

Being a Historian of Central Europe: The Survey of HSCE

The main goal of *Historical Studies on Central Europe* is to provide an interdisciplinary and international platform for disseminating new findings on Central Europe and enhancing the dialog on it. In this spirit, the editors have decided to launch a series asking prominent scholars of the region: their personal motivations for choosing Central Europe as their field; their view on central questions of methodology, trends, and definition, as well as their opinion on the status of the field.

Our first discussant is Pieter M. Judson,¹ who currently holds a chair in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century History at the European University Institute in Florence. He is the author of numerous prize winning books on fundamental aspects of Habsburg Central Europe, including *Exclusive Revolutionaries. Liberal Politics, Social Experience, and National Identity in the Austrian Empire, 1848–1914* (1996), *Guardians of the Nation. Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (2006), and *The Habsburg Empire. A New History* (2016), with the latter translated into twelve languages. For ten years, Professor Judson has been one of the editors of the *Austrian History Yearbook*, and currently serves as President of the Central European History Society of North America.

A Response from Professor Pieter M. Judson

HSCE: *The historian's interests may have very different origins: they may be inspired by the scholar's family background, personal experiences or even certain dilemmas concerning their own era which they seek to comprehend through studying the past. What is your motivation for studying Central Europe?*

My motivations for studying this region extend back to my childhood. My own family does not come from the region (My roots are in Russian Kaunas and England) but as a child I was fortunate to travel to Vienna (and in the 1970s to Budapest) where I learned a bit about the region's fascinating history. Later, as a student I wanted to study the history of modern Germany, but it seemed that everyone who studied Europe in the USA at the time wanted to study Germany (thanks to the Nazi

1 Pieter.Judson@eui.eu; European University Institute, Villa Salviati – Via Bolognese 156, 50139 Florence, Italy; ORCID: orcid.org/0000-0001-6679-9482

regime). I was persuaded by my supervisor at Columbia University, István Deák, that if I wrote about East Central Europe, I could choose a bigger topic. (If I stayed with Germany, I would have to choose a narrow topic.). He was correct. I was able to choose for my dissertation an enormous and broad topic in Austro-Hungarian history that no one else was studying (a social and political history of the German liberal political movement in the nineteenth century). As I learned and researched more about the region in the nineteenth century, I began to see that the way most historians treated the region (as an almost non-European, pathological Orient) was problematic and that most of the important questions in modern European history could be studied quite successfully there. As a US American I also had to learn other languages in order to study the Habsburg Monarchy, but this was easier when I was a student because during the Cold War the US government paid students to learn languages from the region. Later, during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, I renewed my interest in studying the region, this time focusing my research on conflict in language frontier regions for the book *Guardians of the Nation*. Finally, I should add that for US Americans, once you have learned new languages and done the hard work of learning about the institutions, laws, social structures, economy, etc. of East Central Europe, you would not change fields but would stay with this field because of the investment of time and research energy.

HSCE: Perhaps it is no exaggeration to state that the notion of 'Central Europe' is one of the most disputed terms in historiography. To recall but only a few from the diverse definitions: in the Anglo-Saxon milieu, they often refer to Germany as Central Europe, while others mean the Danubian region of the Habsburg Empire; in the meantime, there are still other definitions that integrate the Baltic states into the notion. Some consider that the German notion of 'Mitteleuropa' should not be used as it is ideologically charged, implying a German hegemony. Certain thinkers believe that Central Europe is simply undefinable. Moreover, inspired by cultural studies, some scholars aim to break with the traditional geographical approaches and conceive Central Europe as a space of communication. Which of these definitions do you agree with? Have you created a new definition for Central Europe which is more adequate to your own research?

In my work, I generally use the term 'Habsburg Central Europe' to characterize the region which I write about. I do not define this region too specifically. I am also sympathetic with those who understand Central Europe as a space of communication. Since the 1980s, I have worked to convince US Americans that Central Europe is more than Germany. (This was a problem more specific to historians in the USA than perhaps to those in Europe). I served as president for two years of the Central European History Society of North America (CEHS). Our organisation publishes the journal *Central European History* (CEH). Now, after many years of work, our journal publishes articles

on topics about all regions of Habsburg Central Europe (the Empire and its successor states), as well as on Germany. We regularly make certain that we elect to our Board and as our officers, historians not only of Germany but also of other parts of this broader Central Europe. In Germany, I found early in my career that there were either historians of Germany or of Russia but almost none of the Habsburg Monarchy or the regions we called 'East Central Europe' in those days. This was a problem. Today, the situation is different. In the USA Habsburg Central Europe is seen as a region where one can profitably apply transnational methods of study, therefore, it has become very popular, and now competes with studies of Germany.

HSCE: As every field of history, Central Europe has its influential scholars whose thoughts and approaches have inspired researchers or even a whole generation. Who are the scholars that you consider as your masters? Whose oeuvre and approach has influenced your work?

All my work has been greatly influenced by my PhD supervisor and dear friend, István Deák. He has always been my greatest inspiration. Because I started in the field of German history in the early 1980s, I was also influenced by the (then) quite new approaches of David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, who questioned the German *Sonderweg* and whose approach I sought to adapt to Habsburg history. I was also tremendously influenced by the remarkable first book of Gary Cohen on the Prague Germans, and by John Boyer. Most of these are in the Anglophone world. But I was also lucky to take a class with György Ránki at Columbia and to meet Peter Hanák, thanks to István Deák. Later, in the 1990s and 2000s my work (especially on nationalism and national indifference) was highly influenced by the brilliant Gerald Stourzh. Waltraud Heindl's research has also been an ongoing inspiration. Today, there are many younger historians whose work inspires me.

HSCE: The researcher of Central Europe has to face numerous difficulties which are not present in the case of other subjects—the most evident being the multi-lingual makeup of the region. For you, what has constituted the greatest difficulty in your research on Central Europe?

The greatest difficulty as a US American was the issue of languages because I came to the field only with German and Czech. Czech helped later with the little bit of Slovene I learned to read for some newspaper research. For other reasons, I also knew French, Dutch, and Latin, but these were not very helpful for the post-1848 Habsburg Monarchy. My single greatest regret in retrospect is that I did not have the time or opportunity to learn Hungarian. Another difficult challenge was the financial constraints of traveling to Europe to do archival research as regularly as

possible. In those days, no sources were digitized, of course, and there was no online possibility to learn new languages.

HSCE: What do you think of the current state of research on Central Europe's history? In your view, how does research into Central Europe fit into the major trends of European historiography? What do you consider the most debated questions? What do you think the most pressing issues are in the field? Where do you detect deficiencies?

On the whole, I am optimistic about our field, even in an era of renewed methodological nationalism, which poses a threat to the field. I am of course worried about the general diminishing importance of history at universities everywhere, and the diminishing funding for historical projects and students. This situation is probably worse in the USA for students of European history than it is in Europe. On the other hand, I am extremely happy and excited about how 'central' the field of Central European history has become to the general field of European history in the past thirty years. Central Europe has become a premiere site for developing new methodologies, new approaches, and new narratives. As I mentioned above, today, international students looking for transnational topics look to Central Europe as a site for their research. The best and most interesting European history dissertations are now being written about Central Europe, and the decline of national approaches among professionals has strongly benefitted our field. Central Europe must now be taken into account much more seriously when people write about the general history of Europe, and it is no longer as ghettoized and limited as it once was. This is true in the history of science, of knowledge, of culture, of gender, of politics, economics, social movements, etc. It is quite a different situation from when I was a student. In the field of empire studies, for example, or in the field of migration history, the Habsburg Monarchy is now taken more seriously as a laboratory of critical European developments. However, I should also mention that, ironically, these initiatives have often come from outside of Central European institutions, and often scholars in Central Europe face more challenges to have their cutting-edge work accepted in these fields. But the most exciting development for me has been the gradual internationalisation of the history of Central Europe so that today I work with scholars from all the 'successor states' as well as with scholars from the USA, Britain, France, and Japan, who are also researching the history of this region. Obviously, the issue of languages remains a critical one, and it is not easy to solve because one wants to maintain multi-lingual traditions, and not to impose a single language (English) on scholarship, as has happened in other fields like Economics.

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