to Fryderyk Chopin, Béla Bartok or Arvo Pärt not only because they were Poles or Hungarians or Estonians, but because their music is always moving. The same refers to such famous musicians as violinist Jasha Heifetz, born in Vilnius (Wilno) or Vladimir Horowitz, born in Kiev. The degree of attachment of the Jewish writers and artists to their native soil was complicated by the changing political fortunes in the region. They often belonged to the cosmopolitan elites but sometimes paid homage to the local national environment. This was for instance the case of the famous pianist Artur Schnabel, born in Polish Łódź, who grew angry with the absence of the Polish delegation during the United Nations opening ceremony in 1945 and played the Polish national anthem.

Another important question concerning the East and Central European culture is to what extent it was focused on particular native issues and to what extent on universal problems. The answer is that probably it referred to both. The struggle for the national identity and freedom of expression was a peculiar feature of the East Central European culture but universal problems such as love, admiration of nature, reflection on the injustice or the sense of human life, were also present.

East and Central European countries are hardly known in the West. Western history textbooks rarely mention such personalities as Adam Mickiewicz, Ferenc Liszt or Ivan Vazov to name just a few examples. However, the role of these people in the formation of national consciousness of the Poles, Hungarians or Bulgarians respectively was immense. Probably the per capita number of geniuses in East and Central Europe is no lower than in Western Europe. The problem was not only that they were often engaged in liberation struggles and not in promotion of their careers, but also that the strongest European centers of cultural impingement were elsewhere: in London, Paris, Berlin, Munich, Vienna, Venice or Rome. These centers attracted writers and artists because they were rich and politically strong. East and Central European men and women of culture could make a name only in these centers.

East and Central European nations are often accused in the West of extreme nationalism. Nationalism has frequently been a driving force of development in many countries, not only in East and Central Europe. However, what kind of nationalism is it? Peter Alter is right to comment: "It is clear that nationalism, so convenient a label and justification for many developments, conceals within itself extreme opposites and contradictions. It can mean emancipation, and it can mean oppression". The history of East and Central European culture shows both phenomena. When the Iron Curtain was dropped many authors in the West feared instability and ethnic strife in the region. However, except for unfortunate Yugoslavia, most of the countries of the region peacefully joined the European Union. This means that given peace and minimum stability, citizens of East and Central European countries may cultivate their traditions and may contribute to a wider European heritage.

Any reflection on culture should not ignore values, such as freedom, rationality, truth, justice, solidarity, beauty, hope or empathy. In this respect the 20th century brought East and Central Europe, just like the whole Euro-Atlantic civilization, a lot of damage. Totalitarian theories and practice of German Nazism and Soviet Communism devastated lives and mind of hundreds of millions of people and left societies atomized. Contemporary Post-Modernism is also dangerous but in a new way. As the spiritual heritage of Europe erodes, a bureaucratic European character rooted in European Union regulations flourishes. The increasing moral and cognitional relativism undermines the philosophical foundations of the European culture, such as for example the belief in the existence of objective truth, the definition of life and marriage, standards of sexual behavior or the oath of Hippocrates. Europe is becoming a community which is home to millions of people from outside the area and many countries face the threats of militant Islam. The real danger consists of the fact that few Europeans are really aware of these threats and even if so they admit they are helpless. Quite recently some Western authorities claimed East and Central Europe stayed behind again in intolerance and xenophobia. But defending their national identities East and Central Europeans may prove to be smarter than other Europeans.