Europe: two continents or one?

The Samuel Gee Lecture 1990

Lately, Eastern Europe has been much in our minds. How—if at all—is what goes on in Eastern Europe different and distinct from the ‘Western’? Does eastern Europe make up a whole with an identity of its own? When we look to the east, what are we looking at? What do we see? Do we live in one Europe or two—or even more?

The ‘Cold War’ hangover

I believe the term ‘Eastern Europe’, as we have recently understood it, has become an obstacle to understanding. The way we now tend to look at Eastern Europe is, I am sure, inadequate, because it is rooted in a particular and very brief historical episode, the Cold War. For 40 years after 1946, and perhaps a little more, Eastern Europe was a clearer idea than it had ever been. People looked eastward and recognised a zone of civilisation which they thought they could understand and conceptualise as a whole. A starting-point for this approach can be found in March 1946, when Winston Churchill made his famous speech at Fulton, Missouri, about the ‘Iron Curtain’ which was coming down in Europe. He spoke of a line running from Stettin on the Baltic to Trieste on the Adriatic. Of course, both east and west of that line there was plenty of variety: Barcelona is not much like Bournemouth, and life in Northampton not much like that in Naples. But that is really only a preliminary point. What the idea is based on is a clear political difference which obliterates all qualifications.

Yet even then it was not actually a definition of the Cold War division. It turned out to be too pessimistic. Ten years later, in 1955, after the formation of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, the ending of the occupation of Austria, and the setting up of the two German republics, the Cold War line ran somewhat differently from Churchill’s. In the first place, it ran along the frontiers of Greece. What is more (and here we go back to the point about variety within these areas), Yugoslavia had by 1955 quarrelled with Russia and, though formally under a Communist government, was not a member of the Warsaw Pact or of Comecon, the economic agreement linking Russia to its satellites. So the picture is clearly more complicated than the phrase ‘Iron Curtain’ suggests. Nonetheless, one can say that (setting aside Yugoslavia and, later, Albania) the Eastern Europe of the Cold War did have three general characteristics. First, it was a political and military system dominated by Russian power. Geographically, the limits of that power were set for the most part by the operations of the Red Army in 1945, the most important exceptions being Austria, Yugoslavia, and Greece. This power was from time to time demonstrated in action—in East Germany in 1952, in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968. Second, it was a zone which seemed to have ideological unity. Its rulers endlessly invoked the names of Marx and Lenin. Official doctrine was Communist, materialist, anti-traditional, internationalist. Third, and connected with the last, East Europe’s countries shared a certain broad direction of economic policy—Eastern Europe was the region of centrally planned ‘command’ economies where economic life was predominantly investment-led rather than consumer-led. This was called ‘socialism’. One of its subsidiary features was that it encouraged a certain practical integration over the whole region in the sense that bilateral trade (often in kind) with Russia dominated international exchanges. That was what Comecon was really about.

Of course, the role of Russian power could vary. There were grumblings and disagreements. We must not forget the qualifications of our general truths. Nonetheless, until the early 1980s any change in Communist Eastern Europe was largely determined by these three characteristics. It looked, from the West, a pretty homogenised system.

In the past 18 months all this has collapsed. Russian power has been much diminished. The withdrawal of Russian armies is under way. Even the integrity of the Soviet Union is itself now in question. Outside that country, official Communism has everywhere given way to multi-party politics (except in Albania), and the Communist parties have ceased to claim sole right to the direction of society, whatever their former members may be up to under other names. Other ideologies are now everywhere working with various degrees of vigour and openness to express themselves. Finally, the command economies are everywhere in retreat before the market. It is just this that makes it necessary to ask not only ‘What has happened?’ but ‘What has happened to what?’

We can start with what is closest to hand. Clearly, 40 and more years of Communist rule have produced some shared effects. The dissolution of a structure that once seemed so solid has revealed that most East European countries have been left with some common features as a result of those decades. This is not just a mat-

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ter of material deprivation or economic obsolescence; there are also sociological legacies of Soviet domination. There is, for example, evidence of widespread corruption, even perhaps destruction, of civic spirit. For decades, many East Europeans had to live double lives, paying lip-service to the regimes under which they lived, believing, if they could, that black was white, that poverty was prosperity. Many of them, to survive, had to find ways of evading legal and civic obligations and to seek benefit by irregular means. In some cases, corruption went very far. The result is sometimes—perhaps Rumania illustrates it—a grave lack of qualities and assumptions on which civic life as we know it in Western Europe can be based. We welcome the onset of what we believe to be democracy in the East, but must wonder where, in some countries, the democrats are to be found. Nonetheless, 40 years of history cannot have eradicated a much deeper past. Let us try to go back into it a little.

Approaches and possibilities

More than a century before the Cold War, in the 1830s, an acute French observer of politics and society, the writer Alexis de Tocqueville, said that he could see two different areas in Europe. He called them ‘zones of sociability’, where life was organised in distinctive ways and had a special colouring. He felt Eastern Europe, or part of it, was one of those zones. Can this distinctiveness be pinned down? There are demographic and epidemiological facts which may be relevant to my theme and have a special resonance for a largely medical audience; for example, there is a celebrated paper by a historical demographer which has been thought to provide a fundamental clue to a great deal of European social and economic history [1]. To summarise, it showed that, at least since the seventeenth century and well into the twentieth, a marked divergence at all age levels could always be found between the proportion of the unmarried in the total population to the west and east of another imaginary line, one running from Trieste to Leningrad. In the West, a significantly larger proportion of each age cohort remained unmarried than in the corresponding group to the east. In other words, marriage tended to be put off until later in the West and a larger number of people there never married at all. This was not true east of the line.

Such facts could have important implications. They suggested interesting ways of approaching the question of East Europe’s identity. But I felt I had to set them aside, partly because it would require too much time to do justice to such an approach, partly because of the complexity with which it would need to be qualified. It seemed more helpful simply to take such a demographic observation as one indicator of a possibly relevant consideration. One of the things that is indicated, though, seems to me to be interesting enough to remark at this point. The line identified from the population data was, obviously, not the Cold War line. Trieste to Leningrad leaves out (approximately) East Germany, the Baltic nations of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, and, by and large, Poland. So we have at the outset a positive historical phenomenon which says to us ‘Be careful; don’t take it for granted that any identifiable East Europe is the same as ex-Communist Europe’. It suggests also that we ought to look for more than one East Europe, after all.

Another possible positive approach to our problem might be through the history of disease. Some diseases persisted in parts of Eastern Europe long after they were eradicated or had disappeared from Western European countries. Plague is the most obvious example. There is also a fair amount of historical evidence about the epidemiology of malaria, intestinal infections and infestations, and syphilis, though it does not always fit the areas which we are concerned to distinguish. Dramatic comparisons can be made, once we get into the age of governments collecting statistics, particularly over life expectancy. Recently, too, there have been observations from some East European countries (notably Poland and Hungary) about the prevalence of obesity, and this, inevitably, has led to consideration of differential dietary factors. Certainly diet is one of those very obvious (but in this connection remarkably unstudied) factors making for differentiation in European history. Then there is the recent evidence of disease linked to environmental damage—though that, of course, is a matter of very recent changes.

With reluctance I had to give up this approach, too. Its implications are just too vast. There are too many difficulties in integrating one group of variables (specific diseases) with many others in a general lecture, even if those variables can be accurately and precisely observed. And there are real obstacles to doing that, as all historians of medicine know. Whatever we may suspect, or even plausibly infer, problems of evidence dog the history of disease. Accurate diagnosis is often impossible. Historical accounts of symptoms, though often vivid, are often inadequate. After all, measles and smallpox were not clearly distinguished until the sixteenth century. Moreover, until recent times, records are sporadic, incomplete, and of doubtful statistical validity. Even those of the World Health Organisation, let alone those of the old League of Nations, are far from irreproachable. Political and administrative change often renders them discontinuous as boundaries are redrawn and rulers come and go. Finally, and decisively, the basic studies do not exist for effective generalisation over areas and populations of a size such as those we are now considering. There is not yet sufficient secondary study of even such hard evidence as we have. All in all, I do not feel able to pursue in a single lecture the will-o’-the-wisp of defining Eastern Europe either in medical or physiological terms.
Topography

Is there a geographical Eastern Europe? In terms of political geography, the one that existed—Cold War Eastern Europe—has now gone away; the watchtowers and barbed wire are coming down. But is there another topographically distinct Eastern Europe? We know the shape of our Europe, Western Europe. On its western edge the names tell us the boundary: Land’s End, where the earth ends in ocean, finis terrae. Quite simply, there is a coastline. In the east there is nothing so clear. Metternich (himself a Rhinlander), Chancellor of the Habsburg empire in the early nineteenth century, thought that Asia began just beyond his office windows in Vienna. This was not just a German version of the legendary judgement by Englishmen about what begins at Calais. There was something to be said for Metternich’s view: after all, the banners of Islam had twice been carried to the very gates of the city by Turkish armies besieging Vienna. Metternich was talking about something more complex than geography, then. But Vienna also stands on a great river whose valley runs on for hundreds of miles to provide a natural outlet for many of those eastern countries in the Black Sea—itself an enclosed sea. The Danube draws civilisation and trade south-east, down the valley. East Europe’s natural trade and communications routes look away from the two great magnets of Western Europe—the historic civilisation of the Mediterranean world, and the Atlantic ocean routes of the northern seaports. Both are important, but especially the second: Eastern Europe had no part in the ‘Age of Discoveries’ and the opening up of the globe by sea.

North of the Danube valley, geography becomes vaguer and more difficult to interpret. Roughly speaking, Europe’s great northern plain broadens out steadily to the east from its root in northern France and the Low Countries. It is like a great fan. Within it, from Flanders to the Urals, you can find hardly any land higher than, say, Exmoor. The plains and forests roll on and on. They still can impose a harsh life, on those who live there, especially in winter. But the plain is easy to move about in and offers cultivable land and plentiful cheap building material—timber. So it has always tempted intruders and settlers from the west, and nomads and raiders from the east. In the ninth century, Charlemagne’s men carried forward the frontier of Frankish Christianity on the Danish ‘Mark’; from the eleventh century onwards, later German settlers pushed on across Mark Brandenburg and into Pomerania and, from the thirteenth century, into Prussia. Further south, in Moravia, they had long before that already bumped into members of another group of peoples, the Slavs, who had settled on the plains centuries before. So here is another factor making it hard to say where ‘Eastern Europe’ begins. There is no clear topographical boundary to ‘our’ Western Europe in the East. For one purpose it seems to run along one line; for another, elsewhere. We are really speaking of an imaginary fracture. The plain begins in the west, and so do the mountain-chains of the south and the Danube valley.

But there is another fact which is closely linked to geography. Eastern Europe is now much poorer than Western. Communist economics can account (if they do account) for only 45 years handicap at most. Perhaps we should give as much weight to this century’s two great wars, which fell unequally on Europe east and west. Beyond those recent events, though, there must be other important differences, because even in 1900 the two halves of Europe were already economically far apart and growing further apart. What lies behind that?

Let us again jump back a long way. Even in medieval times, the signs of a difference were already there: more working capital per head in Western Europe, more livestock production, more eating of meat there. For a long time that meant that more energy was available to the West European populations—a fact obviously likely to be of increasing significance as time went by and technology could tap more and more new sources of energy. To explain the start of this disparity, we must, in a most literal sense, go back to the grass-roots. There was from the start a notable contrast in agricultural potential of the two halves of the continent. For all the superficial attractiveness of the great plains of the East, and the special richness of areas like the Ukraine, terrain and climate were from the start better for farming in the West than in the East. There was often richer soil and, thanks to good rainfall, a longer grazing season. Both implied better returns on seed than in the East, and, before the coming of scientific agriculture, quality of land, only slightly offset by superior tillage, was what made the difference to yield. Add this to the less intensive pressure of populations on resources in the West, which is probably implied in what I have already said about population patterns, as well as access to new lands which the Age of Discoveries gave Western Europe, and the remote origins of a gap between East and West begin to become visible.

Labour is another element in the agricultural equation. Labour is connected with power and social order. In the early Middle Ages, Western Europe had more labour than the East and it was well settled on the land. Nomads drove settlers off the eastern lands, and those nomads returned to ravage them again and again, long after they had been thrown back from the West by Charlemagne (the Vikings, for all the terror they inspired, did nothing like so much damage to agriculture in the West; their attacks were by definition peripheral, even if they could get a long way up the rivers). Asia, the great pool of nomadic peoples, was much nearer to the countries of Eastern than to those of Western Europe. Avars, Huns, Magyars poured across those plains time and again. For centuries it was difficult to anchor settlement there where, over large areas, there was rarely settled government. Moreover, at an early date Western Europeans had invented a
social system which attached labour to the land; it was called feudalism. The tenant was tied to the land. The serf could not leave the estate. Interestingly, serfdom's most striking manifestations were to come only centuries later—in the seventeenth century, and in the East, in the shape of the large-scale serfdom in Prussia, Poland, Bohemia, Hungary, Russia. But this was long after it ceased to matter in the West, when landlords and rulers needed to hold their labour forces there, and it is revealing that serfdom and bond labour were not abolished over much of Eastern Europe until 1848.

Feudalism also registers something else that was important—the fragmentation of power in the West. Every schoolboy and schoolgirl knows—or ought to know—that the Middle Ages in England, France, and Germany are all about kings and barons battling out their rivalries. There was another contestant, too, the Roman Church, whose popes sometimes behaved as independent rulers, and at times claimed to rule all Christendom. What does this mean? It means a diffusion of power in different foci. Power, of course, implies liberty for those who have it: liberty from interference, perhaps from the interference and depredations of a despot whose men might otherwise swoop down to carry off the agricultural surplus of farms, estates, manors, village communities. That surplus was the guarantee of growth—of investment. The insecurity of such surpluses explains centuries of economic stagnation in many parts of the world. The security which protected them was able to find more props inside the medieval West than in the East.

Religious differences

We seem to have come a long way from geography, though not altogether out of touch with it, and to be deep in the past already. We should stay there a little longer, and think of a different sort of map—a map of religion. Let me recall that the persons we first hear speaking of themselves as 'Europeans' are Christians fighting the Moors—pagans, infidels—in the eighth century, in the Spain of the early reconquest of the peninsula from Islam. The idea of 'Europe' as a political and cultural unity, an even more abstract idea than 'Europeans', then actually emerges 500 years later in the fourteenth century in the efforts of Pius II against the Turks—against, once more, Islam. Self-recognition comes about for Western Europeans through conflict, and that is the way in which, later, outsiders seem to recognise that Europeans are in some way special, too. Now, Western Europe was until the sixteenth century a religious unity so far as the law, formal observance, and theory went. It was Catholic. But there were other Christians than Roman Catholics, notably the Orthodox churches of the East. Is there, then, a line to be drawn around Eastern Europe in religious terms?

There is too much history mixed up with this question for me to do more than touch upon a couple of outstanding points. It will help if we recall how Christianity came to Eastern Europe. It came from two directions. It is best to work southwards down the map. Broadly speaking, paganism survived longest in the East (at least in an obvious sense) in the lands just south of the Baltic. Much of that area went on being pagan centuries after England was Christian. When Christianity arrived in the Baltic lands, it came from the West. The Teutonic knights, whose power was at its apogee in the thirteenth century, were the most spectacular of the armed missionaries with whom the Roman Church drove forward its frontiers and, therefore, the frontier of Christendom in much of Eastern Europe. And, at the same time, part and parcel of the same process, the frontier of settlement of the German peoples was being driven forward too, the first Drang nach Osten. Fortresses and new towns became the seats of new bishoprics.

That looked after the barbarians in the north. The formula of conquest and conversion did not work when something more ordered than pagan barbarism already existed—and this was the case in Poland when the Germans came to it. They found a Slav country already Christian whose ruler had been converted by Bohemian missionaries in 966. Bohemia itself had been converted to Catholicism by Germans at the end of the ninth century (the only Bohemian saint most of us have heard of is Good King Wenceslas). A few years after the conversion of the Polish king, another saint, St Stephen of Hungary, settled that his country, too, was going to be Roman Catholic. So by the beginning of the fourteenth century we have a block of countries with peoples of many different racial stocks—Lettis, Prussians, Lithuanians in the north, the Slav Poles, the Slavs of Bohemia, and the non-Slav Magyars of Hungary, all falling within the sphere of the Western, Roman Catholic, church, but converted at different times.

Elsewhere in the East, the story had been very different. Let me go back even further, to a decision taken at the end of the third century AD by the Roman emperor Diocletian. He then accepted that the Roman empire had become too big to rule as a whole, too big to govern from one place. He drew a line down the middle of it and chose a co-ruler to rule the western half, while he governed the east. Another line in the east! This one established a division which endured. After another three centuries the western empire disappeared in the fifth century AD, while in the east the eastern empire of Byzantium, centred on Constantinople, was to last nearly a thousand years more—until 1453, to be precise.

The character of that empire was very special and very important to the sphere in which it exercised its influence. It called itself Roman, but was really Greek in its culture. It was Christian, but Greek Christian. It was also a great and glamorous focus of civilisation at a time when Western Europe seemed to have lapsed back into barbarism. At the new city, which took its
name from the emperor Constantine who built it—the emperor who also made the empire Christian—on the site of the old Greek city of Byzantium, there was focused power, wealth, and the mysteries and ceremonies of a great religion. All of it was backed up by the historical prestige of the name of Rome, the ruler of the Mediterranean world.

The Byzantine empire was a beacon of civilisation. When it sent out missionaries to convert the Slav peoples who had settled in south-east Europe (the first were the Bulgars), the converts got much more than a faith. The missionaries brought culture, too. They brought, for instance, literacy. Byzantine clergymen even invented the script—Cyrillic—in which the Slav languages were written down and which is the basis of the modern Russian alphabet. The Orthodox missionaries also brought with them certain ideas about authority. Orthodoxy was more than just a doctrinal version of Christianity, it was also a way of looking at authority, a way of conceiving it. Byzantine emperors were the living embodiments of the idea that religious and secular authority were one, inseparable, indivisible, an idea which was very different from the Western distinction of Church and State which we accept so easily that we take it for granted. The Byzantine empire wasn’t like that. It was a monolithic Christian community: Church and State in one; and that meant that Byzantine emperors had a very special sort of authority. They were autocrats: sole and supreme rulers, combining the role of prince and priest.

Such thinking deeply marked what was to emerge as Slav civilisation. The emperors made it different from the Catholic civilisation of the West. Above all, they were to mark Russia. The Russian imperial monarchy was to evolve under the pressure of state-building and Tatar invasion: both likely to strengthen the hands of successful rulers and to increase their power. But it was also shaped by Byzantine tradition. By the time the last dynasty of Russian monarchs, the Romanovs, came to occupy the throne, the mould of that monarchy was set. The title ‘Tsar’ is the same word as Caesar. It came from Byzantium, from which there also came the symbol of the monarchy, the double-headed eagle. So did its basic idea: autocracy. Power was concentrated in the ruler by God’s will. He was God’s vicar on earth. He ought to be obeyed. No liberties existed except by his will. He was head of Church and State—his authority determined what men should believe—as well as what they should do.

Of all the Orthodox nations, Russia was most deeply marked by the Orthodox idea. Some have seen in it a part of the explanation of the docility of Russians in modern times under terror, of their willingness to accept the unrestrained rule of the dictator or the party; of their presumption that those with authority know best what is the common good. Russia has virtually no liberal tradition to draw upon in now wishing to move towards democracy. But Russia is the extreme case. None of the other Orthodox countries showed the same concentrated expression of the autocratic tradition inherited from Byzantium as did Russia. Nevertheless, wherever the Orthodox church was dominant, it tended, as the Roman and Protestant churches did not, to favour the notion that political power should not be questioned, should be accepted, should be seriously respected. This did not encourage dissent. Even under Turkish rule (and all the Orthodox peoples outside Russia were for long periods ruled by the Turks), it took centuries to bring the Orthodox church into play as a focus of opposition or rebellion. Ottoman rule, indeed, favoured the government of subject communities through their religious leaders, who had an interest, therefore, in getting on with government. So, in looking at Eastern Europe, we have to recognise that the longest enduring political tradition in many parts of it was one favourable to autocratic rule, the non-involvement of the individual, the centralisation of authority. It was not a way of thinking about politics ever likely to produce a Magna Carta, or a Declaration of the Rights of Man.

The Ottoman experience

Another experience shared by many East European peoples is Ottoman rule. Let me remind you of what it meant in space and time. The Ottoman Turks seized Constantinople in 1453. The Byzantine empire came to an end. By then they had already conquered much of North Africa, the whole Middle East and Anatolia, and in Europe most of Greece and the Balkans. A few years later they had overrun Serbia and Hungary, and won acknowledgement as the overlords of the Ukraine. In 1683 they even besieged Vienna—for the second time. Then they slowly began to fall back. Even in 1800, though, they still ruled all of modern Greece, Albania, Macedonia, most of modern Yugoslavia and Rumania, and all Bulgaria. Much of nineteenth century history was about the crumbling away of that huge empire in Europe. But for four centuries much of south-eastern Europe and Eastern Europe was under Turkish rule. Here was another boundary in the East.

Turkish government was not like that of Western European states. It did not rest on bureaucracy, or on a feudal nobility, or on local immunities (civic privileges and so on), but on tribute-gathering. Taxes and, in some areas, slaves for service in the army or at Constantinople were the hallmarks of Ottoman government. Providing they were assured, the system was quite tolerant. Christians, Jews, Moslems lived in their communities and conducted their affairs through their own leaders—usually religious leaders. They were responsible to the local governor or pasha for the good behaviour—which meant prompt tax-paying—of their communities.

This meant that Turkish government could be very arbitrary. Everything depended on the local pasha—there was virtually no control over him from Constantinople. He and his men had no interest in
achieving anything more positive than quiescence among those over whom they ruled. No doubt they achieved this sometimes by disinterestedness and equitable behaviour, but probably they did so more often through terror and intimidation. The methods could be savage, too. Ottoman rulers in Europe in the nineteenth century still impaled people as a punishment. The massacres in Greece, during the war of independence, and in Bulgaria have remained notorious, the latter thanks to the efforts of Mr Gladstone.

Cruelty and oppression alienated many among the subject peoples. This came out more and more violently, as time went by, in banditry, rebellion, massacre and counter-massacre. One consequence was fierce community identification against the oppressor. Another was that no association developed between the ideas of good citizenship and law-abidingness. Government was simply seen as an oppressive force, to be thwarted, deceived, resisted if necessary. It brought oppression, not benefit. Add this experience to the Orthodox tradition of autocracy, the virtually complete absence in the old Byzantine lands of local liberties for cities and of the legal immunities which went with them, and you have an unpromising soil for the growth of the kind of habits of mind and behaviour which were associated with the emergence of Western European politics.

Nor was this quickly offset by the spread of progressive ideas from Western Europe. There was too much backwardness to overcome. After all, there was still a slave market at Belgrade in the early years of the nineteenth century. As that century went on, and Ottoman rule gave way to new national states, illiteracy was only slowly rolled back. Social backwardness and a deep social conservatism—exemplified, for example, in attitudes towards women—were usual. Add the experience of intermittent warfare and the recipe is not a promising one for the establishment of modern societies. Perhaps this throws some light both on the savagery of Balkan partisan warfare between 1941 and 1945 and that of the Greek Communist rebellion of 1944–5, as well as on the comparative violence (by comparison with other East European states) of events in Bulgaria and Rumania in the past twelve months. The legacy of 300 years of Ottoman empire is, I believe, still visible.

Twentieth-century experience

These historical observations, brief as they are, help to throw light on what happened in Eastern Europe after 1918. The three great empires which had dominated the region had been overthrown in the struggle. What had been Prussian, Habsburg and Russian territories were reorganised in new forms. There were three new Baltic states—Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia—and Poland re-emerged after a century and a quarter as an independent country. So, technically, did Hungary, though it had been a self-governing part of the Habsburg empire. (It was dramatically reduced in size.) Two absolutely new states which had never existed before, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, made their appearance. The first consisted of the old kingdoms of Bohemia and Moravia, together with Slovakia. Yugoslavia was the kingdom of the South Slavs and incorporated Serbia and Montenegro (previously independent), Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and parts of Macedonia. (Perhaps this is the point at which to recall that the culinary term macedoine refers to a finely chopped fruit or vegetable mixture.) Albania, Greece, Bulgaria and Rumania were all still there after 1918, with some boundary changes, of which the most important was a big increase in Rumania's share of Transylvania. When one looks at the history of the next 20 years—down to the outbreak of the Second World War—it cannot be said that these arrangements worked well, though this was by no means always the fault of the inhabitants of these countries. There were two great defeated and disappointed powers with interests in recovering their position in the area—Germany and Russia. When they decided to do something about their wishes, there was no one to stop them—the third great empire had gone.

Looking at the countries of Eastern Europe themselves in the inter-war period, it can also be seen that they had internal weaknesses which helped to thwart the hopes of 1919, even without the interference of outsiders. To begin with, they were mostly poor and undeveloped. They almost all had large peasant populations eking out a living from undercapitalised and pretty primitive agriculture. Only Czechoslovakia was really a mature, developed economy, though Hungary and Poland had significant industry. This economic backwardness was often accompanied by social tensions, huge contrasts of rich and poor, and the fears and hatreds that went with them. And, just to the east, there was a new revolutionary state, Soviet Russia, which talked about international revolution and sponsored Communist parties intended to bring this about. This, by reflex, tended to produce inside these countries a drift towards right-wing, or at least authoritarian, government in the inter-war years. By 1938—when the Czechoslovakia of Versailles was about to be destroyed by Hitler—in Eastern Europe only the Czechs and Slovaks preserved a working democratic and constitutional political system [2].

Worse still, many East European countries did not get on with one another because of another inheritance from the past which haunted Eastern Europe in the inter-war period. One map which cannot be drawn simply is that of ethnic and linguistic Eastern Europe. Centuries of history had produced a mosaic of peoples and languages. The new states of 1919–39 did not correspond to that mosaic. They did not represent single blocks of ethnically distinct peoples. There was a huge minorities problem. It went a long way to explaining Hitler's success, and it was probably the biggest single weakness of democracy and international stability in the area.
The weight of history

We should be wrong were we to think that such historical complexities and many other legacies of the past could be simply ironed flat, bleached out in the steam laundry of Communist rule, standardised by 40 years of police power and technology. Consider only the enduring power of the Catholic Church in Poland. Many of them survive—and much that is ominous which stems from them is already showing itself in action. Looking far ahead, it is true, affluence, if it comes, may do more to reduce particularity and division than Communism did. But affluence will be a long time coming. Meanwhile, Eastern Europe is and will remain a zone of huge variety. We may have mythologised several distinctions under one head, yet there were real distinctions to start from. That is why, though Eastern Europe is hard to define on a map, it exists in men's minds. And so do other imaginary zones. I have not said anything about a quite different concept familiar to millions of Czechs, Germans and Hungarians as something quite distinct from Eastern Europe—the idea of Central Europe, Mitteleuropa. It deserves a whole lecture and more, because the way we think about things influences the way we act [3].

Finally, a reflection about something just a little nearer to the natural sciences than the subjects touched on: it could be called a comment about animal behaviour. It is about the behaviour of a particular species, *homo sapiens*, our own. History is the record of that behaviour. As a record, it is imperfect, uneven, disordered, often incoherent, and certainly incomplete. Still, it is all we have. Of the behaviour observable, though, two aspects appear to me to be clearly distinguishable and unique. The first is well known but sometimes forgotten: ours is the only mammalian species which has established itself successfully all over the globe. It has been able to do this because of its unique powers of modifying its environment and of adapting its own behaviour to suit, and often dominate, different environments. So successful has it been at doing this that we are now within sight of interplanetary colonisation. This biological success is a big and important fact—one of the biggest and most important which history records. But taken alone it may encourage us to see things in terms which are too general. It draws attention to what is shared by the species—human qualities and skills—not to what makes for difference, and to the problems that have been solved, not to those which have not.

That makes the other observation about human behaviour important. It is this: Man is also the only species—so far as we know—which is conscious of its past, its history. There are many aspects of that past, that history, which have great weight and determining force, and of which, therefore, we should try to be conscious in order to master them. Our species is the only one whose collective past and history—or, better, collective pasts, for there are many—are important to it in living its life today. History, quite simply, is one of the most powerful forces which makes us different from one another as human beings, and that means it makes us potentially creative, as well as potentially antagonistic. That is why I ventured to think that it was worthwhile saying something about Eastern Europe, a living museum of historical variety if ever there was one.

Notes

1 Hajnal J. European marriage patterns in perspective, *Population in history*, eds DV Glass and DEC Eversley. London: Arnold, 1965.

2 Lithuania had taken to dictatorship in 1926, Latvia and Estonia in 1934. Yugoslavia, formally a constitutional monarchy, became a dictatorship in 1929; Greece was first a monarchy, then a republic, then a monarchy again before a coup in 1936 set up a military dictatorship there. Bulgaria had a succession of authoritarian rulers, and Romania, in spite of its constitutional form, had dictatorial rule by the ‘Iron Guard’. So much for the democratic hopes entertained at Paris in 1919.

3 Examination of this topic can be approached with great profit through the work of my Oxford colleague, Timothy Garton Ash, in particular his essay ‘Does Central Europe exist?’ in The uses of adversity: essays on the fate of Central Europe Cambridge: Granta Books, 1989.

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