

## PUTTING EASTERN EUROPE BACK INTO WESTERN CIVILIZATION: OR, WHY IS THE RUSSIAN STUFF ALWAYS AT THE END?

John K. Cox  
Wheeling Jesuit University

### Introduction

This essay offers a brief description of efforts by a specialist to rework courses for a general curriculum. Needless to say, this adaptation is a common concern for faculty at colleges and small universities. Where there is a strong core curriculum, professors are often called upon to teach surveys or other general courses that include but move well outside their specialties. My own graduate work was in East European history; my foreign research languages are Serbian, German, Slovene, and Hungarian; my visceral frames of reference for historical questions are quintessentially East European concepts such as nationalism, *irredenta*, great power hegemonism, lagging economic modernization, linguistic diversity, and cultural fault lines; my dissertation was a biography of a revisionist Yugoslav communist. But much of my time in our required freshmen classes is spent teaching a lot of different material, from Hatshepsut to Hiroshima. My colleagues have similar experiences. How do we adapt, and what constructive perspectives can a specialist bring to a general course?

This essay, however, also has a second aim: to help historians who are not specialists in Eastern Europe improve the way they integrate that region into general European history courses. The history of the lands east of Germany is complex, especially to North Americans. While I am sure that other historians approach the history of this region with nothing but the best of intentions, we cannot all be trained in everything, and, as it turns out, too often the textbooks we use are not without shortcomings.

### What Exactly is Eastern Europe, Anyway?

Before a treatment of our two main topics, we need a clear understanding of just what constitutes the region of Eastern Europe. Unfortunately there are almost as many definitions of Eastern Europe as there are scholars of the region. One common (but now superannuated) definition was of Eastern Europe as the Soviet-dominated communist countries of Europe. This created problems for scholars of Albania and Yugoslavia, which—though communist (or socialist)—were maverick states, beyond the control of the USSR. This definition also left Germanists in the lurch. What was one to do with East Germany, which ended up in Eastern Europe by an accident of military history and, although temporarily a loyal Soviet satellite, had precious little in common historically with Bulgaria or Romania? The East Germans, of course, had their minds on the other Germans during the Cold War, trying to build a relationship with their cousins to the West, while determining whether or not the German Democratic Republic really had its own cultural identity.

Another, and better, way to define Eastern Europe is as the sum of the countries of Central Europe plus the countries of the Balkans. Such a formula, of course, immediately requires further definitions. What constitutes Central Europe?<sup>1</sup> Undisputed candidates for inclusion would be Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovenia; scholars debate over Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia (the Baltic states) as well as Croatia and Slovakia; historians would include Austria during the Habsburg period. What countries comprise the Balkans?<sup>2</sup> Sure bets for inclusion here would be Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Macedonia, and (historically speaking) Greece. Questions of what to do with East Germany, the European provinces of Turkey, Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine make this solution less than comprehensive, however.

Yet another approach is embodied in the term "the other Europe."<sup>3</sup> Given the scholarly impetus to achieve equal "air time" for Eastern Europe, this emotionally charged term works. But in practice its advocates have not used it to include any of the former western republics of the USSR (the Baltic states, Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus). Russia itself would seem to belong in this definition; Russia certainly deserves inclusion in some definition of Europe that would produce more integrative thinking in the historical community. But its inclusion in "the other Europe" opens tricky doors to Siberian, Caucasian, and Central Asian studies, and it runs the risk of overshadowing small cultures and countries such as Slovakia, Macedonia, and the Baltic states. A more arcane way to conceptualize parts of this region, most often used by Germans and scholars of Germany, is the term *Mitteleuropa* ("Middle Europe"). But many East Europeans themselves dislike this notion, because it often connotes both Germany and the zones of Europe adjacent to the eastern border of Germany where Germans have historically played dominant (or at least important) economic, cultural, and political roles. In some people's minds, it is only a short leap from factual

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<sup>1</sup>See Czeslaw Milosz, *Central European Attitudes*, in *Cross Currents 5: A Yearbook of Central European Culture*, 101-108.

<sup>2</sup>The term "Balkans" is derived from a Turkish word meaning "wooded ridge" or mountain. See Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 22-25, and L.S. Stavrianos, *The Balkans Since 1943* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 2. It is commonly applied to those regions of southeastern Europe that were, for varying lengths of time, under Ottoman Turkish dominion.

<sup>3</sup>See E. Garrison Walters, *The Other Europe: Eastern Europe to 1945* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988), xi-xii. Walters notes that he borrowed this term from the American writer Philip Roth, who edited a series of novels that included works by Jerzy Andrzejewski (Poland), Tadeusz Borowski (Poland), Geza Csath (Poland), Milan Kundera (Czechoslovakia), Bohumil Hrabal (Czechoslovakia), Danilo Kis (Serbia), and Bruno Schulz (Poland). These novels were published by Penguin books in the 1960s and 1970s.

recognition of *Mitteleuropa* to the ideological and genocidal nightmares of the Third Reich's *Lebensraum* ("living space," to be added to Germany at the expense of East European neighbors) and *Drang nach Osten* ("push to the east"), although recent German history gives no indication that these expansionistic concepts linger in the minds of German diplomats.

The simplest and most reliable approach seems to be Alan Palmer's notion of Eastern Europe, set forth in 1970 in *The Lands Between: A History of East-Central Europe since the Congress of Vienna*. For Palmer, the phrase "the lands between" stood for the countries in between the German and the Russian cultural zones. The most concrete presentation of this approach is a good old-fashioned (but long) list: Albania, Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine, Yugoslavia (currently consisting only of the two provinces of Serbia and Montenegro). In terms of their history, Austria (up to 1918) and Greece (up to about 1950) should also be on this list. For the characteristics (besides location) that make this region a cohesive corpus for the purpose of scholarly study, see the section below entitled "Tips on Teaching Eastern Europe."

### The Importance of Eastern Europe

This section begins with a brief set of statements about important East European persons or events with great impact outside the region. While many historians are familiar with most or all of these points, a list can serve as a convenient source of ideas when re-thinking lectures and readings at both the high school and college level. The section concludes with more general remarks.

a) The Byzantine Empire was the most important successor state to the Roman Empire. The much-heralded collapse of "Rome" in the fifth century AD was in actuality a collapse of the western half of the Roman Empire.

b) The Eastern Orthodox churches represent an important branch of Christianity, both spiritually and historically. Often overshadowed by Christianity's Western European variants, Catholicism and Protestantism, Orthodoxy deserves study not just for its religious significance but also for its function as a pillar (or even department) of the state and as a cultural repository for smaller national groups.

c) Medieval Poland was a great power. It was also known for its religious tolerance and its proto-democratic (or stubbornly feudal) limitations on monarchical authority that paralleled those of England.

d) Culturally and economically, Medieval Eastern Europe was more advanced than Medieval Western Europe, especially its Christian (non-Iberian) parts. The glorious city of Constantinople and the trade routes of the "caravan world" characterized this relatively high development.

e) The Ottoman Empire was also known for its (relative) religious toleration, as is shown by the immigration of the Sephardic Jews from Spain after 1492 and the

*millet* (religious community) administration. Christians and Jews, while discriminated against in civic terms, were not systematically forced to abandon their faith. This example of Muslim respect for "peoples of the book" is a worthy antidote to many of the supposed lessons of late twentieth-century world history.

f) The Habsburg Empire played an important long-term role in industrializing many regions of Eastern Europe, especially Bohemia and Hungary, and also in familiarizing them with the procedures of democratic government in the late nineteenth century.

g) The cultural and intellectual achievements of cities such as Cracow, Prague, Vienna, and, in the twentieth century, Belgrade are well known and center on music, medicine, psychology, and of course literature. The region produced many famous authors, such as Ivo Andrić and Czesław Miłosz (Serb and Polish Nobel laureates, respectively) and Milan Kundera (Czech).

h) Cities such as Sarajevo, Prague, Vienna, and regions such as the Vojvodina and Bukovina have proven to be important crucibles of cross-fertilization in both high and popular culture. Politically, different national and religious groups have often lived harmoniously in these places.

i) The communist governments of Eastern Europe provided for massive improvements in the standard of living of their populations. This upswing was, sadly, accompanied by great state curtailment of civic and political freedoms and, during the Stalinist period, by the use of political terror. Furthermore, the basic methods of Soviet-style industrialization, focusing on heavy industry and central planning, were not able to sustain East Europe's economic growth or meet the rising expectations of a consumer economy. Nonetheless, economic modernization occurred under communist rule and Eastern Europe is today clearly a part of the industrialized world.<sup>4</sup>

j) The fall of communism represents a heartening example of the triumph of civil society and the possibility of nonviolent political change, except in the former Yugoslavia, which ironically was long the most liberal of all the communist regimes in Europe.

k) The four wars accompanying the break-up of Yugoslavia can serve to remind scholars and students of the responsibility of the international community for keeping the common peace in Europe. As in the case of the Spanish Civil War and the Holocaust, the temptation of short-sighted noninvolvement has obviously not disappeared.

Nowadays many teachers are redesigning many canons and curricula by attempting to build more non-Western or non-traditional history into courses. If the concept of "worthwhile history," like that of a canon of great literature, is to continue to exist, it will obviously be in an updated and more inclusive form. If we are

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<sup>4</sup>See Geoffrey Swan and Nigel Swain, *Eastern Europe Since 1945* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998).

considering more issues from women's history, for instance, and if we are now looking much more closely at class and race, may I make a plea for another "forgotten" history? Appreciation of diversity can begin at home. That home, for many historians who teach surveys, is Europe. Europe, in turn, is much more than France, Great Britain, Spain, Germany, and Italy.

There are many perspectives and types of knowledge that an Eastern Europeanist can bring to courses in Western Civilization. Geographical and linguistic considerations, a fuller cultural appreciation of Europe in general, and parallels that deepen one's understanding of West European events and trends—these are examples of the intellectual advantages at the fingertips of the East Europeanist. Terms such as *irredenta*, ethnic nationalism, and historical (as well as ethnic and strategic) rights have been popularized through discussion of Eastern Europe. Scholars of "the lands between" have traditionally needed to be familiar with both Western European and Russian history in order to flourish in intellectual life and survive in the profession.

We turn now to the second issue to be treated in this essay: how to improve the teaching of Eastern Europe by non-specialists.

### **What Makes Teaching About Eastern Europe Difficult?**

Looking at my Western Civilization courses, I have noticed that most textbooks pay too little attention to Eastern Europe. Sometimes, as well, they give insufficiently detailed or even erroneous information. Since most of us have far more training in West European history than in East European, and since the same is true of our students, I realize there is a natural tendency to build on what we know in our classes. It pays to link new material to old material. We do this, however, on pain of propagating unbalanced stereotypes about East European ethnic groups, religions, political persuasions, and levels of development.

Imparting cross-cultural exposure and enabling students (and teachers) to deepen their thought processes require breaking new ground by coming to terms with alien concepts, adopting fresh approaches, and digesting new nomenclature. It might be helpful for teachers to be aware of the types of problems likely to be faced in the classroom.

The first hindrance is students' unfamiliarity with Eastern Europe when they arrive at our universities. Few high schools teach about the region, at least to judge from the comments and answers to my questions provided by WJU freshmen. When in English literature class, they might have studied the English kings and queens. When studying the American Revolution, they might have examined eighteenth-century France to serve as a comparison. When studying World War I, their emphasis was almost certainly on the trench warfare of the Western Front (as opposed to the battles on the Alpine front in northeastern Italy, the campaigns in Serbia and Greece, and the huge seesaw struggles in Russia, East Prussia, and Poland). What they know about World War II likely will turn on the Battle of Britain and D-Day, not the dive-

bombing of Warsaw and Belgrade, the partisan struggles of Ukraine and Bosnia, and the colossal German defeat at Stalingrad.

A second factor accounting for part of students' lack of knowledge about Eastern Europe is their lack of genealogical connection to the region. In parts of North America, such as Chicago, Toronto, Cleveland, St. Louis, New York, Saskatchewan, Indiana, and Western Pennsylvania, this statement would be seen as an absurdity. But in many parts of the United States, East European ethnic heritage is not widespread. Where it exists, it is not always clearly defined or valued. In addition, few of the dominant features of American society derive from Eastern Europe. American culture is obviously much more influenced by West European, African-American, Hispanic, or Asian societies; politically the United States is modeled on the English system and on various Enlightenment principles (from Western Europe).

Another consideration is the legacy of the Cold War. Until 1989, most of Eastern Europe was closely tied to the Soviet Union in foreign policy and economics. The difficulty and expense of traveling to beautiful cities such as Krakow, Prague, Budapest, and Weimar meant that the region tended to fade in popular consciousness. The military alliance commonly known as the Warsaw Pact, which bound Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union, meant that Eastern Europe tended to become part of "them," or, even worse, part of "the evil empire." In other words, during the Cold War, many people saw Eastern Europe either as the political enemy or simply thought about the place as distant and submerged and less worthy of touristic or cultural appreciation.

A final factor—to me this seems to be the most important nowadays—is simply the geographic, linguistic, and ethnographic complexity of "the lands between." The unfamiliarity discussed above obviously heightens the students' sense of mystification when faced with the lists of working vocabulary of East European studies. But I will also be the first to admit that the number of "proper nouns" necessary to understand this part of the world is rather large. For example, can we really fail to understand the students' quizzical looks the first time we ask them to distinguish between the toponyms Slavonia, Slovenia, and Slovakia?<sup>5</sup> To prepare students for unavoidable deluge of proper nouns, I usually warn them about what is coming and provide them with lots of maps and lists and recommendations of good atlases. Then we might need to carry out intellectual triage by jettisoning the approach of the gazetteer and

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<sup>5</sup>How many of us knew the difference between a Serb and a Sorb when we were their age? Or how about the difference between a Serb and a Serbian, or a Croat and a Croatian? (Yes, there is one, sometimes.) Why do Slavs now live in Macedonia, which used to be so very Hellenistic? And what country is Macedonia really in, when cartographers tell us there are three Macedonias: Vardar, Pirin, and Aegean? What religion do the Romany (Gypsies) adhere to? How do we find maps with regions such as Bukovina, Dobrudja, Epirus, Teschen, Moravia, Transdnistria, and Friulia? What was the relationship of the Kashubians to the Poles, and of the Ruthenians and Hutzuls to the Ukrainians? Who in the world are the Kutzovlachs and the Lipovans? All this is to remind us, I suppose, that figuring out the family linguistic tree of the various Slavic peoples isn't so hard after all!

exercising restraint by choosing regions and peoples that are emblematic of large issues.

### Tips on Teaching Eastern Europe

Fortunately, there are plenty of steps we can take to lessen the difficulty of teaching about this polyglot and formerly remote half of Europe. First of all, I suggest taking a few minutes in a class near the beginning of a course to do some "taxonomical work." I try to give students an idea of which languages are Slavic and what the various branches of the Slavic family are. Then I discuss how Romanian, Hungarian, Greek, Albanian, Romany, and Estonian fit into the picture. On geography, I explore the terms discussed above such as "Central Europe" and "the Balkans," and I also always mention that the Balkans comprise one of Europe's three southern peninsulas; somehow this helps to remind people that Romania is part of Europe too!

A great number of scholars have pointed out the characteristics that make Eastern Europe generally different from Western Europe.<sup>6</sup> This list of characteristics represents the single most important aid to understanding the region, because it links the countries of the area together and provides a contrast to other parts of the world. The list includes the predominance of ethnic over civic nationalism; a much slower process of industrialization, due in part to a lack of participation in the exploration and exploitation during the Age of Discovery and to a position as a supplier of raw materials to Western Europe during the Industrial Revolution; a lower population density; a mixed Byzantine, Islamic, and Roman Catholic religious heritage with smaller Jewish and Protestant admixtures; the absence of primogeniture in many regions; a smaller historical role for cities with their rising commercial classes, professionals, and intellectuals; multi-national empires imposed by outside powers that lasted for hundreds of years, resulting in the preservation of a jumbled ethnic map long unsimplified by cultural, economic, and political homogenization; a historically closer relationship between church and state; and, contrary to received wisdom and journalistic shorthand, the often harmonious or indifferent *modus vivendi* between many ethnic groups in the region, at least until World War II.

Whenever possible I also look at the relationship between East and West in Europe. That is, I try to weave East European material as seamlessly as possible into the courses by discussing even-handedly the effects of important ideas and trends (e.g., industrialization, socialism, nationalism) throughout Europe. I also encourage students

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<sup>6</sup>See, for instance, Dennis Hupchick, *Culture and History in Eastern Europe* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994) George Schopflin, "The Political Traditions of Eastern Europe," *Daedalus*, 119 (1990), 55-90; Peter Sugar and Ivo Lederer, eds., *Nationalism in Eastern Europe* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994); Piotr Wandycz, *The Price of Freedom: A History of East Central Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Gale Stokes, *Three Eras of Political Change in Eastern Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

to follow the trajectory of ideas and movements beyond their points of origin in Western Europe on into Eastern Europe and the rest of the world. The Crusades are a good example. It is not enough to study the motives of the Crusaders and the havoc they wreaked in the Middle East; the atrocities they committed against East European Jews and Orthodox Christians are an important part of the full picture. Likewise, when studying the Holocaust, I encourage students to "think all the way through the topic," which means thinking beyond *Kristallnacht* and the Anne Frank story. We then confront the thorny issues of East European anti-Semitism and collaboration with the Nazis, as well as the patterns of Jewish settlement in Poland, Ukraine, and western Russia, the regions where the Nazis found and murdered the majority of their Jewish and non-Jewish victims. That, in turn, brings us to the issue of Jewish military resistance to the Nazis and their henchmen, an important topic long obscured by political concerns in Eastern Europe.

Finally, I find that it often works well to expose students to the nature of daily life and the daily hopes and frustrations of Eastern Europeans. Since I have lived and studied in Hungary and the former Yugoslavia, I have plenty of photos, memorabilia, and anecdotes to weave into the class. Many excellent East European films are available with English subtitles. When confronted with "the other" or "the unknown," another way to encourage student open-mindedness is to do things such as quoting Sting's otherwise unremarkable song from the 1980s, to the effect that "I hope the Russians love their children too." Of course they do, as do the Latvians and the Bulgarians and the Serbs. Although these activities do not exactly pave the way for political harmony in the world or impart a great deal of historical knowledge, they are tools for helping demystify other cultures for our undergraduates.