

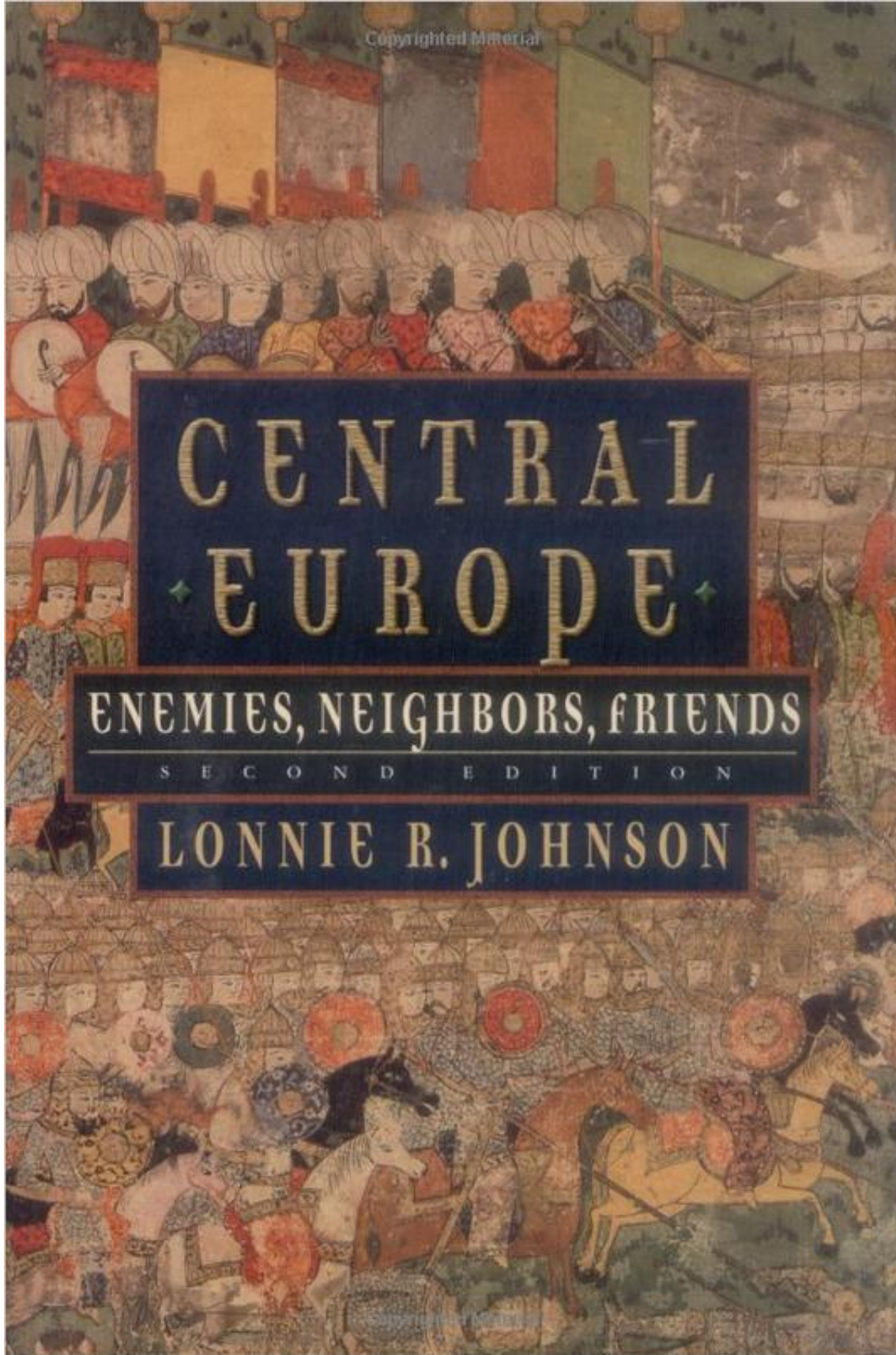
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CENTRAL EUROPE

ENEMIES, NEIGHBORS, FRIENDS

SECOND EDITION

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Introduction

Where Is Central Europe?

Historical memory, the presence of a past that is so remote that it bears little or no resemblance to the so-called realities of the contemporary world, is an important Central European attribute. History in this part of the world is epic and tragic; small nations frequently have struggled against larger ones and have lost regularly. The past consists of inexcusable transgressions and missed opportunities; the present is filled with unfinished business from the past; and the future is a chance finally to rectify a historical record that has been inauspicious at best and unjust at worst. Developing a sense for what could be called the subjective dimensions of Central Europe—the (usually pretty good) stories that Central European peoples tell about themselves and the (usually pretty bad) ones they tell about their neighbors—is important to understanding the region. Some of the problems Central Europeans have with themselves and with one another are related to the fact that their history haunts them.

Several different criteria are used in the following chapters to define Central Europe as a region distinct from Western, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe. The first is the relationship between religion and cultural orientation. Central Europeans consider themselves long-standing historical representatives of Western European culture because the various nations in the region were converted to Roman Catholicism, the Western form of Christianity, at the turn of the millennium. If one is willing to accept the Mediterranean world as the proverbial “cradle of Western civilization,” then Central Europe was drawn into the sphere of Western civilization relatively late. The Romans colonized only small portions of Central Europe west of the Rhine and south of the Danube, and the missionary work of the Christ-

ian churches in the early Middle Ages beyond the former frontiers of the Roman Empire proceeded from two different poles: Rome and Byzantium. The pagans of Central Europe were converted to Roman Catholicism, whereas the pagans of Southeastern and Eastern Europe were brought into the fold of the Eastern Orthodox Church. The differences between Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox ideas of "Christian dominion" led to fundamentally different societies and institutions in Central Europe than in Southeastern and Eastern Europe,¹ and Central Europe never really abandoned "the West" as a primary point of cultural orientation, although the formative impulses from Western Europe changed throughout the ages.

The frontiers of medieval empires and kingdoms provide a second criterion for defining Central Europe, and they correspond to a great extent to the religious frontiers between the Roman Catholic West and the Orthodox East. The "maximum" historical borders of this region date back to around 1500 and correspond to the western frontier of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, the southern and eastern frontiers of the Kingdom of Hungary, and the eastern frontier of Poland-Lithuania. Central Europe is a dynamic historical concept, not a static spatial one;² therefore its frontiers have shifted throughout the ages. For example, Lithuania, a fair share of Belarus, and western Ukraine are in Eastern Europe today, but they were in Central Europe 250 years ago because they then were parts of Poland.

Multinational empires are a third characteristic of this region. Hungary and Poland, small and medium-size states today, were empires in their own right early in their histories. The historical kingdom of Hungary reached its territorial peak at the end of the fifteenth century, and until 1918 it was three times larger than Hungary is now. Poland was the largest state in Europe in the sixteenth century, but it virtually disappeared from the map of Europe at the end of the eighteenth century. Both these kingdoms housed a wide variety of different peoples, and the Habsburg and Russian empires that eventually swallowed them were equally multinational, too. The experience of multiethnicity—a patchwork of peoples with different languages, cultures, and traditions living closely together—and imperial subjugation—smaller nations being conquered and ruled by larger ones—are essential parts of the Central European historical experience.

Western Christendom's centuries-long confrontation with the Oriental and Islamic empire of the Ottoman Turks also helped define Central Europe as a cultural and historical region. The fact that much of the Balkan Peninsula became part of the Ottoman Empire during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and stayed under Ottoman rule until the nineteenth century enhanced the differences between Central Europe as a "Western European" region and Southeastern Europe, which not only was religiously Eastern Orthodox but also became part of an "Oriental" empire. (The Central European use of the term "oriental" can be confusing. It does not refer to the Far or the Middle East, but to the Near East and the Ottoman Empire that was established on the Balkan Peninsula. The nineteenth-century Austrian statesman Clemens von Metternich once pointed out that the Orient started southeast of the city walls of Vienna.)

Peculiar patterns of Central European development provide a fifth criterion for defining the region. After the Middle Ages, Western European polities, societies, and economies began to modernize at much more rapid rates than did Central European ones, and the gap between the levels of development in these regions increased steadily as time passed. Indeed, retarded development or "backwardness" became one of the structural characteristics of Central Europe. As a region it undoubtedly stayed ahead of Islamic Southeastern and Orthodox Eastern Europe (or Russia), but it lagged behind the West.³ It will have to suffice at this point to state that the impact of Western European economic revolutions—from agriculture in the early Middle Ages to industry in the nineteenth century—and political revolutions—in seventeenth century England and in late-eighteenth century France—decreased in Central Europe in an almost proportionate relationship to the region's distance from these epicenters. Why did ultimately more prosperous and more democratic societies develop in Western Europe than in Central Europe? How did Central Europe fall behind and stay there?

One of the purposes of this text is to acquaint readers with the different national stories, histories, and historiographical traditions of Central Europe. Each nation in the region has its own story to tell. Consequently there is no one definitive Central European story but, rather, a number of conflicting national accounts colored by moral indignation, historical speculation, and nostalgic transfiguration. Central Europeans also have in their heads a number of different historical maps and milestones that are not particularly well known outside the region or necessarily respected by their neighbors, and they still regularly use them as points of orientation.

Furthermore, historians always have devoted more attention to the larger states and nations in European history, the "big players." Who knows much about the venerable traditions of Central European kingdoms like Poland-Lithuania, Bohemia, and Hungary and their valiant struggles for freedom? What does 1102 mean to Croats, 1389 to Serbs, 1526 to Hungarians, 1620 to Czechs, or 1772 to Poles? These are dates of world historical importance for these smaller peoples because they mark tragedies or defeats that led to the loss of national independence. Central Europeans sometimes expect other inhabitants of the so-called civilized world to know much more about their histories than they do. Many Poles, for example, assume that average Americans know something about the great American revolutionary figure Tadeusz Kościuszko. (Kościuszko was a "Polish Lafayette" who fought in the Continental Army against the British during the Revolutionary War. He finished the war as a brigadier general and an American citizen but migrated back to Poland, where he played a major role in a revolutionary uprising against Russia in 1792.)

Central Europeans also always seem to be able to find some remote historical precedent for an explanation of the present. They flash back from the present into the past—not in years or decades, but in centuries—and they flash forward with great facility from the past to the present. If you ask a Hungarian about the date of the most important *recent* event in Hungarian history, the chances of getting 1918 instead of 1989 are pretty good, and

1526 would not be out of the question in light of the fact that Hungarians look back on a continuous historical tradition that started in 896. Readers occasionally will be confronted with these kinds of jumps in the following chapters, too. Such leaps may violate the rules of chronological historical narrative, but they are important because they show to what extent Central Europeans think in historical terms, which points of reference they rely on, and how they deal with their own histories.

Moreover, Central Europe is a mode of self-perception. This voluntaristic definition may not be methodologically very sophisticated, but some people in this part of the world refer to themselves as Central Europeans, and others do not. Although Central Europeans may quibble among themselves about Central Europe, they generally agree on which peoples are to be excluded from this club: for example, Serbs, Bulgarians, Romanians, and Russians.

Central Europe also may be defined by invitation. In April 1994 Czech President Václav Havel asked Central European heads of state attend a summit to discuss the region's future. At this occasion, Thomas Klestil from Austria and Richard von Weizsäcker from Germany posed for a picture in an Baroque palace in Litomyšl in front of a life-size portrait of the Habsburg empress Maria Theresia with their Czech host and Lech Wałęsa from Poland, Michal Kováč from Slovakia, Árpád Göncz from Hungary, and Milan Kučan from Slovenia.⁴

Many histories of Eastern or East Central Europe focus primarily on Poland, the former Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. This history of Central Europe has a somewhat broader focus and brings "West Central Europe"⁵ into the picture by treating Germany and Austria as integral parts of the region. Slovenia and Croatia, small nations and newly independent states, appear primarily in their historical capacities as parts of Austria and Hungary before 1918 or Yugoslavia between 1918 and 1991.

Despite the preceding criteria that justify treating Central Europe as one region, the concept of Central Europe can be confusing because it may refer to different things for different people. Its meaning changes in different national and historical contexts, or as Jacques Rupnik, a Czech-born political scientist from Paris, observed: "Tell me where Central Europe is, and I can tell who you are."