

Less than Nations

Less than Nations:
Central-Eastern European Minorities after WWI,
Volume 1

By

Giuseppe Motta

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P U B L I S H I N G

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FOREWORD

In his study about nations and nationalism E.J. Hobsbawm wondered about the features according to which some nationalities were destined to become full nations, while others to never attain full nationhood. His suggestions about this sort of “discrimination” proved their soundness not only at the beginning of the “Short Twentieth Century”, but also during the final years of this troubled age. At that time many new nations were founded and obtained a travailed independence, taking the last step towards the acknowledgement of their national dignity. Independence, thus, meant final recognition of a nation, the existence of a population, which identifies itself in some specific “national” characters. The idea of “nation” has been the topic of many studies and papers, which have tried to clarify and point out the leading features of the *longue durée* process of nation building. This phenomenon was experienced by the Europeans in different ways and at different times, even in recent history, when newborn countries have been engaged in defining their ancestral and historical past. The shaping of European society among national lines is rooted in the whole of European history and, sometimes, even in ancient times where many modern nations sought their origins. Authors who have studied and investigated this topic have focused on the different features that the phenomenon expressed from time to time and, altogether, contributed to clear up an articulated idea of nation. Many tried to give a complete and exhaustive answer, explaining the various steps of the nation-building process and approaching the question from different points of view, focusing on cultural, religious, historical, economic and political causes and consequences of the spread of national ideals.

Conventionally, they analysed the historical path followed by the European nations since the French Revolution, which united national aspirations with hopes of democratic and social reforms. This process involved European peoples in different ways. Some showed a national consciousness right from the beginning, appealing to their historical past. That is the case of the Italians and the Poles, who both took pride in their ancient and glorious history. Others started an “invention of tradition” process chasing the basis of their national ascent (language, religion, culture, ethnicity). This process has been discussed at length by authors in numerous works dedicated to the historical and cultural conditions of

nineteenth century Europe, which saw the birth and growth of contemporary nations (Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Hans Kohn, Benedict Anderson, Anthony Smith, Guy Hermet, James Kellas, Hugh Seton-Watson, John Breuilly and Roger Brubaker). Many authors pointed out that the building of nations is the result of the cultural influences of Romanticism (Jean Plumyène), others stressed the cultural implications of this process and international solidarity ties which accompanied the nations during the first stages of their existence (A.M. Thiesse). Some linked the development of national doctrines to the transformation of rural societies into industrial ones (Gellner, Hobsbawm), others distinguished a western romantic nationalism from an eastern mystical one (Plamenatz, Gellner), focusing on the contribution of state policies imposed from the top and defining nations as imaginary communities (Benedict Anderson); others described a triadic nexus between national minorities, nationalising states and external national homelands (Brubaker). Kellas distinguishes nationalisms in the First, Second and Third Worlds; Hans Kohn, instead, focuses on the difference between civic and ethnic nationalism. All reported the historical steps taken by the people who were nationalizing themselves following different ways and counting on different supports (history, language, religion). The sum of these factors, which carry different weights in each case, led to the same result: the formation of a national consciousness.

The end of socialism in Eastern Europe and the implosion of the Soviet Union determined not only the fall of some political and economic systems, but also the decline of a mentality, of a “philosophy” that wanted to achieve a new social order through collectivization and planned economy, annulling any distinction among social classes and national identities.

The success of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, in 1917, fed this sort of illusions which became an absolute creed, a “category” of mind and spirit, a culture which prevented many to consider the true reality of this regime. From a political-institutional point of view, it was the Party and not the state to define the *ubi consistam* of what had been the reality of the Soviet-Socialist republics, as the planning became the only tool of economic administration. The result was shaped according to a totalitarian doctrine of the state, a crystallization or a militarization which did not make room for any possible modifications.

From the economic point of view, the command economy pursued by Soviet Union was raised at the level of supreme principle and became an exclusive tool of administration, creating within that system a subsequent rigidity, which was undoubtedly one of the causes of the delays showed by

Soviet productive process, especially during the Seventies and Eighties, when in the market-economy many new transformations occurred and accelerated the whole economic process with the introduction of some high-technology systems and the opening of new fronts all over the globe.

While during the thirties and forties the Soviet Union carried out the Stalinist program of forced industrialization with human and social costs which were difficult to evaluate (mass deportation, forced labour, purges...) the result of the Second World War seemed to have elevated Soviet Union as a world-power capable of concurring with the United States for the dominion of the world. This accomplishment allowed Russian system to extend its own hegemony over a considerable part of Europe and of the world. With the creation of the popular democracies and the assumption of the rank of super-power, the Soviet Union entered the phase of the Cold War and the competition with the United States and the capitalist block in a hard political and economic division of the world into spheres of influence.

The Soviet hegemony over Central-Eastern Europe, from the Baltic to Adriatic sea, was initially interpreted as the birth of a new political category, the People's Democracy, which was conceived as a compromise between the two systems, taking the best from both. This economic and socio-political model was considered different from the western and from the Russian one, but in few years was abandoned and turned into the classical "dictatorship of proletariat" according to the Soviet experience: the nationalization of the economic resources and means of production, the massive use of the secret political police, censorship and social control soon replaced the original and idealized idea of a popular democracy which emerged as an utopian solution for the problems that had brought Europe to two tragic world wars.

With the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the historical parable of socialism, the nations of Central-Eastern Europe re-appropriated of their past and their own national history in order to return to manage their foreign relations freely and to develop their economic structure according to the classical liberal doctrines of capitalism. The red wire that led different countries to the same road through transition towards democracy and market economy highlighted the development of two correlated processes, though in contrast one with another. On one side, in each country a process of political and economic liberalization began to change the structures of the old regime together with the necessity of the integration into western economic and security institutions; on the other side, these reforms produced many troubles and left considerable sections of public opinion into the hands of nationalist and populist movements.

This tendency generated many inter-ethnic clashes and a high level of national hostility among the people of Eastern European States where nationalism began to be once again used as a means of gaining political consensus in a delicate phase of transition. In both aspects, the recall of historical situations surprisingly resurfaced and produced the same national passions that emerged during the First World War and later developed in the following years undermining the fragile order of Versailles. The difficult stabilization Europe experienced, with unsuccessful results, in the interwar period materialized once again in different European countries and regions, combining conceptual and political categories. The term identity strongly emerged as a target and also as a tool to lead this process of transition and to reconstruct not only a political and economic system, but also a history and a culture which were weakened and transformed according to the ideological needs of Cold War.

Many questions of economic stabilization and inter-ethnic coexistence once again characterized the life of Central-Eastern Europe and marked this phase of reconstruction, during which European people often reacted to a general bewilderment through the consolidation of an identity and fundamentalist interpretation of their national history.

The horizon of historical research has showed the necessity to lead a critical revision of the last century and to abandon the traditional historiographic canons adopting the perspective of the multi-cultural dialogue as the cultural benchmark of new historical and political studies. The appearance of the new historic documents and the rise of new generations of researchers has contributed to the achievement of a new tendency in the historical analysis of Central-Eastern European countries. The contemporary process of European integration, particularly, has featured many problems related to the conditions of the minorities and caused by the radical adoption of "ethnocentrism" as the only way to interpret and reconsider national and European history. This tendency, anyway, often turned into a sort of "militant nationalism" and contributed to exacerbate the clashes between majorities and minorities and among the different populations of Eastern Europe. The conflict of Yugoslavia, on the contrary, outlined the necessity European people had to overcome this century of ethnic and national clashes and to reconsider terms such as identity, nation and Europe under a new perspective. The study of the minorities and of their experience during interwar Europe, in this sense, could contribute to look at the experience of National States under a new light, not only based on ideology and on the traditional themes European historiography has already explored, but even concentrating on delicate

issues –such as the minority question– whose study could prove to be useful in order to comprehend the past and to face the present and the future.

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SECTION I

EMPIRES, STATES AND MINORITIES

CHAPTER ONE

RISORGIMENTO AND NATIONALISM: THE ORIGINS OF A GREAT MISUNDERSTANDING

Empires and Nations in East-Central Europe

Suonata è la squilla—su presto, fratelli, Su presto corriamo la patria a salvar

(The bell has tolled – hurry up brothers, hurry up, let's run to save our homeland.)

For the European people and their path towards liberty, the Italian *Risorgimento* represented a model and a source of inspiration. It was venerated and its protagonists, the heroic patriots, became legendary together with its ideals of justice and equality. The *Risorgimento*, as well as the historical myth of the French Revolution, contributed to cement the base of the future European construction and of the European democratic development. Art, literature, and music marked the generations who adopted the idea and the spirit of *Risorgimento*, starting from its symbolic value of liberation from the foreign domination, from the oppression and misery of the Restoration that the Congress of Vienna imposed to Europe in 1815.

In this context, the idea of nation was central and got forward thanks to the secret societies and circles, such as the *Carboneria*, inspiring and modelling a path which through hurdles and dangers had to lead people towards independence and freedom. As a matter of fact, the contemporary concept of “nation” began to be defined only during the XIX century, after that the French Revolution of 1789 had opened a season of deep changes and reforms: the latter were only suspended by the Congress of Vienna, which could not halt a process that had already been set in motion. During this period, the idea of nation was paradoxically spread under the sign of trans-nationalism and contributed to deepen the connections among the different European people who all asked for more justice and freedom.

In spite of the resistance of the conservative governments, these ideals infected the people through a numerically restricted enlightened elite, who led the different national movements in order to reform the State and the politics in the name of the nation: the latter was the symbol of liberty and democracy, emancipation and equality.

In a conventional way, the French Revolution was considered as the starting point of this epoch and of the birth of nationalism as a political movement that was originated by the people's aspirations to a better life, one without oppressors and despotic rulers. On the contrary, the idea of nation was inevitably associated with a universal sense of justice, social equality, and with many other improvements that were linked to the growth of this new ideal.

National epic poems and arts were the main expression to define these new nations, who rediscovered themselves through the legendary work of poetry which was the product of Romantic nationalism. The “discovery” of Beowulf, in 1818, Operas such as Rossini's *William Tell*, or Verdi's *Nabucco* were the result of the convergence between idealist aspirations towards liberty and the culture of those times. Folklore and arts were emphasized to awake the spirit of oppressed people, reminding them of their past and their primacy, their inalienable right to possess a geographical terrain, a “heartland” to rule freely and in justice.

These ambitious targets won the favour of the XIX century generations who adhered to these ideals without distinction of language, race, and religion. Instead they joined their efforts and passions and embraced each other. The Internationalism of these movements turned Risorgimento from an Italian phenomenon into a European one and spread throughout the whole continent the myth of the Italian patriots like Giuseppe Garibaldi, “*eroe dei due mondi*”, who fought for the freedom of South American people as well as for the Italians, or Giuseppe Mazzini, the father of *Giovane Italia* and *Giovane Europa*. These organizations had many relationships with the analogous movements that were flourishing throughout all Europe, from Germany to Hungary, from Greece to Romania, arriving as far as Poland, who had been erased from the European map during the XVIII century. The idea of nation made proselytes in all the European populations and through all the communities who wanted to get free from foreign domination and, like the Poles, fight for “our and your liberty”.¹

Many strangers joined Garibaldi's legendary expedition (István Türr, Lajos Tüköry, Carlo Wagner, Ernesto Benesch...) and built a web of exiled patriots who communicated and cooperated among them for the liberation of all the people who were imprisoned by Imperial foreign rulers. An

outstanding example was represented by the young poet Lord George Byron, who lost his life during the struggle for the independence of Greece by testifying his commitment for the cause of freedom. This idea was illustrated in this excerpt from Byron's *Journal in Cephalonia*:

The dead have been awakened – shall I sleep? The World's at war with tyrants – shall I crouch?

The harvest's ripe – and shall I pause to reap? I slumber not; the thorn is in my Couch;

Each day a trumpet soundeth in mine ear, Its echo in my heart...²

Refreshing the classical topic of the “*Ratto d'Europa*” already drawn by Tiziano and by the Veronese (Paolo Caliari), this battle was described with the portrait of a young girl, the nation, who had to fight against the *ancien régime* of the empires to get her own emancipation. This metaphorical image was applied to all the nations who were developing a national identity in order to face the Restoration with a different vision of Europe as a whole of different States. The principles of international brotherhood and solidarity were to lead to the creation of a “holy alliance” among the nations to fight the “holy alliance” of the emperors.

As many authors pointed out nothing was more international than the formation of national identities.³ Movements like *Giovine Europa* collected the hopes of deliverance of many national organizations, each with its own story and particular features, but all ideally linked to the idea of a Europe made up of nations with their symbolic value. Among the different characters that historical research has emphasized describing the phenomenon of nationalism (Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson, Anthony Smith, Guy Hermet, James Kellas, Hugh Seton-Watson, John Breuilly, Roger Brubaker) every case featured different facets.

Some stressed the relation between nationalism and the social transformations caused by the passage from agrarian society to an industrial one: the former had fragmented and marginal elites while the latter built up a strong and cohesive middle-class that rode the wave of national building (Gellner, Hobsbawm). Others focused their attention on the discovery of national history, the linguistic codification and the literary production (Anne Marie Thiesse), some others on the internationalism of this process, which was expressed through the participation in great international events, such as the universal expositions and the Olympic games. Since Ernst Renan wondered what a nation was – *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* –, the latter was perceived as the necessary result of a process of self-identification, a cultural expression of some “imagined communities”

(Benedict Anderson) who were only sketched in the age of Risorgimento and became real entities in the XX century. During this period, the idea of nation spread not only through the elites, but it also conquered masses, who initially were not caught up in this process of construction of a national identity: nationalism, thus, evolved and became a stronger and more radical idea.

If in the Risorgimento phase, the nation embraced all the European people and gathered them around shared principles of justice and freedom, in the following periods the original solidarity gradually turned into open hostility. The reasons for this change were manifold and could not be explained without considering the international scenario and the events that shocked Europe and prepared the pattern towards the start of the First World War (1914-1918). During the conflict, the model of Risorgimento was still alive and animated the fighters in the battlefield, as demonstrated by the description John Reed gave of the Serbian soldiers.⁴

It was exactly in this context that the old friends became the new enemies and the brotherhood among nations converted into hatred and lack of comprehension, especially in the Balkan and Danube regions. These areas, where the interests of the Tsarist, the Habsburg and the Ottoman Empires clashed and converged, featured an incredible ethno-linguistic and cultural variety that was often to put side by side with social discriminations and controversies: these problems were rooted in the historical distinction between dominant and dominated nationalities and in the religious complexity which sometimes tended to create diffidence and to cement national identity and national creeds.

The idea of nation initially summoned all the European people around a shared set of values, around a general but, at the same time, vague idea of liberty which in this context paved the way for the future fights that would inflame the XX century, the age of “genocide and totalitarianism.”

While the liberation from the foreign domination was a common aim of all the reformist and progressive forces, an analogous convergence could not be recorded in the political field and in the definition of a new enduring and peaceful European settlement. As a matter of fact, the different movements which recalled the Risorgimento ideals had many different political addresses, oscillating from conservative and moderate approaches to radical, republican, leftist and socialist tendencies. In spite of the general request of a constitutional text, these different views were manifest since the first phase of the fight against the empires. But this dissent was not the only problem that affected European history during the XIX and XX centuries. The idea of nation itself, actually, contained the

seeds of the irreconcilable clash that would find in Central-Eastern Europe the most fertile ground where to take root.

The lack of clear geographical divisions among the different nations made the delimitation of borderlines between them create further difficult questions: nations were intermingled in the same territories and had created a multicultural and multi-confessional reality. Notwithstanding this entangled situation, also Central-Eastern Europe adopted the model of the Nation-State, which became the focal point of all the people who were involved in this nation-building process. According to this model, European people deserved to create independent and free States in order to protect all the communities who were part of the same nation.

In the XIX century the Balkan and Danube regions were partitioned among the Tsarist, Habsburg and Ottoman Empires and inside these reigns the first national movements appeared. The populations under the rule of the Sultan were the first to rebel against the Sublime Porte, whose government was considered as Asiatic and oppressor. The first revolts of Kara Djeordje, in Serbia in 1805, led the country to obtain autonomy from the Porte, while Greece followed the same path gaining autonomy and independence with the treaties of Adrianople (1829) and London (1830). The Romanians of Wallachia were less lucky and the rebellion that started in 1821 together with Greece was not destined to enjoy the same success. The Romanian uprising in Wallachia caused the strong reaction of the Ottomans, but on the other hand coincided with the overthrowing of the Phanariotes, members of Greek families coming from the borough Phanar of Istanbul who had occupied the thrones of the Romanian Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia during the XVIII century.⁵ Tudor Vladimirescu broke up with Ypsilanti's Eteria and did not receive the same international support that Greece had got thanks to the appeal deriving from her antiquity; this fascination was renewed by the travelers of the *Grand Tour* and contributed to internazionalizing the Greek question attracting European patriots in the Hellenic struggle for liberty.

The Greek War of Independence (1821-1829) illustrated the great feeling of solidarity existing among the Europeans who shared the same idea of liberty, which was undoubtedly connected with that of nation. Other revolts occurred in the Balkans throughout the century and similar episodes affected also the Tsarist and Habsburg Empires. As a matter of fact, in 1830 the Poles rioted against the Tsar while in 1848 the Spring of Nations animated many European cities and regions with uprisings, rebellions and insurrections. The tensions were widespread to all German and Austrian territories and were particularly inflamed in Hungary, where some intellectuals like István Széchenyi and Sándor Petőfi had contributed

to consolidate the traditional feeling of national identity and the will of independence of the Hungarian patriots. In 1848 young leaders such as Ferenc Deák and Lajos Kossuth inherited this task and advanced precise requests for a greater autonomy from Vienna. In the following months, benefiting from the difficult situation of the Habsburg army which was engaged by the tensions of the capital and by the conflicts against the Italians in the Lombardo-Veneto, Budapest converted its initial demands into complete independence. The Habsburg succeeded in suffocating the resistance of the Hungarians only thanks to the intervention of the Russian army of Tsar Nicholas -who was labelled with the name of gendarme of Europe- and the help of the different nationalities. The latter felt betrayed and humiliated by the Magyar attitude towards the national question and accepted the courtship of the Emperor since the new Hungarian Government had not approached their demands with the necessary sensitiveness until the belated minority law of 1849.

Other insurrections characterized the Balkans and the Romanian territories, while in Prague the traditional sentiment of loyalty towards the Habsburg Monarchy was not questioned: the reaction of the authorities, anyway, was as repressive as in other cases, even if the Czechs and other Slavic groups summoned in the Bohemian capital the first pan-Slavic congress only in order to claim more autonomy inside the empire.

Besides the common features of the different movements –for instance the use of historical tradition to reconstruct the identity of the nations– every people began a different path and handled the question of identity in a different way. The events of 1848 outlined the different vision that Czechs and Hungarians had regarding their relationships with the Habsburg, and also stressed the contrasts not only between the liberal, socialist and nationalist factions, but even among the different groups. In fact, Serbs, Croats, Slovaks and Romanians opposed to Magyars as they could not tolerate the political and linguistic dominion that Budapest rebels proposed to them.

The Romanians gave birth to their own national movement and in 1848 featured a young generation of patriots (Avram Iancu, Nicolae Bălcescu, Bărnuțiu, Șaguna) and a political program which was defined at the meeting of Blaj, at the liberty fields (*Câmpia Libertății*).⁶

At Karlovac, a Serbian patriarchate under the leadership of the conservative Josif Rajačić was restored and anticipated the military rebellion of the Serbs of Vojvodina under the youthful General Djordje Stratimirovic.

Croatian Count Josip Jelačić established the *Bansko Vijeće* (Ban Council) while the Slovaks started their uprising with a volunteer

campaign and the definition of their own Slavic identity as it was shaped by their leaders L'udovít Štúr, Jozef Miloslav Hurban, Michal Miloslav Hodža.⁷

In the second half of the XIX century the nationalist organizations improved their force and following the example of Italy and Germany – who reached independence in 1861 and 1870– their aspirations became more advanced day by day. The Magyars first welcomed the recognition of their nationality and took advantage from the division of the empire and its reform under the principle of dualism: in 1867 a new balance was reached and the Habsburg territories were divided between Transleithania and Cisleithania. Budapest became the capital of a Hungarian reign which was connected to Vienna by the figure of the King (the Emperor) and by some common ministries: war, finance and foreign affairs.

In 1856, the Congress of Paris acknowledged the desire of union of the Romanian Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia which in 1859 found a common ruler in Alexandru Cuza: this patriot, who fought during the riots of 1848, became the lord of both entities and formed a Romanian State.

In the international field, Moscow and Vienna worked on a difficult operation of political engineering to get the Balkans partitioned respecting their reciprocal interests. The result of this operation conditioned the whole European balance and needed the intervention of all the Powers to be definitively accomplished. The interest of European States in the fate of Balkan affairs clearly appeared after the rebellions of Bulgaria, Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1875 and the bloody repression of Ottoman troops, which were blamed by all European press for their atrocities and their barbarian behaviour.

Russia took this occasion to “brush up” her pan-Slavic policy in defence of the Christian communities under Ottoman rule –dated back to the Treaty of Kuciuk Kainargi in 1774– and decided to intervene against the Sultan. War lasted more than it was expected and was concluded by the Peace of Saint Stephan. The conditions were favourable to Russia who extended her influence with the creation of a Great Bulgaria and obtaining the free passage through the Straits. The new settlement, anyway, was not appreciated by the other European governments who did not wish to repeat the experience of the previous Crimean War (1853-1856), when they had to intervene against Russia in order to suffocate her dreams of *grandeur*.

German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck convoked a new Congress in Berlin and, in June-July of 1878, a new order was imposed on the Balkan region: Bulgaria was not independent and was divided into three parts; Austria acquired the administration of Bosnia-Herzegovina; Serbia,

Montenegro and Romania became independent; Romania was deprived of part of Bessarabia which was given back to Russia.

The presence of the first National States strengthened the position of nationalisms inside the big empires. Even though following different but parallel paths, this evolution generally started from an ideal conception of nationalism and international solidarity, but later abandoned it and began to show some contrasts. The first phase required a union against a common enemy, but when this need was not felt anymore, the different movements clashed as regards the political shapes of their projects. These controversies increased during the last decades of the XIX century, especially in the Hungarian part of the empire, where non-Magyars had to bear the consequences of a strong process of Magyarization.⁸ In the Balkans different positions emerged between those who aimed to federate the Southern-Slavs, even under Habsburg crown, and those who claimed for the independent Serbian State a leading role in this process of union, on the model of Piemonte, *Pjedmont*, and German Prussia. In Bosnia-Herzegovina the struggles between the Habsburg authorities and the nationalist revolutionaries characterized the years after Austrian annexation in 1908 –the same year when Bulgaria finally obtained her full independence- and overcame in violence and brutality the fights that had followed the arrival of the Habsburg troops in 1878.

The situation was complicated by the fact that the States had as their final target the creation of an independent or autonomous unit responding to precise ethnic and historical principles. In some cases the goal was to give birth to a Nation-State, an entity which had to enclose within its boundaries all the populations who had a common “national” identity, even restoring the medieval Reigns that were taken as the historical proceedings for these projects of independence. When applied on a large scale, however, this policy was clearly troubled by the particular conditions of Central-Eastern Europe, where no clear geographical limits separated the different ethnic groups: German communities were present in all the region, from the Baltic to the Balkans; there were Romanians in Greece, Albania and in Magyar Transylvania; Czechs and Germans in Bohemia; Bulgarians, Serbs and Greeks in Macedonia; Poles, Germans and Czechs in Silesia.... The situation of the Jews was extremely fragile because they were often perceived as an extraneous element who did not take part in the different national plans and with a not-well defined national identity. The traditional prejudices were moreover accompanied by the growing sympathies for the Zionist and socialist groups and this tendency would later trigger a wild and barbarian hatred.

The incompatibility of the different national schemes was outlined by the Balkan Wars in 1912-1913, when a first alliance among Serbia, Greece, Montenegro and Bulgaria succeeded in overthrowing the Ottoman enemy, but not in arranging an agreement about the partition of the conquered territories.⁹ Bulgaria soon found herself fighting against her former allies, the Ottoman Empire and Romania, and her territorial aspirations were completely frustrated: not only Sofia had to renounce to Macedonia but also had to cede Southern Dobruja to Romania. In this context another candidate to independence emerged, as Albania was recognized by the conference of London of 1913 and was assigned to the German Prince William of Wied.

Many nationalist movements defined their aims along ambitious and great projects, in order to create a Nation-State which was shaped with huge proportions: everyone dreamed about a Greater Romania, Greater Bulgaria, Greater Serbia, Greater Albania, Great Greek Idea (*Megali Idea*)... Obviously these visions were not reconcilable among them and for their concrete execution had still to get over the obstacle of the multinational empires. If the Ottoman Empire appeared in all its weakness and decline, the Habsburg was healthy and vigorous and, on the contrary, it was appreciated for its capacity of creating a harmonious coexistence of languages, peoples and cultures. The separatist pressures inside it were especially fomented by the surrounding States more than by the communities living inside Austria-Hungary.

Only the war accelerated this process and brought to the definitive end of the old order and the birth of a new one, that of National States. As a matter of fact, only World War I gave the Nations what Doctor Faustus called the “metaphysics of magician” and “Lines, circles, scenes, letters, and characters” which were necessary to the European people, the studious artisans, to create “a world of profit and delight, of power, of honour, of omnipotence” (Doctor Faustus, book I, 20).

The Rise of Nations

During the XIX century many populations had the opportunity to create an independent state. From this point of view, while France, Spain and Great Britain had had their own national monarchies to lead this process since medieval times, the situation of Central-Eastern Europe was a little more complicated.

Italy and Germany, as well as Hungary, Bohemia and Poland, had a long history which represented a constant recall for the culture of their elites. The literature, the arts and the language were rediscovered in the

XIX century in the wake of Romanticism. The latter stressed the myths and the legends of the past and emphasized the importance of history, making European culture move towards the research of traditions, and in some cases their “invention” (E.J.Hobsbawm).

European elites, thus, began to study the past of their cultures looking for a new spirit to change the world of the Restoration that was imposed by the Emperors in 1815. Culture was tied to policy and the emancipation of nations passed through the study of their constitutive features and the liberation from the chains of the *ancien régime*. Of course, not all the nations started to follow this path simultaneously; Italians and Germans anticipated the others and represented a model for other European civilizations, especially those of Eastern Europe which had experienced Ottoman rule for many centuries –with the exception of Greece who founded the bulk of her State through the war of independence and the treaties of Adrianople in 1829 and London (1830)-.

Germany tested an economic union, the *Zollverein* of 1834, to finally achieve political independence in 1871, after the Schleswig Wars and the conflicts against Austria and France. Italy reached her aim with Garibaldi's expedition of 1860 and continued her fight in 1866 and in 1870. Hungary obtained the dualist reform of the empire with the *Ausgleich* of 1867. Wallachia and Moldavia were first united in 1859 and finally recognized in 1878, together with Serbia and Montenegro, while Bulgaria converted autonomy into independence in 1908. As regards the other nations, fortune reserved them further years of wait.

But even if with different times and in different ways, the political construction of the state also implied a cultural process of nation-building and an investigation of the national past to achieve a definite national identity. This process brought to the creation of national hymns and the codification of national languages. The music, the words of many poems and the historical novels left to posterity an ideal image of the populations' roots, of the highest values and of the common and more concrete habits as well; their efforts were all aimed to draw the lines of a national heritage which represented the basis to build a new society.

All Europe experienced French dominion with Napoleon, who mistreated and exploited national feelings for his own purposes of greatness and, at the same time, strengthened them and paved the way to a century of reorganization and fight. All nations recalled their past to create their future towards the independence, justice and fairness that all the European people deserved. Also from this point of view, the Italian *Risorgimento* represented the perfect model to describe the other kinds of

national awakenings, which all looked at the Italian sample to build up and consolidate their national thought.

In Italy, Foscolo, Nievo, Manzoni and many others stressed the *magnitudo* of the past, the splendour and the misery of ancient times to wake up the Italians or those whom they considered akin for language, culture and other noble historical values. National education was pursued by philosophy, which retook the teaching of Dante and the classics, such as GianBattista Vico and his “*antichissima filosofia italica*”. Bertrando Spaventa, for instance, perfectly underlined the union and separation of the national phenomenon; throughout their distinctions, nations had a common spiritual legacy whose recovery was one of the most glorious achievement of compared philosophy.¹⁰ While in Italy Spaventa defined the primitive community of nations as a “hidden treasure”, in Germany Fichte appealed to the nation to remember its uniqueness, invoking the spiritual and physical renewal of the Germans in order to manifest their cultural supremacy. Even if Fichte would be later misunderstood, he took the word German to identify all those who believed in spirit, while strangers were the ones who did not have faith in liberty, without distinctions of language and nationality. Some decades later, the *Song of the Nibelungs* (*Nibelungenlied*) was translated into music by Richard Wagner, who showed the greatness of the German saga and the slight and dangerous border existing between it and anti-Semitism. Philosophy was put side by side with art and with history: the historical research of the national roots became an outstanding point in the definition of national identities.

The Germans underlined their role in the building of a Christian Europe during the age of the Holy Roman Empire (*Heiliges Römisches Reich*, HRR, *Imperium Romanum Sacrum*) which after the Franks became a prerogative of some German noble families such as Luxemburg, Hohenstaufen and Habsburg. The preservation of liberty and tolerance, which was possible thanks to figures like Martin Luther, was combined with the military order and discipline of Prussia.

The Poles looked at the Kingdom of Poland that had been created by the Piast dynasty in the X century and then ruled by the Jagiellonian dynasty since the wedding between the Grand Duke of Lithuania Jogaila and Jadwiga in 1386. The Polish Crown was then united with Lithuania and this union was consecrated legally only at Lublin in 1569. During the period of their utmost rise, the Jagiellonians also obtained the crowns of Bohemia from 1471 until 1526, with Vladislav Jagellonský, Vladislaus II and Ladislaus, and Hungary from 1490 until 1526. The Jagiellonians reached their natural end with Sigismund II Augustus, who married the daughter of Ferdinand I Habsburg trying to preserve for his family the

titles they acquired in the past: *Dei gratia rex Poloniae, magnus dux Lithuaniae, nec non terrarum Cracoviae, Sandomiriae, Siradiae, Lanciciae, Cuiaviae, Kijoviae, Russiae, Woliniae, Prussiae, Masoviae, Podlachiae, Culmensis, Elbingensis, Pomeraniae, Samogitiae, Livoniae etc. dominus et haeres*. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, *Rzeczpospolita*, was converted into an elective monarchy and took the way of an inexorable decline, until the agony of the three partitions in 1772, 1793, 1795.¹¹

Bohemia or Great Moravia, which was intended to be the predecessor of contemporary Czechoslovakia, was created by the Premysl dynasty who ruled the country until 1306, when the royal title went to the Luxembourg family. This reign included Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia and Lusatia and deeply influenced European history with the defenestrations of 1419 and 1618, sparking off the Hussite and the Thirty Years' War.

The patriots of the XIX century remembered those times with pride and love and looked at the past to claim new conditions for the present. Even without taking a "radical" approach, as the Polish patriot Adam Mickiewicz and the Magyar leader Lajos Kossuth did, they all stressed their peculiarity, their connection with a nation which was different from the dominant one, to gain new linguistic rights and enhance their social and economic status.¹²

At the dawn of 1848 uprisings, the first Pan-Slavic Congress was convoked in Prague to express the hopes of Central European Slavs under the influence of Austro-Slavism. The latter gained consensus especially among Czech liberals such as Karel Borovský and František Palacký and was later converted into a serious political program which, after 1867, tried to overcome dualism and reform the empire with its federation and the birth of a Slavic entity within the huge Habsburg dominions. Pan-Slavism, thus, was the key concept for the development of different nationalisms, which started from the evaluation of their Slavic identity to stress both their vocation and their unity, as Father Anton Bernolák did when codifying a Slovak language for the first time.

The Hungarians were the ones who created the biggest problems. After having defeated the rebels of 1848-49, the Austrian Crown, in fact, had to yield and give a new status to Saint István Crown dividing the territories into two parts along the River Leith. The Hungarians had once again the possibility to exercise their rule over the lands which were part of their ancient kingdom. This conquest was also celebrated with the feasts for the millennium (1896) that had elapsed since the legendary passage of the Carpathians by the old ruler Árpád. He had given birth to a dynasty which, such as Piast and Premysl, was legitimized by the Christian church and formed a reign which was destined to live until it fell into the hands of the

Habsburg and Ottomans, after the battle of Mohács in 1526. After the failed siege of Vienna in 1683, the Habsburg started their counter offensive and engulfed all the Magyar territories, not without problems, as showed by the intestine struggles against some important forerunners of XIX century patriots such as Imre Thököly and Ferenc Rakosi.

The Ottoman rule was hard to throw out of Europe and it continued to rule the Balkans, subjugating many other Christian populations such as the Slavs (Serbs, Croats, Bulgarians, Macedonians), the Albanian people, and the Romanians. In the Balkans, the first form of identity was found in the Slavic brotherhood which united all the Christians of the region and also the Bosniaks, as they were thought to be Slavs who had been compelled to adopt a different religion after the fall of Kotromanić Kingdom which lasted from the XIII century until 1463.¹³

The Illyrian movement, which was also interpreted as a Croatian national revival (*Hrvatski narodni preporod*), was a cultural and political campaign initiated by a group of young Croatian intellectuals such as Ljudevit Gaj during the first half of XX century. Croats could consolidate their pan-Slavic identity even after 1867, when they were the only ones to enjoy a minimal form of autonomy in the Hungarian half of the Habsburg Empire. The Illyrian idea also found supporters among prominent Serbs of the time, such as Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, the reformer of the Serbian language, which was conflated with the Croatian one, in spite of the permanence of a different alphabet.

Even if the Croats underlined the connections among the Slavs of the region, they did not neglect the recovery of their past and the pride for their national heritage, which was rooted in the age of Branimir, who was called *dux Croatorum* by the Pope John VIII in 879. While Duke Tomislav of the house of Trpimirović was thought to have united the Croats of Dalmatia and Pannonia into a single kingdom in 925, the latter reached its peak during the reign of Kings Petar Krešimir IV (1058–1074) and Zvonimir (1075–1089). Following the extinction of the Croatian ruling dynasty in 1091, Ladislaus I, the brother of the last Croatian Queen, Jelena Lijepa, became the King of Croatia which was attached to Hungary as a separate kingdom with the treaty of 1102 (often referred to as the *Pacta Conventa*). For the next four centuries, the Kingdom of Croatia was ruled by the Sabor and Bans who were appointed by the Hungarian King and by the Habsburg, who confirmed their hegemony in the region with the treaties of Karlowitz (1699) and Passarowitz (1718). These acts constituted the starting point of Christian *reconquista* of the Balkans, the first symptoms of the disease that would affect the Ottoman Empire until the XX century.

The Eastern Crisis that occupied the pages of all western newspapers at the end of the XIX century actually had started many years before, since the Ottoman Empire began to be "*l'homme malade de l'Europe*". After Lepanto (1571), the failed siege of Vienna (1683) and the wars against Russia of the XVIII century, the Post-Napoleon fragility of the Ottoman Empire was unveiled by the revolt of the Greeks, who obtained a free state and started to foster the dream of a *Megali Idea* to liberate the Hellenes of Asia Minor, Thrace and to possess the imperial city of Constantinople.¹⁴ The Greeks were the first to profit from this weakness even if not the first to rebel against the Sultan. In 1805 a Serb, George the Black, *Kara Djeordje*, led an uprising which was continued some years later by Miloš Obrenović, the chief of the second Serbian rebellion. Although these events generated the birth of the dispute between Karadjordjević and Obrenović, which lasted until 1903, they also gave Serbia the opportunity to become the first bulwark of Slavic autonomy. Serbia and Montenegro finally obtained their independence at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, after another bloody revolution whose reprisal was condemned by all western public opinion as a token of Turkish barbarism.

From that moment Serbia self-assumed the role of the leading force for the liberation of Balkan Slavs and enriched this process with the proud remembrance of the ancient fights of Stefan Dušan, who introduced the *Dušanov Zakonik*, an outstanding legal code, and became the Tsar of Serbs and Greeks. This result, however, was destined to be short-lived as this medieval kingdom crumbled against the Ottoman invasion. The symbol of that fight remained the battle of Kosovo Polje (1389) in which Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović lost his life, opening the way for the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans. The resistance of the Serbs was carried on by other heroes who would be later taken as a symbol for the history of the nation such as the ambivalent figure of Marko Kraljević: he was portrayed as joyous, just, strong, incredibly brave, and chivalrous, an implacable foe of the Turks, a prodigious drinker of wine.¹⁵

Together with other nationalities, the Serbs combined the revival of classical historical themes with their Orthodox faith and claimed a role of supremacy over the other Slavs of the region, who from their point of view had lost their original features corrupting their Slavic identity with western culture or with Turkish Islam.

The struggles against the Ottoman Empire were not a monopoly of Serbian nationality, also the Albanians reassessed the epic George Kastrioti Skanderbeg who defended his land against the Ottoman Empire for more than two decades, until his death in 1468. In the age of the Tanzîmât reforms (1838-1878), Albanians prepared for the start of their

national revival, which coincided with the creation of the Prizren League in 1878, stressing the glory of national history and myths, more than the religious affiliation, since the Albanians did not have a “national” church.¹⁶ In Western Europe Skanderbeg was considered by many as a model of Christian resistance against the Ottoman Muslims since his military skills and strength presented a major obstacle to Ottoman expansion and delayed the Turkish attack against Italy. Skanderbeg became Albania's greatest hero, an inspiring figure for Albanian identity and for the revival of Albanian statehood following the Declaration of Independence in 1912.¹⁷

The XIX century and the first part of the XX were difficult years for the Ottoman Empire, which lost its large territories and discovered its Turkish character. Following the same process of the European people, the Turks experienced a national revival thanks to the Young Turks, who connected the demands for a secular reform of the old declining empire with the evaluation of their homeland, the *Turan* which united people of Turkish origins from Balkans to Caucasus and Central Asia (Yusuf Akçura, Ziya Paşa, Ibrahim Şinasi, Namik Kemal, Ahmed Vefik, Mustafa Celâleddin, Süleyman Paşa).¹⁸

In that time the Balkans consummated the tragic appetizer of WWI as they were stained with blood by the Balkan Wars, which began with the creation of a Balkan League composed by Serbia, Montenegro, Greece and Bulgaria, and were followed by the dismantlement of the latter and the start of another “all against one” conflict which frustrated Bulgarian dreams of expansion.

The Bulgarians had expressed their wish of independence since the April uprising of 1876, which brought about the bloody reaction of the Sultan and the war that ended with the Treaty of Saint Stephan and the short-lived creation of a Great Bulgaria, then “abrogated” by the Congress of Berlin in 1878. Bulgaria paved the way for the creation of a future State, which was based on the historical reigns existing with alternate fortunes between the VIII and XIV centuries, when the Bulgarian land was taken by the Ottomans.

Even if after 1878 Bulgaria remained under the formal Ottoman sovereignty, her government was entrusted to Battemberg and Coburgo-Gotha lords; the country adopted the Tarnovo Constitution, which was very liberal and advanced for its time -it was replaced only in 1947- and waited until 1908 to gain full independence. Undoubtedly in 1878 the Romanians were more fortunated.

Compressed between Russian and Turkish imperialisms, the Latin population of the Balkan-Danube basin started to express a national

conscience after the works of the Transylvanian School (XVIII century) and the efforts of the XIX century which contributed to define the features of their national existence on the Roman legacy and the codification of a neo-Latin language. The liberation from Turkish rule coincided with the first steps towards the recognition of a first Romanian state, which was free from any foreign sovereignty and put in the hands of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen dynasty. The union of Wallachia and Moldavia, however, did not necessarily mean the end of the nation-building process; it represented just the first step towards the idea of a Great state which had to include all the territories that were inhabited by the Romanians according to the model of the Nation-State. But the Romanians were not alone with these ambitious dreams: all the independent states formulated projects of this kind aiming at the creation of wide National States, while the populations who were still under foreign rule claimed with more and more insistence the concession of their political autonomy and national rights. This target, however, crashed against the reluctance of the big empires, which not only proved their incapability to understand the feelings of their nationalities but, on the contrary, turned sourer the relations with them until the final break of the first world conflict.¹⁹ In fact, the war years created the perfect conditions for the outbreak of the Russian revolutions of February and October and for the success of the national self-determination principle that was proclaimed by the Congress of oppressed nationalities in April 1918 in Rome.

War proved to be essential not only for Lenin's revolution but also for strengthening national feelings among European populations, who were convinced of the necessity of a new order by the reluctance and the deafness of the empires to abandon the war as a means of solution for their controversies. If after 1905 Lenin understood that only a war could generate a revolution, during the following years he also worked out the idea that national questions could become one of the main instruments in the hands of the proletariat. Nationalism could represent a tool to trigger revolution against Tsarism as it was exposed in Lenin's essays on the right of self-determination, in 1914 and 1916, and in the declaration of the first communist government in November 1917, when the People's Commissar for National Questions Stalin and the President of the Council Lenin promised to replace the old policy with a "full and entire mutual trust" among the people of Russia.²⁰

The outbreak of the First World War represented a turning point for the evolution of the nationality question. The conflict created the opportunity to take a decisive step towards the completion of the different national designs and once again proposed the rivalry that few years before had