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THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History
of Modern Europe, 1500-2000



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2.2.3 Interethnic Relations in Contemporary History (ca. 1900–2000)

Jaroslav Ira, Thomas Schad, and Erika Szívós

Introduction

Interethnic relations and the complex relationships among states, nations, and minority populations underwent several changes in twentieth-century Europe. The First World War brought about the dissolution of empires on the continent, the rearrangement of European borders and the emergence of entirely new states, especially in the continent's eastern half. These geopolitical changes often thoroughly redefined the populations of European states as well as the possibilities for minorities within them. Dictatorships and authoritarian regimes in the interwar period fostered racialised thinking and the persecution of ethnic and other minorities, culminating in genocide and ethnic cleansing during and after the Second World War on a scale that would have been unimaginable a century earlier. Even in the second half of the twentieth century, discriminatory practices towards minorities continued and nationalist or separatist movements re-emerged, leading to periodic outbursts of violent interethnic conflicts. The remainder of this chapter will examine the ambiguity of the term 'ethnicity' and the changing relationships between majority and minority populations in Europe, with a particular focus on the more complex situation in multi-ethnic regions of Central, Eastern, and south-eastern Europe.

Ethnicity, Nationality, and Markers of Identity

Ethnicity and ethnic groups are often equated or confused with nationality, national minorities, or even nations. While these categories do overlap, they are not necessarily identical. To take but one example, the Socialist Federative

Republic of Yugoslavia (1945–1992) drew a distinction between nation (*narod, nacija*) and nationality (*narodnost*), with the former term applying only to Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Muslims, Montenegrins, and Macedonians, all of whom spoke Slavic languages and were considered the ‘constitutive people’ of the multiethnic state. However, residents of the same state who identified as Hungarian, Albanian, Romani, Jewish, Czech, German, Romanian, Bulgarian, Slovak, Turk, Rusyn, Italian, Vlach, or otherwise, were considered to belong to a nationality (*narodnost*) instead, implying that their ‘true’ homeland lay beyond the borders of *Jugoslavija* (literally “the land of South Slavs”).

Across Europe in the twentieth century (as in earlier periods), a commonly accepted, uniform definition of ethnicity never emerged; most often, the term was related to markers of difference such as religion, language, origin, culture, or some combination of these attributes. Religion, for instance, is still a decisive feature of identity in Northern Ireland: according to the 2011 census, the majority of Roman Catholics (57.2 percent) identified as Irish, while most Protestants (81.6 percent) declared themselves British. In the Balkans, religious affiliation is often the most prominent marker before language, as the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina shows, where Bosniaks—known until 1993 as Muslims (*Muslimani*)—are traditionally Sunni Muslims, whereas Serbs are Orthodox Christians, and Croats are Roman Catholics. However, the situation is radically different in nearby Albania, where Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic, Bektashi, and atheist Albanian speakers identify as Albanians, regardless of their respective religious traditions.

Language is the decisive identity marker for Germany’s Slavic-speaking Sorbs as well as for Frisians, who speak a Germanic dialect. In Spain and France, the Basque minority speaks a language unrelated to that of the dominant, surrounding communities. In Belgium, the two major population groups speak either French or Flemish, but neither is usually referred to as an ‘ethnic group’—instead, they are mostly referred to as Walloons and Flemings, or collectively as Belgians. This example from the European Union’s institutional centre draws attention to the widespread Eurocentric habit of applying the label of ‘ethnicity’ overwhelmingly to marginalised and minority groups—particularly outside of Europe and in supposedly peripheral regions such as the Balkans—but not to larger groups and majority populations in (Western) Europe.

In other cases, like the Swedish, Norwegian, and Sámi peoples of Scandinavia, ethnicity is not only marked by linguistic difference, but also by reference to different origins and origin myths. Cultural difference might be associated with religious difference, as in the case of Bulgaria’s Muslim Turkish minority. However, for the Sarakatsani people of Greece, North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Albania, cultural difference is associated with a

nomadic lifestyle. Nomadism became highly exceptional towards the end of the twentieth century in Europe, although it remains a stereotype associated with Europe's largest ethnic minority, the Romani people. However, they use different names (such as Roma and Sinti, Ashkali, Lovari, Kale, Calé, and many others), they speak their own (Romani) and/or other languages, and they follow various religious traditions. The Romani people are present in every European country, from Finland in the north to Andalusia in the south. Throughout the twentieth century, they were stigmatised in various ways, from the names given to them by outsiders to open forms of racism and persecution, which peaked during the Second World War. Estimations by Romani organisations of their total population size in Europe vary between ten and fourteen million. Spain has the largest Roma population in Western Europe (725,000–750,000), whereas other significant centres are in the Balkans.

Ethnic Relations in Europe ca. 1918–1945

As these examples show, it is extremely difficult to grasp Europe and its interethnic relations across the twentieth century from only one perspective. It is nevertheless possible to draw a distinction between developments in the western, south-western, and northern parts of the continent on the one hand, and the central, eastern, and south-eastern parts on the other. In Western Europe, a consolidation of nation-state structures accompanied by ethnic homogenisation took place earlier than elsewhere (though often later than commonly assumed). In Central and Eastern Europe, stretching from present-day Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Austria, and Hungary eastwards to the western Balkans, ethnic diversity within the spaces of former multi-ethnic empires persisted much longer. Whether it was the Austro-Hungarian, the Ottoman, or the Russian Empire, all of these pre-national political structures were intrinsically multi-ethnic.

The difference between mostly mono-ethnic nation-states and multi-ethnic empires also helps to explain why inter-ethnic violence and tensions often arose in areas which became nation-states comparatively late: the logic of nationalism stresses the alignment of territory, population, and political power (sovereignty) within one 'nation'. According to this logic, ethnic difference can easily turn into violent conflict over resources, especially when new borders are drawn, new state bureaucracies emerge, or when citizenship is redefined along linguistic, religious, or other 'ethnic' criteria. Nationalist regimes homogenised populations through policies of 'social engineering' that reshaped their demographic or ethnic composition, such as through ethnic cleansing, forced resettlement, assimilation, or genocide.

While ethnic diversity in Eastern and Central European states was commonplace before 1918, the 'Versailles System' established after the First World War created radically new conditions. The dissolution of the multi-ethnic empires (Austria-Hungary, Russia, Wilhelmine Germany, the Ottoman Empire) was followed by the emergence of successor states whose legitimacy derived from the principle of national self-determination. But the new states were far from ethnically homogeneous units and many ethnic groups found themselves dispersed outside of 'their' nation-states.

Incongruencies between cultural and political borders fostered major tensions both within and beyond individual nations during the interwar period. Domestically, relationships were often strained between national minorities and the majority populations (the so-called 'titular nations') that became hegemonies of their respective states. At the same time, national groups became bones of contention between the states in which they formed a minority (such as Germans in Czechoslovakia or Hungarians in Romania) and the states where they were dominant (Germany, Hungary).

Legal measures were created to secure the rights of national minorities, such as those enshrined in the Minority Treaties that newly established states were obliged to sign in order to join the League of Nations. The League served as arbitrator in cases of alleged mistreatment of minorities, but cases could only be put forward by the recognised nation-states that were members of the organisation. In practice, many new states imposed the cultural dominance of the largest ethnic group and treated minorities that did not assimilate as unreliable or disloyal.

Some states, such as Poland, adopted harsh policies toward minorities, enacting measures of cultural Polonisation while excluding minorities from state structures. This especially applied to Ukrainians, Belarussians, Jews, and Germans, who together formed roughly one third of the population. Czechoslovakia adopted a more liberal attitude towards its German, Hungarian, Ruthenian, and Polish minorities, but still regarded these groups' demands for greater cultural or territorial autonomy with suspicion. The peculiar and instrumental construction of a 'Czechoslovak' nation itself concealed the unequal relationship between Czechs on the one hand and Slovaks on the other, with the latter remaining underrepresented in state administration and public institutions.

Mid-century Transformations

The Second World War and its aftermath brought about a profound transformation of Central and Eastern Europe's ethnic conditions. The war itself triggered the flight and emigration of hundreds of thousands of people

from territories invaded or annexed by Nazi Germany and its allies. The largest proportion of the refugees were Jewish by religion or by descent, but non-Jewish citizens also had reason to fear persecution on ethnic or political grounds, and thus fled in large numbers from countries like occupied Poland in 1939. As the war continued and the Nazis pursued a policy of extermination towards Jews, millions of people in Central and Eastern Europe were murdered. Jewish emigration from the region during and after the war thoroughly changed its composition and culture, as characteristic groups and urban subcultures disappeared and the complex ties between Jews and Gentiles were broken.

Similar movements of mass flight and forced migration unfolded in the other direction as well. In 1939, following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, the Soviet Union annexed eastern Poland, and in 1940 forced the Baltic states to join the USSR. The Nazis themselves forced Baltic Germans, who had inhabited the region since the Middle Ages, to resettle within the Third Reich. As the Soviet front approached, the ethnic German population of East Prussia (today the Kaliningrad exclave of Russia) was evacuated *en masse*, never to return to their former homeland. At the end of the Second World War, the Allies instituted wartime agreements that led to substantial border changes in Central and Eastern Europe, which were often accompanied by ‘population exchanges’—mass expulsions that forced several million people to relocate. To take Poland as an example: Germans were expelled from the western territories incorporated into post-war Poland, while Polish citizens were forced to move out of the areas ceded to the Soviet Union. Simultaneously, a similar number of ethnic Belarussians and Ukrainians had to leave Poland and move to the neighbouring Belarussian and Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republics, areas which by then had become permanent parts of the Soviet Union.

Almost everywhere in Eastern and Central Europe, the guiding principle behind expulsions and population exchanges was the drive of post-war governments to transform their countries into ethnically homogeneous states, an idea that was initially supported by all Allied powers as well. However, given the ethnic, linguistic and denominational diversity of Central and Eastern Europe and the ethnic complexity of many of its sub-regions, homogeneity in most cases could only be achieved—if at all—by coercion. For example, under a so-called population exchange treaty in 1946, ethnic Hungarians from Czechoslovakia and ethnic Slovaks from Hungary could ‘swap’ their domiciles; however, the figures on the two sides did not match (approximately 120,000 resettled Hungarians vs some 73,000 resettling Slovaks).

Expulsions and forced resettlement, designed partly to solve the ‘nationality problem’ and partly to administer collective punishment, disrupted age-old patterns of coexistence. By placing people into rigid ethnic or national

categories, expulsions often targeted those who had compound identities and those with multiple ties to their country and its communities.

Minority Issues and Policies During and After the Cold War

Although states in post-war Central and Eastern Europe perceptibly worked towards the greatest possible degree of homogeneity, several countries retained a multi-ethnic character and/or ethnic minorities after 1945. Policies regarding minorities varied from state to state and from period to period. After the communist takeover, the Marxist doctrine of 'proletarian internationalism' to some extent relegated minority issues into the background, but ethnic realities still had to be addressed. The USSR was itself a multi-ethnic state in which contradictory policies coexisted. While Russification and the suppression of local nationalisms was a marked tendency during the entire history of the Soviet Union, so too was a whole range of working solutions developed with regard to the languages of member republics and the historic and cultural heritage of non-Russian nationalities. The countries of the Socialist Bloc were required to adopt the principles of proletarian internationalism, but at the same time they could look to the Soviet Union for practical examples of how to handle nationalities within a multi-ethnic communist state. In some east-central European communist countries, such as Hungary and Yugoslavia, the equality of all nationalities was stated in the constitution; in others (Czechoslovakia for instance), the rights of nationalities were regulated by various laws.

However, state socialism did little to cultivate the allegiances of minorities. Communist governments required citizens to identify primarily with the party and the state, usually regarding all other loyalties and identities with suspicion. Where national minorities were permitted their own institutions (such as schools, cultural associations, organisations, events, newspapers, or regular radio and television programmes), these were closely monitored and kept under strict state control. The case of the Roma in Czechoslovakia is illustrative of the contradictory approach toward minority groups under socialism. On the one hand, the state pursued assimilation strategies premised on the idea that the Roma did not constitute a distinct nationality, but rather represented a kind of 'deviant' lifestyle or a social problem for the state. Measures deployed against the Roma included not only continuous sedentarisation and resettlement (from the countryside of eastern Slovakia to cities in the border regions of Bohemia), but also much more aggressive policies such as the sterilisation of Roma women or segregation of Roma children into 'special schools'. On the other hand, the proclamations of equality and extensive social rights that legitimised the socialist regime also created a space for advocating

for the rights of Roma, their inclusion in society, and their recognition as a nationality.

As far as Western Europe was concerned, intercultural issues underwent significant changes after the Second World War as, for the first time in modern history, Europe became a continent of mass inward migration (see the chapters on 'Demographic Change' and 'Migration' in the twentieth century). In the wake of decolonisation, an ever-larger number of non-Europeans arrived from former colonies to countries like Britain, France, and the Netherlands. In the economic boom that began in the 1950s, large numbers of so-called 'guest workers'—initially from Italy, Spain, and Portugal, then increasingly from Turkey and Yugoslavia—were recruited for employment in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. By the 1990s, immigration had greatly diversified in terms of the motivations of migrants and their countries of origin. With the emergence of the European Community, later the European Union, intra-European migration began to increase as well. These new patterns of migration raised new kinds of concerns. Cultural differences, manifest in residential spatial patterns such as segregation, and new issues of cultural integration began to define discourses on interethnic relations.

The collapse of state socialist regimes in 1989–1990 put the question of minorities on a new footing. Democratically elected parliaments and post-1990 governments sought to create legal frameworks in which minority rights were respected and observed. In many cases, these new laws were shaped by the European Union, which expanded to include the Visegrád countries (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary), the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), as well as Slovenia in 2004, followed by Romania and Croatia three years later. Minorities in these countries thus obtained greater legal protections. However, populist and right-wing nationalist parties claiming to represent the entire 'nation' (meaning, in fact, the majority ethnic population) also pursued aggressive policies against minorities in this period. In some countries, unbridled nationalism led to increasing tensions and discrimination in everyday life.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, Europe was also reminded of the dangers of violent interethnic conflict. The breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991 and the subsequent wars in Croatia (1991–1995), Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992–1995), and Kosovo (1998–1999) represented the first large-scale interethnic wars on European soil since the Second World War. With the fall of the Muslim enclave of Srebrenica (Bosnia) on 11 July 1995, the war even led to the first post-1945 genocide in Europe, against the Bosniak people. These conflicts shared many similarities with those earlier in the century, when the disintegration of multi-ethnic states had led to struggles between competing ethnic groups for sovereignty over 'their' territory.

Conclusion

After the First World War and the dissolution of former empires, national ideals informed the self-identification of new states, and continued to define the strategies of governing elites throughout the century. This development encouraged restrictive or assimilative policies towards national or ethnic minorities, fuelling unresolved tensions and in some cases leading to separatist movements. The period between the early 1930s and the late 1940s irreversibly changed the ethnic maps of entire regions. Millions were killed or forced to resettle as a result of the Second World War. War, genocide, and mass expulsions broke up centuries-old patterns of ethnic coexistence in the victims' places of origin, while the arrival of forced migrants often led to new tensions with the local populace in their places of arrival. After 1945, Europe became a region of mass immigration due to post-colonial global migration patterns and the globalisation of the labour market. Until 1989, Eastern Bloc countries—being closed societies under the control of the Soviet Union—stood largely outside the circuits of global migration. However, after the collapse of state socialist systems, they too became countries of arrival for international migrants within an expanding European Union.

The 'national turn' that had taken place in the late nineteenth century thus manifested itself in all countries of Europe throughout the twentieth century, deeply affecting the relationship of majority nations with the minorities living among them, as well as the relationships between different minority groups. The ethnically and culturally homogeneous nation-state became the norm and the ideal, even if that ideal was far removed from the existing realities of most European countries, and particularly far from the conditions of large, multi-ethnic states in early twentieth-century Europe. This was particularly true in Central, Eastern and south-eastern Europe, regions whose twentieth-century history exemplifies key problems of interethnic relations. Indeed, the habit of speaking about 'ethnic groups' is far more prevalent in relation to Eastern and south-eastern Europe than it is to Western Europe, though there exist important tensions in minority-majority relations in the latter as well. Conflicts over ethnic difference are thus not a specific feature of the east and southeast, but a reflection of the longevity of nationalist thought and its assumption of ethnic homogeneity. Given the bloodshed and body count of nationalist projects, one must use 'national' and 'ethnic' categories with care and critical reflection.

The most troublesome impact of the 'national turn' has been on minorities who have never had their own nation-state within Europe, such as Jews, the Roma, and nomads. The Jewish response to the experience of being a 'stateless' people was often a strong identification with, and an effort to integrate into, the state in which they lived. However, with right-wing political groups and

exponents of racial ideologies repeatedly calling such efforts at integration into question, another Jewish response was the rise of political Zionism, an early twentieth-century modern nationalist movement that sought to (re) create a Jewish homeland outside Europe and encourage the emigration of European Jewry into that new state. The societal integration of the Roma, the Sinti and of various nomadic groups was similarly controversial and remained incompletely addressed in many European countries, even in the late twentieth century.

Discussion questions

1. Discuss the role of the nation state in interethnic relations in twentieth-century Europe.
2. What was the role of the Cold War in interethnic relations in Europe?
3. The twentieth century was full of interethnic tensions. Do you think the EU has solved these problems? Why or why not?

Suggested reading

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