Between Past and Future
The Revolutions of 1989 and Their Aftermath

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Years Later,” that is to be chaired by Jeff Goodwin, a theorist of revolutionary change. It will also include papers by Jack Goldstone and Daniel Chirot.


30 Barme, In the Red, 129; see also Barme, In the Red, xviii, i-19, 304, and 345; the query comes from Haraszti, Velvet Prison, 159.

31 It is worth noting that some producers as well as analysts of Chinese popular culture are interested in links between Eastern Europe and China. It is surely no mere coincidence, for example, that the title of the controversial rock singer (and more recently rapper) Cui Jian’s latest compact disc is “Power of the Powerless,” an allusion to a famous piece of writing by Havel.


20 Mickiewicz and the Question of Sacred Territory
IRENA GRUDZIŃSKA GROSS

The tenth anniversary of the 1989 velvet revolutions also marks the tenth year of the Yugoslav war. It was ten years ago—on 28 June/1989—that Slobodan Milošević delivered his farewell speech in Kosovo, which celebrated the six-hundredth anniversary of the Kosovo battle, an event central to Serbian national mythology. The gradual disintegration of the Yugoslav federation and the creation of small nation-states according to uncertain and terribly complex ethnic lines followed this event.

The present conflict over Kosovo is the latest chapter in this bloody, destruvtive war. At this point in time, Serbian ethnic cleansing has reduced the Albanian Kosovo population from approximately 1.8 million to 1 million people. It has been estimated that at least eight hundred thousand Kosovars have been forced abroad, six hundred thousand are believed to be internally displaced in Kosovo, and two hundred thousand are missing. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) planes are “bombing targets in Serbia and Kosovo, and there is no sign that civilian Serbs disapprove of ethnic cleansing; on the contrary, they seem united in facing NATO bombing.

No easy resolution at this stage of the war is at hand. Kosovo, observers believe, is essential to the very essence of Serbian nationalism. “Serbian culture itself is built around elaborate sagas of failure and betrayal, all beginning with the 1389 defeat of Prince Lazar by the Ottoman Turks on the battlefields of Kosovo—a heroic last stand that sanctified Kosovo for all Serbs for all time”, runs one typical comment (emphasis added). “For centuries”, writes the same observer, “Serbs have been taught not only that they sacrificed more than any other Christian European people to resist pagan aggression, but also that their sacrifices have never been appreciated or recognized. Rather, outside powers ungratefully denied them their independence.”
It is in fact this “for all time” that I address here. The basis of the fatalistic approach to the Balkan wars lies in the conviction that national symbolic geography is unchangeable. Yet such history is not unique to the Serbs and has been changed in other countries; thus, although it does have “staying power”, certainly it is not eternal. Moreover, the process of constructing national myths comes under scrutiny even in today’s Serbia. One of the few certitudes about the battle of Kosovo is the significance of its date—the day of Saint Vitus, 15 June 1389 (28 June according to the new calendar), on which both the Serbian Prince Lazar and the Turkish Sultan Murat were killed. The Serbs were defeated, and their state, which continued to exist for another eighty years, was subjugated by the Ottoman Turks.

The origin of the legend of Kosovo was religious rather than political or national. The Orthodox Church quickly placed Prince Lazar among its saints. The Kosovo battle legend evolved then around two New Testament motifs: of unconditional sacrifice and of betrayal. In the eighteenth century it was finally encapsulated in a coherent epic work, enriched a century later in numerous variations and modernizations. The definitive literary version of the Kosovo battle was written in 1847 by Petr Petrović Njegoš, a Montenegrin Romantic poet. The battle became a living part of national tradition, modified and invoked at every historic moment, constituting an interpretation of history and the model for present behavior.

Other East and South European nations have similar symbolic national histories. Past glories and defeats, betrayals by stronger powers, civilizing missions toward those who were of other religious persuasions, and deep feelings of victimization are characteristic of the region. Yet within this framework, spectacular changes and accommodations have taken place.

A radical change in the Polish attitude to its sacred territory is one such case. Forced to relinquish its eastern lands, Poland first adjusted to its new borders, and then, it seems, almost forgot what was left behind. It is possible to observe by this example a change in national geography and a national identity in motion. “For all time” turned out to be finite.

Modern Polish national identity was forged in the first part of the nineteenth century, at approximately the same time as Serbian identity. Poland had a long history of statehood, but its state disintegrated in the seventeenth century, when the historic nation-states of Western Europe were coming to maturity. “Belated” nations like Italy and Germany, and even more “belated” East-Central European states, were formed after the long preparation of “an anticipatory national consciousness disseminated by propaganda”. The main actors in these preparatory efforts were “writers and historians, and scholars and intellectuals in general, who laid the groundwork for... subsequent unification of the state by propagating the more or less imaginary unity of the ‘cultural nation’.” “The exclusive legitimacy of culture-based states” needed a kind of “ethno-genesis” in which “schoolteachers, ethnographers, folklorists and national Awakeners... went... to the villages and constructed a national culture from the chaos of regional dialectical variety”, thereby transforming peasant culture into high culture so as to permit the building of a political entity that would be coterminous with the state. Only in that way could the nationalist principle of “one culture-one state” have been implemented in Eastern Europe.

The father and codifier of the Polish “cultural nation” was the romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz (along with many of his contemporaries). The year 1998 was the bicentennial of his birthday, and it was the first celebration of a national icon in post-1989 Poland. The country was awash with conferences, speeches, concerts, readings, and performances. Television programs were produced, movies were made. The bicentennial became an occasion to debate issues that are now being addressed in all postcommunist countries: the question of the relationship between newly regained national sovereignty and accession to the larger world community; of the growth of individualism coterminous with the protection of local communal values; of justice and forgiveness, or, to quote Adam Michnik, amnesia and amnesty; of going forward while carrying the burden of recent history.

The terms of the discussions surrounding that anniversary made clear the romantic origin of Polish national consciousness and the continuity of its basic suppositions. Polish public life was described and analyzed through concepts such as political treason, individual betrayal, sacrifice, and redemption. Because of the tradition of statelessness, these terms were—and still are—used in a moral rather than a political sense. The identification of Polishness with Catholicism seems to remain the basis of national identity. Such Polishness is counterposed to western liberalism and liberalism (although Poles are undoubtedly the most prowestern nation among the Slavs). The “primordial” people’s wisdom is contrasted with the embracing of false knowledge and nonpatriotic values by the elite. Family constitutes a unit of resistance and is the real repository of national tradition, with the woman as the guardian of family (“the nation’s hearth”). Men are not politicians but continue to be warriors (or traitors). The “West” continues to misunderstand Polish specificity, although its acceptance into NATO makes one believe that this chronic mistrust is weakening.

It is not accidental that these issues were debated on the occasion of the bicentennial of the birth of a poet. This vision of national life can—
and should—be traced back to the messianic nationalism of Adam Mickiewicz. A few words about him are therefore needed here. Born in 1798, Mickiewicz belonged to the first generation that never knew a sovereign Polish state. (Mickiewicz, one should note, was just slightly older than the codifier of the Serbian Kosovo saga, Petar Petrović-Njegoš). At the time of his birth, Poland was partitioned among Austria, Prussia and Russia, and was not to regain its independence for another one hundred and twenty years. He was a citizen of the Russian empire, living as a child in Nowogródek (now in Belarus), and later studied in Vilnius (now the capital of Lithuania). In the past, these territories were a part of the powerful Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Exiled to Russia as a young man, Mickiewicz did not once set foot in Wawel in Kraków, or what is now the central part of Poland. He passed his life in exile, mostly in France, nostalgic for the country of his childhood and youth, which he called, in Polish, “Lithuania”. He died in 1855 in Constantinople, trying to organize Polish and Jewish military units to fight for Poland’s independence.

Mickiewicz was the descendant of poor, minor nobility, most probably of Lithuanian ethnicity (if such a description makes any sense). An ardent Catholic who spoke and wrote in Polish, he had a limited, or non-existent, knowledge of Lithuanian and a boundless devotion to Poland. Throughout the nineteenth century he functioned in Polish culture as an exemplary patriot and was the embodiment of the very idea of what it is to be Polish. Over the years there were endless rumors and controversies attached to his name: the often-suspected Jewish origin of his mother, the Orthodox Christianity of his father, his own heretical Christian mysticism and life in a Christian sect, and his womanizing. The reasons why he did not join the 1831 anti-Russian insurrection and why he organized Jewish battalions in Turkey are very difficult to ascertain. He was the bearer of Polishness, the common ancestor of all Poles. His poetry inspired awe and love and was absorbed into everyday language, providing it with proverb-like sayings, quotations, and expressions. If we define a classic as a source of quotation, Mickiewicz is such a classic for Poles. By repeating, paraphrasing, or alluding to his words, Poles signal to each other their common national heritage. Several of his characters and literary situations are recognizable to any Pole—even illiterates. Repeating his words is the way in which the nation proves its uniqueness, its authenticity. The mechanism of repetition serves then to maintain a unique identity.

The role Mickiewicz played in the creation of Polish national consciousness was similar to that of other national poets of East-Central Europe. His geographic origin—coming from the borderlands—seems to have been a common pedigree of the founding fathers of early nineteenth-century East European nationalism (Niesiołowski a Montenegroine; Petöfi was of Slovak origin, to name just two of them). These poets, writers, and intellectuals bridged the eighteenth-century vision of the territorial state based on dynastic legitimacy with the nineteenth-century concept of state sovereignty based on nationhood. One could say that they “democratized” state sovereignty, brought it down to demos in its original meaning: the people. In Mickiewicz’s case the “people” were not so much a single ethnicity as the body of all inhabitants of the historical Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and especially as a class—the local peasantry. The Polish nation was not an ethnic concept, but it had a larger sense—it was “a cultural nation”, to use the words of Józef Babiński. It could not be otherwise, since Mickiewicz’s Poland was not even located on what could be called ethnically Polish territories. The plays and poems Mickiewicz wrote were set in what today is Belarus or Lithuania, a part of Europe that used to— but does not anymore—belong to Poland. As Tadeusz Boy-Zeleński said, because of Mickiewicz, Vilnius, rather than Warsaw or Cracow, became the poetic capital of Poland. When, one hundred and fifty years after Mickiewicz’s death, the location of Poland changed, that seat of Poland was as good as forgotten.

The Poland that romantics celebrated and proposed as the common historical homeland for all Poles was located on the Niemen River rather than on the Vistula. These Belarusian or Lithuanian territories of Mickiewicz’s works were populated by “medieval” pagans and Orthodox Christians. The settings, both historical and geographical, were far removed from his contemporaneity. Yet the exotic territory and pagans were never an obstacle to the patriotic—and later even ethnic—interpretation of his work. Many particulars were brushed aside or ignored. It was always understood that the Poland of Mickiewicz was true in a nonliteral sense, that independently or in spite of particulars, what he captured was its essence. The fatherland (or rather, suffering motherland) of Polish citizens did not have to be ethnically Polish, did not have to be Catholic; that ideal fatherland was a re-creation of an idealized Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania, perched towards the East, “civilizing” and christianizing Lithuanian pagans and Ukrainian nobility, submerging barbarian Muscovites, repelling Tartar attacks and invasions. Its greatness disappeared, but the idea of a Catholic and Civilizing Ante-Murale did persist.

Mickiewicz was a man of the Polish borderlands who celebrated a Poland that already then belonged to the distant past—to put it crudely, a nonethnic. Pole who captured in supreme verse an idealized image of an ethnically non-Polish Poland. The Polish Divine Comedy—Mickiewicz’s
Pan Tadeusz—is the best example of that “mispacement” or dislocation. The imaginary manor of Soplicowo, where the Polish-speaking nobility awaited the arrival of Napoleon’s army, is located somewhere to the west of Moscow, but also far to the east of Warsaw (in, it seems, Lithuania). 8 Mickiewicz’s Poland—its geographic shape imprecise—was there, in that between-Warsaw-and-Moscow territory.

That vision, shape, and location of Poland gradually changed. Throughout the nineteenth century the concept of Polishness became more and more ethnic. That ethnicization was not due to the forgetting of the patriotic “matrix of Poland”—the Polish Commonwealth. 7 The Polish nobility and intelligentsia kept this matrix alive. Important literature has been written about it, and the books by such writers as Orzeszkowa and Sienkiewicz maintained, so to speak, the “location” of Poland in those ethnically composite territories. The ethnicization of the concept of Poland—the linking of Polishness to blood and the transformation of a cultural nation (of nobility) into an ethnic nation (of all classes)—came with the spirit of the times. Poland was just one of many European nations that gradually redefined itself in ethnic terms. The ethnically complex Mickiewicz and his ethnically complex Poland became purified and cleansed, as did all other East European nations. His work was first poetic and symbolic, but gradually it became even less literal. The nostalgic Soplicowo took on an ethereal, idealized quality, and its quarrystone inhabitants became family to every Pole.

I mentioned already that during the bicentennial anniversary of Mickiewicz’s birth, many problems were discussed that were common to the postcommunist countries. There were also specifically Polish questions: about the persistence of romanticism in Polish patriotism, the place of religion in Mickiewicz’s vision of Poland, and some Mickiewicz family secrets, like the mental illness of his wife. There was almost no discussion, however, of the location of Poland, even though the poetic and intellectual, if not moral, authority of another Polish “Lithuanian”—the poet Czesław Miłosz—revived the vision of the Commonwealth of Poland. Throughout his long creative life, Miłosz writes continuously about the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and returns repeatedly to Mickiewicz. (Miłosz believes Mickiewicz made all questions, including theology and metaphysics, with national issues. Goodness was on the side of Poles and, Miłosz said, Mickiewicz made God become Polish.) But today the Lithuanian Commonwealth is basically a land of poetry, and Miłosz himself sees it as a place of exoticism. 15 Besides, Poles have more and more trouble understanding the very idea of the Republic of Lithuania and Poland. The link between language, blood, and territory, reinforced by the idea of one religion, delineates the borders of what Poland can be, of how Poles are able to think about their country. In the Commonwealth, nobility was Polish or Polonized; the pan-language was Polish; the peasantry was just that—peasantry. With the collapse of the old class system, the Commonwealth became exotic and obscure. Today we can hardly understand what it was all about. 11

I wrote above that there was almost no discussion of the former location of Poland, but some nostalgic voices were raised and should be noted here. One was that of Jacek Trzadzel, who wrote, “Pan Tadeusz is a testimony of the strength and reach of Polish culture, the way Roman aqueducts, roads, temples, and amphitheaters outside of Italy are witness to the power and greatness of Rome”. 12 The Ukrainian city of Lviv, present in Polish consciousness as Lwów, is still celebrated by the poets and writers who were born there: Zbigniew Herbert, Adam Zagajewski, and Stanisław Lem. But the tone of these reminiscences is simply nostalgic. It is one issue to leave behind monuments of past greatness (however Trzadzel understood these words) and another to claim a territory as one’s own. That difference is clearly visible in Kosovo.

The mental and ideological abandonment of territories that used to be (politically) Polish was helped, of course, by several historical calamities, wars, uprisings, and population movements. New states appeared in place of former Polish territories, and no one doubted their legitimacy, especially not the people who believed in the ethnic principle of national state. Stalin’s creation of these countries “pushed” Poland towards the West, causing her “migration”. Although this campaign was primarily the enlargement of Stalin’s domain, Poles actively embraced their new location and its tilt toward the center of Europe. That embrace was well expressed in the short but very meaningful episode that took place in the 1980s: the creation (or return) of the myth of Central Europe—the mostly Czech-inspired idea of Eastern Europe being in reality an integral part of the European West. A series of articles written by Milan Kundera, Czesław Miłosz, and Timothy Garton Ash, among others, and enthusiastically accepted in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland mark the latest case of East European intellectuals rewriting the concept of national and state loyalties. This very successful rewriting of the mental map of Europe now has been sanctified by the enlargement of NATO.

But it is unclear how the NATO story will end. Today, the national question is back with us in full force. Ethnic cleansing, the redrawing of borders, the appearance of new nations, each claiming a state of its own, seem to continue the process that started in the first half of the nineteenth century. The gradual dissolution of multinational empires led then to the creation of new nation-states, and the European mosaic of ethnicities started to sort itself out. World War II was in itself a gigantic wave of
ethnic cleansing and was immediately followed by another. East European Jewry was wiped out; a large proportion of Roma population was annihilated; the Sudeten Germans were expelled from Czechoslovakia. Poland moved west into new territories and had part of its eastern population settled in formerly German towns and villages. These resettled people never returned to their former lands. One could say that this phenomenon was due to the cold war and its freezing of borders. But in all of twentieth-century European history, there are no examples of the return of populations once they have been expelled from their homelands. The unlikely return of Kosovars to their lands would be the first such case.

The former Soviet empire is disintegrating on ethnic fault lines. Undoubtedly, it has been defeated to a large degree by the internal and external resistance of oppressed ethnicities. No matter how small the group, the dream of its own state seems to be the order of the day. Communism transformed itself into nationalism; to use another apt formulation by Adam Michnik, nationalism became the supreme stage of communism. The best, or rather the worst, example of that evolution is Slobodan Milošević, former communist apparatchik and now a virulent Serbian nationalist. The postcommunists in Russia are another illustrative case.

It is unclear where and how this process may end. But one could say that in the case of Poland, the horrendous task of ethnic “sorting” has been completed. Nobody in Poland casts a longing eye on formerly Polish eastern territories. It also seems that present-day Germany accepted the fact that its eastern territories are now firmly possessed by Poles, including such “sacred” German places as Danzig and Marienburg. “After 1989 it was generally accepted that borders should stay where they were. This was what had been agreed at Helsinki in 1975, and it remained an article of faith even when this meant accepting the injustices of the post-1945 settlement. Germany finally recognized Poland’s western border and gave up all claims to the old eastern territories. The Baltic states too accepted independence within the postwar boundaries and did not seek a return to the pre-1939 status quo ante. Stability was too precious to be jeopardized.” 14

The Poles have the look of a nation satisfied with its geographic and political position, with the ethnic and religious unity of its population placed “neatly” within state borders. It is a truly unusual situation in Poland’s thousand-year history and in European history as well. One often can hear in Poland that religious and national unity assists the development of democracy. This is a truly paradoxical situation: among its neighbors, Poland is the only religiously and ethnically homogenous country; it is therefore tautological that it would have less ethnic and religious conflict. One could question the long-term relationship between democracy (which implies plurality and diversity of subjects) and ethnic and religious monogeneity. Even without minorities, Poland has a serious Jewish question, as though a democratic state needs to produce diversity in order to function properly. But if we were to conclude that the mono-ethnic state is more conducive to peace and prosperity, Poland (and Europe) paid an extremely heavy price for this unusual correspondence between borders and ethnicity. That price is being exacted today in the Balkans.

Mickiewicz had a deep respect for the Serbian nation. In his courses in Slavic literature, delivered in the years 1840–44 at the College de France, he discussed the Kosovo battle. “The entire national poetry of Serbs circles around this defeat or painfully reminiscences about it... [T]he old story of this battle is for them a reality to a degree that is difficult to comprehend; their thoughts are not taken by active life, new history, richness of current events. The Serbs, passing through the Kosovo Polje, even now cry as if the battle took place yesterday; they speak about it almost as if about a present event. In the Serb poetry it plays the same role as the battle of Xeres de la Frontera in Spanish poetry: it reigns over every thought. Unfortunately, the Serbs did not have their battle of Tola, which for the Spaniards started a new epoch, while for the Serbs the battle on Kosovo Field opened and closed their political history.” 15 The war against Kosovo Albanians does not seem to bring the Serbs out of the Kosovo circle. Their political history still remains closed.

Notes
2 Olig Zdrojević, “The Kingdom of Serbs is Not of This World”, Gazeta Wyborcza (15–16 May 1999): 14–16. It is important to say that Slobodan Milošević starts his Kosovo speech by acknowledging that the historical facts may not correspond to the current Serbian vision of the Kosovo battle. But it is the emotional truth that is of importance, he says.
8 The poem starts with the famous opening “Oh, Lithuania, my country,” and therefore Sapieha was to be placed in Lithuania. But of course this is not the Lithuania of today, but the “Lithuania” of Mickiewicz’s childhood—most probably present day Belarus. Such supposition seems, however, to be profoundly unsound, judging by the remarks of Jacek Trzeciak in his “Tajemnica przyprowadzającego w Paru Tadeusza”, in Tajemnice Mickiewicza, ed. Marta Zielinska (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1998), 167–177; see 176. Trzeciak considers these territories Lithuanian—that is, Polish—although now “geographically” located “in partibus infidelium” (hic) (175).
9 Ilya Prizel writes that the “aristocratic commonwealth” became “the matrix of a national ideal”; in Prizel, National Identity and Foreign Policy, 41.
10 See Milose’s “The Land of Urlo”, “Prywatne obowiązki”, and “Poznajmy ojczyzny”, among others.
11 This is well demonstrated by the new cinematic version of “By Fire and Sword”, an adaptation to screen of the most popular Polish patriotic book. While Sienkiewicz writes about an arduous fight to keep the lands of the Polish Commonwealth, the movie speaks in an exotic and strange mixture of languages, nationalities, and costumes that illustrate bloody battle scenes, succeeding one another without pause and mercy. The movie tried to redress the historical injustices of Sienkiewicz’s depiction of seventeenth-century Polish wars, turning the entire enterprise into a barely comprehensible mess.
12 Trzeciak, Tajemnice Mickiewicza, 176.
13 Faced by the war, Montenegro and Kosovars started to define themselves as nations. See also “Tea” in which Timothy Garton Ash describes the national aspirations of Ruthenians. In The New York Review of Books (22 April, 1999): 54–55.
14 Mark Mazower, Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century (New York: Knopf, 1999), 393–94.