Chapter 12

Historical Consciousness and Civil Ethics: Debating the 'Painful Past' and Reviving 'Central Europe' among Dissident Circles in the 1980s

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1. Turn in Historical Narrative

After the end of the Cold War, we saw an explosive revival of historical memories everywhere in East Central Europe that had been suppressed under 'real existing socialism'. Of course the Soviet regime gradually loosened political pressure already during Gorbachev's Era so as to allow the discussion of previous taboo topics in history that might have undermined legitimacy of the communist regimes, or the alliance between Soviet Union and the East European countries. The Soviet regime even recognised some of its past crimes, such as the massacre of *Katyn*, or the military intervention in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. However, the revival of various historical memories after 1989 had no precedent in some respects: alternative interpretations challenged the very legitimacy of national history itself. These concerned mainly contemporary history, especially that of World War II and its consequence in East Central Europe.

　　Long after the end of World War II, it was the recognition or approval of its consequences which had helped establish the core of

national history in East Central Europe. In this region, during World War II and the following years, over 60 million people were deliberately killed or displaced in battle, due to the NS racial policies, the most extreme of which being the Holocaust; involving forced migrations or population transfers and so on. Before the establishment of communist regimes, the historical and cultural landscape of East Central Europe was so utterly changed that one could talk about a real break in history. The basic post-World War II function of historical narrative in East Central Europe was to legitimise the new political and social orders which this total break had brought about. In other words, the post-war narrative of national history was conditioned by this discontinuity of history. Discontinuity as a historical reality was to be substituted for the fictional continuity of national history.

The massive destruction and massacres during World War II should be seen as the most dramatic climax of the national liberation efforts of the Slavic people against the Germanic race, which was also interpreted in communist narrative in terms of a 'class struggle', namely as the 'struggle of working people against foreign exploiters'. In such narrative, a nation was constructed as an agent that should be responsible for historical progress and justice. To depict the history of World War II within national history, tragic martyrdom and heroic epics were the basic elements of the plot, which was to ultimately culminate in national liberation and social revolution. For Communists, who attempted to monopolise the legitimacy of the national liberation and identify themselves with the entire nation, the partisan myth was crucial to their narrative. In their eyes, the history of World War II was reduced to the partisan movements and advance of the Red Army to the West, which should also symbolise 'progress in history from the revolutionary East to the reactionary West'. In this conception, the history of World War II constituted a kind of myth of origin about the Communists' regime. During the political and intellectual constellation of the Cold War, this narrative was adopted in order to understand the present situation: the struggle remains ongoing! Historical discourse of communism can be characterised by a deep sense of breaking with the past, or more adequately, a dichotomy between a reactionary past and a revolutionary future. All that is reactionary in the present would have belonged to the past, therefore to be overcome, all progressive elements should have led straight ahead to the future, represented in the present by the communists. Regarding the fictional continuity of the

'progressive tradition in people', the break-up of World War II would have expressed the ultimate victory of this tradition. That means only the supposed march of revolutionary elements could constitute history.

Even if it was the communists who exploited the legitimising function of national history for their own purpose at its extreme, it does not change the fact that the core problem is solely attributable to the fundamental form of national history narrative. In a certain sense, communist historiography simply inherited the basic pattern of historical narrative from the previous period, i.e. a nationalist framework of history and a theological vision of historical evolution. The Marxist vision of the class struggle was superimposed onto this framework as a secondary construction.[1]

Following the collapse of socialist regimes, not only was communists' specific interpretation of contemporary history doubted, but also the very core of national narratives of the recent past was challenged to the extent triggering a 'civil war' around history. World War II could no longer represent a sacred struggle for national liberation, but a total destruction of the historical landscape of East Central Europe, where diverse religious, linguistic and ethnic groups had coexisted for several centuries; something which can be characterised by 'the greatest diversity in the smallest space', according to Milan Kundera. Thus, the status quo after the total destruction itself was questioned.

In Poland, for example, polemics on Polish-Jewish relations heated up, and the indifference or even a certain responsibility of Polish society toward the Holocaust was fervently discussed. The more readily the memory of the lost Jewish communities in Poland and their cultural heritage are remembered, the more Polish society must be confronted with the forgotten past of a multiethnic society, overshadowing the total revision of Polish national history. Tourism around the Jewish heritage and the Holocaust is developing on a large scale; but the memory of the Holocaust within Polish society cannot be defused by such commercialisation of the past. Kielce and Jedwabne became symbolic names for their critical approach to the national framework of historical narrative. In Czechoslovakia and Poland, the forced deportation of German population became one of the most burning issues of the 1990s,

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[1] On the continuity of semantic system of Marxist's discourse since the National Renaissance, see, Macura (1992).

completely dividing public opinion, and becoming overly politicised in the Czech republic. Massive confiscation of property, denaturalisation and other inhuman acts during the deportation and its preparation were remembered in the public sphere, which also required the significant revision of national history. Discussions on Polish-Ukrainian relations, population exchange and the forced migration of Ukrainian (Łemk) minorities (Action Wisła) has the same function in Polish society.

Reminiscence of the forgotten or suppressed memories is sparked by motives such as reconciliation and a return to the supposed multicultural or pluralistic 'tradition.' Naturally enough, motives have their own particular context within the political formation of European integration. However, it must be noted that challenge to the national narrative of recent history was already fermenting in dissidents' or exiles' circles in the 1980s. In Poland, liberal catholic journal *Znak* published a special volume dedicated to Polish-Jewish relations in 1983, which had a decisive impact on the polemics opening up in the following years. Unlike in Poland, where the Catholic Church and its media could offer a relatively wide forum of dialogue even under martial law, discussion on such the taboo topics remained limited to a the narrow circle of dissidents in Czechoslovakia. However, here as well, since the beginning of the 1980s, critical reflection of contemporary history was the main concern of banned intellectuals, which was often focused on Czech-German relations. Here, it is worth mentioning the similarity, contemporaneousness and interconnection between the Polish and Czechoslovak intellectual discussions in the final phase of the Cold War. In the following section, we will try to analyse the ideal formation of the dissident discourses on history in 1980s by using example of this Czech case as an example.

2. Moral Devastation of the Defeated

In 1990, Prague hosted an international conference on the deportation of the German population from Czechoslovakia and Poland, which was titled 'Lost History or Restored Lands?' The words 'restored lands' mean the eastern territory of the former German *Reich*, which was administratively taken over by Poland after World War II, or the Czech borderlands populated by Germans up to the massive deportation. These words also imply the legitimacy of this territorial cession and the following

deportation of the German population. Conversely, the term 'lost history' brings home to us both the oppressed memory of suffering suffered by former co-citizens and the long history of Poles, Czechs and Germans coexisting together in East Central Europe. They suggest a critical revision of national history.

Before World War II, Czechoslovakia had a population of about 15 million, of which approx. 230,000 citizens of Jewish origin and some thousands of Roma and Sinti were massacred as a NS racial policy during World War II, and while approx. three million of the German population were deported after the war. The population structure was dramatically changed during this process, and it took until the first half of the 1970s for Czechoslovakia to restore its population to pre-war levels. The expulsion of the German population was common knowledge, even in the shape of individual experiences in everyday life (not only in regions with Germans, but also many Czechs were directly aware of anyone who moved to the borderlands for internal colonisation after the evacuation of the former inhabitants). However, this was never discussed as part of contemporary history, not only due to the censorship of the communist regime; during the short period of liberalisation in the late sixties, this theme did not become the focus of discussion as a historical problem. Indeed, at the time of the expulsion, namely 1945–6, no dissenting voice was heard that would have questioned the legitimacy of the deed. With the exceptional case of the journal *Přítomnost*, which issued a few articles critical of the brutal violence accompanying the expulsion (but not the expulsion itself), all political camps competed in justifying the massive deportation of the German population amid the great wave of anti-German enthusiasm, referring it as 'the final victory over German colonists', whereby an excess of violence was legitimised to a certain extent. It is simply not true that the communist party was most eager to mobilise the nationalistic campaign in establishing a minority policy. The national framework was the key element for the political campaign and the subsequent narrative of history, and every political group endeavoured to claim to be the legitimate successor of 'the national struggles'.

It was not until a Czech exile journal *Svědectví* (Testimony) in Paris published an article by an anonymous author Danubius (a Slovak historian, Ján Mlynárik) in 1979, that Czechoslovak dissidents' and exile's circles began to discuss eagerly Czech-German relations and the transfer of

Czechoslovak Germans (Danubius 1990). Danubius argues the following five main points in this article:

1. The deportation of the German population from Czechoslovakia was a violation of human rights by applying the principle of 'collective guilt' to an entire national group.
2. Czechs cut themselves off from the European tradition of humanity by violating the European norms of human rights. Thus, the base on which dissidents should rely for moral reformation against the totalitarian regime had already been destroyed before this regime was even established.
3. By violating individual human rights, disregarding the rule of law, and arbitrarily confiscating private property, Czech society destroyed its moral foundation and created its own roadmap for the establishment of a totalitarian regime.
4. The deportation of the German population from Czechoslovakia was a consequence of chauvinistic Czech nationalism that finally destroyed the rich tradition of cultural diversity in Central Europe.
5. While the Czech nation had always had options of modus vivendi between West and East, following the deportation of Germans, no alternative other than total dependence on the East, i.e. Russia, remained.

According to Danubius, Stalin could play a decisive role in planning and realising the massive population transfer in post-war East Central Europe, because he had already applied this method to Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Volga Germans, and Premorsky Koreans, etc. in the late 1930s. However, if it may be true that Stalin and Molotov could initiate the Allies' recognition for transfer of Germans from Czechoslovakia, its plan originated from the resistance movements at home in the Protectorate as a immediate reaction to Hitler's occupation policy. Edvard Beneš' London exile government tended to be more exposed to pressure from the resistance movements in the form of a radical plan concerning the issue of German minority than the Czechoslovak Communists in Moscow around Klement Gottwald up to 1943. It must be emphasised that it was NS Germany's *New Order*, based upon racial policy, that directly paved the way for the mass post-war displacement of population in East Central Europe, rather than the deportations within the Soviet Union.

It is quite understandable for his thesis that Danubius stressed 'Czech chauvinistic nationalism' and the non-European ('Oriental-Asiatic') origin of the forced migration plan as a solution to nationality questions, even if this kind of argument is not sustainable from a historical perspective. The Danubius' thesis related more to his perception of contemporary Czechoslovak society under 'Normalisation' than the historical reflection. He emphasises the actuality of this problem for the dissidents' movement:

> The "Transfer of Czechoslovak Germans" indicated the deepest and most extended infringement of fundamental human rights: rights for homeland, rights for the motherland . . . Today, when we vehemently declare and fight for human rights, we must regard rights for home for the primary postulate, not only in the present, but also in the historical sense . . . We may not close our eyes to the fact that a crime was committed in our recent past on our land . . . If we recognise the principle of human rights and regard their defence as a supreme human act, we must establish a consistent distance from the past. The transfer of the Czechoslovak Germans is not only a German tragedy, but also *our* tragedy . . . (Danubius 1990: 88–9).

Although Danubius' thesis evoked an overwhelmingly negative reaction among dissidents and exiles, his main points were further developed by other dissidents. One of these was Bohemus, who published an article 'Standpoint to the transfer of Germans from Czechoslovakia' in *Právo lidu* in Zurich (Bohemus 1990). Bohemus' article defended Danubius against such critics stating that Danubius might too much moralise historical problems, and was more determined to raise the moral side of the problem:

> The transfer of Germans disrupted existing moral values and civilised relations, which had already been unsettled during the war by two sides locked in combat, because it was executed on the basis of the explicitly or implicitly accepted principle of collective guilt that we must always reject. It facilitated the unprecedented and state-sponsored plunder of individuals and groups in the borderlands. Moreover, it burdened the moral account of the Czech nation in future and sullied efforts to build a free life within the restored republic. Such consequences meant the transfer demoralised a significant part of the Czech population . . . During the occupation, the nation was programmatically humiliated and should have been germanised. Owing to the level of Czech resistance, however, this humiliation resulted in an emotional explosion of hate just at the end of the war. It was an

explicable compensation for the previous complexes, from which the Czech politics of various camps tried to benefit for their own purpose, stupidly promising that the society would develop from that time on a new healthy base . . . (Bohemus 1990: 198).

Bohemus extended his consideration onto a historical root of the end of national coexistence in the Czech lands. He traced the cardinal cause of the tragedy back to the narrow minded provincial character of the developing Czech nationalism, which isolated Czech society from broad contacts with European Culture.[2] Critical perspectives regarding the concept of Czech history, and political and moral critics to the expulsion of Germans in particular are conceptualised from the supposed European norms, and contribute to form a mirror image of the traditional concept of national history (Dichotonomic constellation of the obsessed debate, Czech national or European, has been, en passant, symptomatic in the Czech intellectual discourses since H. G. Schauer's 'Our two questions', or 'dispute on the sense of Czech history' at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries).

That is why such arguments found a strong resonance around *Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft*, which purports to represent all the expelled former Czechoslovak citizens of German nationality. The *Landsmannschaft* retained a political, ideological and even personal continuity from the *völkish* movements and Konrad Henlein's *Sudetendeutsche Partei* up-to the post-war period (as is well shown by its title, *Sudetendeutsch*), and it is one of the largest lobbies supporting the Bavarian CSU.[3] For the *Landsmannschaft*, the catastrophe began only with the experience of transfer, whose 'pre-history' would have solely constituted the development of Czech nationalism since the nineteenth century and the 'failure' of the nationality policy of the first Czechoslovak republic, neither the close cooperation between NS Germany and the *Sudetendeutsche Partei*, the NS occupation of Czech lands, nor its racial policy during the war. Thus, the absolute criticism aimed at the supposed Czech nationalism and the moralisation of the entire problem led Czech

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[2] Pithart, Otáhal, Příhoda published a broader, harshly critical consideration of Czech history from the eighteenth century in the samizdat edition under the pseudonym Podiven (Podiven 1991). The content of this book ends up in the year of 1939, but if it had reached the post-war period, the critical tone of this book would be more exaggerated.
[3] See, Hahnová (1999).

dissidents to become, oddly at first glance, involved into the revisionist trend on the German side.

Since the break down of real existing socialism, there have been intellectuals, not only of former dissidents, but also of the younger generation, who are strongly critical of Czech national courses and even to support such an idea that the Czech government should recognise *Landsmannschaft*, which demands concrete compensation and even the restitution of property and citizenship, as a full representation of all deported Czechoslovak citizens of German nationality and an internationally independent subject. They insisted that Czechs could not enter integrated Europe politically, legally and ideally without abolishing Beneš' decrees from 1945, which led to Germans being deprived of their citizenship and property. With *Landsmannschaft*, such critical intellectuals argued that it must be evidence of the extent to which the Czech society could overcome its totalitarian past and democratise itself. *Landsmannschaft* behaved as if representing European human values and as a patron of infant Czech democracy. We see here again a strange alliance between critical intellectuals and one of the most nationalistic camps in Germany.

For dissident historians, such as Jan Křen, such arguments seemed overly 'unhistorical', and they proposed a 'historical approach' to the problem: to analyse the causality of the events over the longer term, namely, to explain the deportation of Czech citizens of German nationality in a broader historical context, at least from 1938 to 1948. This approach later contributed much to the dialogue between German and Czech historians in the 1990s. However, despite serious reservations, they had something in common with Danubius and Bohemus: namely a basic assumption of a certain continuity from the time of NS occupation to the post-war period. This thesis was diametrically opposed to the official doctrine of history, even to the general public historical awareness. In this historical continuity, dissidents perceived the origin of the demoralisation of society under the real existing socialism: the social degradation and the moral devastation of the politically and militarily defeated nation deeply marked post-war society. A similar tone and virtually the same construction of arguments was also discernable in the harsh discussions concerning the moral responsibility of Polish society to the Holocaust, beginning with an article by a literary critic, Jan Błoński, in 1987 (Błoński 1987). Even if this kind of approach has gradually been acknowledged in

serious historical research since the 1990s, such remarks have always evoked negative reactions and been continually difficult to integrate into national history.[4]

This formulation of the question would find a certain resonance in the quest for the lost 'Central Europe'. The lost history was to be reconstructed for a moral regeneration of society and its return to a supposedly civic, multi-cultural Central Europe.

What we intend here is not to investigate the relevancy of the dissidents' revision of history from a historical research perspective, nor to trace its political consequence, but rather to understand this historical revision in the specific context of the dissidents' historical philosophy. Thus, we will try to find a historical-philosophical construction of the concept of Central Europe.

3. 'Post-totalitarian' Society and History

According to Václav Havel, 'post-totalitarian' society under 'Normalisation' should not be regarded as a 'classical dictatorship' with a monolithic structure, but was characterised by the complete disappearance of the public sphere, fragmentation of political and social life, and complete obedience of individuals to official ideology. Loyalty to the regime should be demonstrated by semantic play in everyday life, which was expressed in his essay as 'living within a lie'. Ritualisation of social acts, scholarly discourse and artistic activities was a characteristic, even essential part, of this system. Havel writes:

> As the interpretation of reality by the power structure, ideology is always subordinated ultimately to the interests of the structure. Therefore, it has a natural tendency to disengage itself from reality, to create a world of appearances, to become ritual . . . Under totalitarianism, . . . there is nothing to prevent ideology from becoming more and more removed from reality, gradually turning into what it has already become in the post-totalitarian

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[4] Recently for example, Penkalla (2003), Borák (2002). Feliks Tych, director of the Jewish historical institute in Warsaw, writes a very balanced, yet critical overview of Jewish-Polish relations during the NS occupation in Poland. He writes about the moral degradation in Polish society during the NS occupation, caused by 'arianisation', i.e. the mass transition of Jewish property into the hands of the Polish population, violence and massacre in an ordinary scene (Tych 2003).

system: a world of appearance, a mere ritual, a formalised language deprived of semantic contact with reality and transformed into a system of ritual signs that replace reality with pseudo-reality (Havel 1985: 32).

Thus, under the 'post-totalitarian' system, it is only the ritualised ideology that gives sense to social communication in the present time, and fragmented events in the course of time can become only pseudo-history, in reference to that ideology of the regime:

> The fundamental pillar of the present totalitarian system is the existence of a single, central and monopolistic subject of all truth and power (the existence of a certain institutionalised 'reason of history), which becomes, naturally enough, even the single subject of all social processes . . . In a world controlled by this principle, there is no room for mystery: having the complete truth means that there is nothing unknown beforehand (Havel 1999*c*: 936–7).

That is why the 'story' is lost in the totalitarian society. Subsequently, in the post-totalitarian society, it is 'theory itself, ritual itself, ideology itself', which 'makes decisions that affect people, and not the other way around' (Havel 1985: 33). Seemingly coherent ideology becomes absurd; it is composed of a collage of various fragmented parts that were cut off from the original contexts, because:

> . . . as ideology gradually loses touch with reality, it acquires a peculiar but very real strength. It becomes reality itself, albeit a reality altogether self-contained, one that on certain levels may have even greater weight than reality as such. Increasingly, the virtuosity of the ritual becomes more important than the reality hidden behind it. The significance of phenomena no longer derives from the phenomena themselves, but from their locus as concepts in the ideological context . . . Thus power gradually draws closer to ideology than it does to reality . . . This inevitably leads, of course, to a paradoxical result: rather than theory, or rather ideology, serving power, power begins to serve ideology . . . (Havel 1985: 32–3).

In such a society, the sense of history, and indeed history itself disappears completely. 'History is substituted by pseudo-history, lent rhythms by calendars recording anniversaries, assemblies, celebrations and Spartakiads' (Havel 1999*c*: 937). In fact, during 'Normalisation',

official historiography provided no consistent narrative but only an over-simplified version of national history, a bundle of fragmented passages borrowed from ritualised ideology, and represented by such historians as Václav Král. Such an image, in which alternative historiography in opposition might have been sharply confronted with official historiography, would be incorrect. The critical approach to recent history represented a constituent part of efforts to restore history itself, through a keen sense to the lost historical landscape of Central Europe.

Havel's reflection on 'post totalitarian society' was not very original, although it was very influential on dissidents in neighbouring countries. Hannah Arendt pointed out the absolute subordination of society to ideology and the 'autonomism' (even though this word itself is Havel's) of ideology as a basic characteristic of totalitarianism. Ideologies, according to Arendt, 'to the satisfaction of their adherents can explain everything and every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise' (Arendt 1973: 468).

Ideology substitutes for reality and it does not even concern reality, accordingly history is disappearing, as Arendt summarises the characteristics of 'ideology':

First, in their claim to total explanation, ideologies have the tendency to explain not what is, but what becomes, what is born and passes away. They are, in all cases, concerned solely with the element of motion, that is, with history in the customary sense of the word . . . The claim to total explanation promises to explain all historical happenings, the total explanation of the past, the total knowledge of the present, and the reliable prediction of the future. Secondly, in this capacity ideological thinking becomes independent of all experience from which it cannot learn anything new, even if it is a question of something that has just come to pass. Hence ideological thinking becomes emancipated from the reality that we perceive with our five senses, and insists on a 'truer' reality, concealed behind all perceptible things . . . The propaganda of the totalitarian movement also serves to emancipate thought from experience and reality . . . Once the (totalitarian) movements have come to power, they proceed to change reality in accordance with their ideological claims . . . Thirdly, since the ideologies have no power to transform reality, they achieve this emancipation of thought from experience through certain methods of demonstration. Ideological thinking orders facts into an absolutely logical procedure, which starts from an

axiomatically accepted premise, deducing everything else from it; that is, it proceeds with a consistency that exists nowhere in the realm of reality.

To an ideology, history does not appear in the light of an idea but as something which can be calculated by it. What fits the 'idea' into this new role is its own 'logic,' (ideology is the logic of an idea, to cite another passage of Arendt!: T.S.) that is a movement which is the consequence of the 'idea' itself and needs no outside factor to set it into motion . . . The movement of history and the logical process are supposed to correspond to each other, so that whatever happens according to the logic of one 'idea' (Arendt 1973: 470–1).

The premise for the dominance of ideology is the emergence of mass society, where people are totally 'lonely' (*verlassen*):[5]

Under modern circumstances, this deprivation of 'objective' relationships to others and of a reality guaranteed through them has become the mass phenomenon of loneliness, where it has assumed most extreme and most antihuman form. The reason for this extremity is that mass society not only destroys the public realm but the private as well, deprives men not only of their place in the world but of their private home, where they once felt sheltered against the world and where, at any rate, even those excluded from the world could find a substitute in the warmth of the hearth and the limited reality of family life (Arendt 1998: 58–9).

Within such society, where both the public sphere and private life have disappeared, and people stand against themselves in total loneliness, ideology substitutes reality. Certainly, Czechoslovak society under Normalisation was not forced into eternal movement, mobilisation of the

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[5] Concerning 'loneliness', Arendt writes; 'Loneliness (*Verlassenheit*) is not solitude (*Einsamkeit*). Solitude requires being alone whereas loneliness shows itself most sharply in company with others. Apart from a few stray remarks . . . it seems that Epictetus, the emancipated slave philosopher of Greek origin, was the first to distinguish between loneliness and solitude. His discovery, in a way, was accidental; his chief interest being neither solitude nor loneliness, but being alone (*monos*) in the sense of absolute independence. As Epictetus sees it, the lonely man (*eremos*) finds himself surrounded by others with whom he cannot establish contact or to whose hostility he is exposed. The solitary man, on the contrary, is alone and therefore 'can be together with himself" since men have the capacity to 'talking to themselves'. In solitude, in other words, I am 'by myself", together with my self, and therefore two-in-one, whereas in loneliness I am actually one, deserted by all others' (Arendt 1973: 476).

masses, nor exposed to open, excessive violence, as was experienced in the fifties. The ritualisation of ideology was already internalised as a rule of social behaviour, and socialists' Eastern bloc was fully recognised as an integral part of international relations. That is why Havel labelled the Normalisation regime '*post*-totalitarian'. However, still, Arendt's remarks on totalitarianism basically correspond with what Havel characterised as the characteristics of the Normalisation regime. Moreover, just as Arendt's philosophical essays on totalitarianism are not necessarily concerned with NS dictatorship or Stalinism alone, but more with the development of European modernity, and the phenomena of the mob and the mass as its consequences, Havel repeatedly emphasises that the post-totalitarian system is inevitably produced at the end of the historical process of modernity, and its moral decadence is that of 'consumer society' in an extreme appearance. In this sense, dissidents experience 'the crisis of modernity' foremost in the vanguard position.[6]

Then, what is Central European history? At least it can not be any 'restoration' of some veracious history. Dissidents in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary had a common ideal and intellectual context, and evidently, historical reflection on Polish-Jewish relations and the Holocaust among Polish dissidents was a certain parallel construction to the above-mentioned revision of history in Czechoslovakia. In fact, the anthology of dissidents around 'Charter 77' was translated into Polish and more eagerly read in Poland than in Czechoslovakia. The concept of Central European history was not to be found in some essentialist understanding of the region, nor in anyway a vague notion of lost cultural tradition, but in a certain attitude to history, a crucial assumption that history had absolutely disappeared from public communication. That is, reconstructing Central European history could not be a mere search for a forgotten 'other history', nor is there any room for nostalgia to a lost historic sight.

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[6] 'And in the end, is not the greyness and the emptiness of life in the post-totalitarian system only an inflated caricature of modern life in general? And do we not, in fact, stand (although in the external measures of civilisation, we are far behind) as a kind of warning to the West, revealing to it its own latent tendencies?' (Havel 1985: 38–9). 'Central European' Dissidents such as Havel, Czesław Miłosz, Adam Michnik, Milan Kundera, György Konrád, and others have in common a certain kind of messianic vision of their own position.

Serious reflection on the ultimate discontinuity in its history, and the self-destruction of Central Europe, leads to a specific sense of historical absurdity. The physical break down of historical continuity in Central Europe, during and after World War II, was suppressed in the narrative of fictional national history. Nothing is stranger for the Central European attitude to history than this praxis, which served only to underline the absurdity of history itself.

Havel's observation concerning vanishing history under a post-totalitarian system would surely be echoed in a literary portrayal of Central Europe. In his essay 'Burden with History', first published in samizdat in 1988, Josef Kroutvor analyses the specific concept of history in Central Europe contained in its literature:

> History cannot be denied, where history does not exist, or exists in distorted form. The little situation corresponds to a miserable history and vice versa. Likewise, the Czech character is a product of history, but one which is falling into decay. One can refer to Czechness as a lack of history . . . A typically popular source of anecdotes comes from the absurd historical circumstances without any history . . . The decline of the historical form is undermining the meaning of everyday life. Every country has its own everyday life, but Central European everyday life differs vastly from the civil everyday life of the West. For example, a Czech does not perceive himself as a citizen, his everyday life is not civil or civic, but routine, banal and depressed . . . (Kroutvor 1990: 64).

If Central Europe is, according to Milan Kundera, 'an uncertain zone of small nations', and 'the small nation is one whose very existence may be put in question at any moment; a small nation can disappear and it knows it', and in this sense 'the fate of Central Europe seems to be concentrated, reflected, and to have found its symbolic image in the destiny of the Jewish people', is it possible at all to conceptualise Central European history? (Kundera 1984: 35) Are those 'small nations' in Central Europe, which were condemned to be exterminated in the course of World history, homes to 'people without history (*geschichtslose Völker*)'?

Central European history is to be found in the ruin of Western history. There would be cause here to briefly examine the historical philosophy of Jan Patočka, another initiator of Charter 77, who was acutely aware of the

apocalypse of European modernity. According to him, the events of humankind run on three levels:

> . . . on a non-historical level, where events proceed in anonymity of the past, in purely natural rhythms, on a pre-historical level, where collective memory exists in the written tradition, and on the real historical level' (Patočka 1990*a*: 50).

> Pre-historicity is typical of the great civilisations in the Orient.

> It seems that events of great civilisations differ from 'natural' human events only by their literal tradition, because writing and its interpretation show evidence of the will for the conscious preservation of a life system and decisive resistance against any change, namely, the effort to regulate the stream of events by humankind, to set a purpose which was not formerly here. However, the will for unchanging tradition precedes writing, the latter of which is here only as an efficient tool to petrify the life form, rather than to set any new purpose. The will for the unchangeable is fundamentally sacral and ritual, related to the basic character of pre-historical truths and to cosmic-ontological metaphors (Patočka 1990*a*: 50).

'History' begins solely with political existence. Man is conscious of problematicity (*problematičnost*) associated with its acceptance into the world, must remain in search of the 'truth' in constant conflicts (*polemos*) with others, as an independent, free subject.

> History is there, where life becomes free and whole, where space for similarly free life is being established, which is not covered only by mere acceptance alone, and where, as a consequence of shaking 'small' life sense which acceptance bears in itself, man decides to adopt new attempts to give himself meaning in the light, as the existence of the world shows him that he is brought into (Patočka 1990*a*: 55).

This means that history began in the essential sense of the word, with polis, with the creation of a public sphere. Polis is not a peaceful place, indeed full of conflicts, but its spirit remains 'a spirit of unity in dispute, in struggle'.

> Conflict is the thing which creates community, arch-discussion, which enables philosophy. Conflict is not the devastative passion of the wild raider,

but is the creator of unity. The unity it establishes penetrates deeper than every ephemeral sympathy or interest coalition; and in the shaking of given sense, opponents meet one another and create new way of human existence. Perhaps only conflict offers hope in storming the world: the unity of the shaken, but not threatened (Patočka 1990*a*: 58).

As an alternative to what initially seemed an integral ideology, dissidents seemed to offer a concept of history based on pluralistic dialogue and the conflicts of various subjects and unpredictability. We can find a parallel vision in Havel's passages, with the words of a dramatist:

> The starting point of a story is, as is well known, a happening. Such a happening—as an invasion of one logic into the world of another logic—creates the thing from which every story grows and by which it is revitalised: a situation, relation and conflict. Moreover, every story has its own 'logic', but this is a logic of dialogue, tension and mutual influence among various truths, attitudes, thoughts, traditions, passions, human existence, higher authorities, social movements, and so on, namely, among independent forces that are not determined by one another. So the fundamental premise of a story is thus the plurality of truths . . . It is never clear beforehand which potentiality of one or another 'player' will evoke the other 'counter-player' into whatever kind of act. That is why the substantial dimension of every story is mystery (Havel 1999*c*: 936).

Under a (post-)totalitarian regime, where ideology predicts all the possible future, and nothing is unknown, either in the past or future, there is no room for problematicity of man's existence in the world, or conflict (*polemos*), through which human freedom in the quest for truth is realised. Such space like polis, the archetypal public sphere, where free men meet together in conflict, is disappearing, and there is no history.

Rejection of a coherent narrative, the Hegelian concept of history is vital to the Central European attitude to history. From this point, the end of the teleological narrative of history was derived, one which had a long tradition since the Enlightenment to the extreme form of communists' historical ideology. This should also have marked the end of the specific tradition of national history in Central Europe since the nineteenth century, where there was a tendency for the semantic composition of literal texts to predetermine historical narrative: the philological tradition of national history was so predominant that social and political reality was perceived

and even altered in reference to it, like Procrustes bed. The Central European attitude to history, or the concept of history as a dialogue and conflicts among various subjects would meet the constellation of post-modern historical science.

However, here as well, history remains conceptualised as nothing else but an essential product of European civilisation. Pre-historicity is allocated to 'great civilisations' in the orient, from which Greek polis, where history was born in the truest sense of the word, consciously dissociates:

> History as the development and progressive realisation of the teleological idea is, in essence, the history of Europe, history of non-European world becomes history only if it enters the field of European culture . . . (Patočka 1990*a*: 59).

The problem is that Patočka, with Arendt, did not regard totalitarian society as any deviation of European development, and did not call for the simple restoration of freedom, public sphere and thus the return of history—its own history—to 'Europe'. Following the complete catastrophes of the two World Wars, the Holocaust, the mass population deportation and the experience of a totalitarian dictatorship, triggered by European 'historicity', namely, in the era of total war, it is not simply possible to restore 'the World of Yesterday'. Patočka writes, 'the ideas of the nineteenth century are ideas of the day, its interests and peace . . . this century is the age of night, war and death' (Patočka 1990*b*: 128). Total war brings an absolute experience, and war becomes ordinary life. In contrast, 'victorious peace is an illusion, in which victory morally degenerates'.

> . . . that war continues is apparent from the fact that it is demotion of all the conventions, ruthlessness toward life, poison of suspicion, malignance, and demagogy that works on full cataclysms in the land of revolution. They are spread in days, and when the front predominates all, when not only weapons, but mainly all the weaknesses of the enemy and all the potential to drive the latter to inner collapse are exploited. However, it is Power, again, that triumphs in this cruel struggle, and which exploits peace as a tool for combat, rendering the peace itself a component of war, its tricky phase which defeats the enemy without a gunshot (Patočka 1990*b*: 134–5).

This grey, seemingly nihilistic vision of the twentieth century as an age of total war, and the end of European 'technical civilisation' is the basis for the dissidents' discussion concerning history and the starting point of Central European history. Patočka envisages yet new solidarity in the age of war which brings absolute freedom. The age of war brings a sense of absolute freedom:

> Peace and day must reign so that people may be sent to their deaths to a secure future for others in the form of progress, emancipation, gradual development, the potential for all of which is not currently at our disposal. The sacrificed are required to show endurance in the face of death. This leads to the gloomy recognition that life is not everything, and indeed can be given up. More precisely, it is this surrender and this sacrifice that is required, as something relative, related to peace and day. However, experience of the front is an absolute experience. Here suddenly, absolute freedom hits participants, freedom from all the interests of peace, life, and day. This means that the sacrifice of the sacrificed stops having its own relative meaning, and is not even the required way forward in the program of construction, progress, increase and expansion of living possibility, but instead has its own meaning for itself (Patočka 1990*b*: 136–7).

From this awful vision, he derives new solidarity, 'the solidarity of the shaken' by war and night. This solidarity of the shaken is built up upon execution and uncertainty. It is on the deep sense of historical discontinuity that this vision is based on. Because of this historical vision, the dissidents and protagonists of Central Europe regarded themselves as standing at avant-garde of history and of European civilisation.

4. 'Europe' and the 'East'

> After six years of raging Nazism, we were infected by the virus of evil. During and after the war, we betrayed one another and applied an inhuman principle of collective guilt. Even if our exasperation was understandable, it went further. Despite judging the betrayers of our fatherland on trial, we deported them and punished them via means irrelevant to the law. It was not a punishment, but revenge. Furthermore, we deported them without proving individual crimes; simply because they belonged to a certain nationality, and simply because they were Germans. In the belief that we were paving the way to historical justice, we injured many innocents, especially women and children' (Havel 1999*b*: 95).

Soon after being elected as president of Czechoslovakia at the end of December 1989, Václav Havel visited both Germanys to show his intention to publicly recognise the criminality of the deportation of Czechoslovak citizens of German nationality. Indeed, he officially invited the president of the FRG, Richard von Weizsäcker, to Prague castle on 15 March 1990, on the day of Hitler's invasion into Czech lands. The main motives of his speech had been long prepared in dissidents' circle in the 1980s, as we saw above.

Surely, critical approaches developed by dissidents had a significant enough potential to break the traditional framework of national history and to expose a forgotten or tabooed past. However, despite revitalising alternative memories to the national narrative of history, it seemed, former dissidents were so eager to establish a new coherent narrative of history, based on supposed 'Europeanness'; namely the European tradition of pluralism, or that of 'a civil society.' The metaphor, infection by 'virus of the evil', by which Havel summarised the course of events from 1939 to the deportation, speaks more than eloquently of his perception of the recent past: this period was a deviation from the normal historical course of European civilisation. If we consider that this revision of recent history developed into the Cold War, the period of deviated development would stretch to 1989.

This supposed Europe (today, no one speaks of Central Europe) has a certain boundary, not only externally but also toward the internal minorities. When discussion on the recent past and reconciliation was at fever pitch, the Yugoslavian war continued. Few voices were heard in Czech society condemning the military intervention in Yugoslavian conflicts, because it was argued that it is the responsibility of Europe to stop the violence and brutality in the Balkans: the Balkans, deeply sunk in blind violence and chauvinism, were unable to solve the problems by themselves! Europe on the path toward historical reconciliation was consciously contrasted with the Balkans.

In a new course, various memories, representing a potential alternative to the national narration of history, remain under threat of annihilation. For example, a few historians are interested in the destiny of Czech Romas, who were deported from concentration camp near Břeclav in Moravia to Auschwitz-Birkenau 1942. The plan of this camp as a segregation camp for Romas would have been completed already in February 1939, namely, before the NS occupation of Czech lands, if this

plan had been realised under Nazi occupation (by the same state administrative machinery of the ministry for internal affairs). Czechoslovakia was certainly not an exception at that time in planning such racist, or 'sanitary' policy. The key element is that this case actually contradicts the 'virus theory' and a story of reconciliation, and thus historians are more or less still silenced on such topics.

The history of Central European nations returning to Europe is supported by their international position and firmly anchored in official doctrine and mainstream historiography. Now that the explosive potentiality of Central European dissidents' attitude to history is gradually fading, it seems as if historical narrative will revert to the traditional course known since the time of National renaissance, where 'Europe' always functioned as the key axis of reference for the concept of national history, as pointed out by Czech literal historian Vladimír Macura:

> Just as a ritual fight for space in the middle and the demonstration of one's own Central European character did not lead to the basic rhetoric of the National Renaissance being abandoned, attempts to play with the 'European' argument do not soil the past illusion of the myth of nations. Definitively not, when these plays are bound with the semantic discrimination of other nations, Russians, Slovakians, Yugoslavians, Bulgarians and so on; we are Europe—they are Asians, Balkans etc. (Macura 1998: 76–7).

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