

Short-lived Polities in Central Europe, 1908–1924

IN LITERATURE, THE DISCUSSION IS WIDESPREAD ON THE creation of ethnolinguistic nations by activists, who from an outside (etic) perspective can be seen as ethnic entrepreneurs or national activists, while from an internal (emic, or national) perspective as national awakeners. The latter term, rife in national histories of Central Europe's nations, hinges on the tacit assumption—without any evidence to this end—that nations are near-eternal or near-natural entities. In this view informed by ethnolinguistic nationalism, during the period of non-national polities and empires from the late Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, many of the region's nations “fell asleep.” This far-fetched hypothesis also assumes that the late medieval period was a nationally happy age (even with no records confirming the existence of any nations then), when Central Europe's “nations” purportedly had a chance to establish their “national” monarchies, such as Bohemia (equated with today's Czech Republic), Bulgaria, Croatia, Greater Moravia (equated with today's Slovakia), the Holy Roman Empire (equated with today's Germany), Hungary, Rus' (equated with today's Belarus, Russia or Ukraine), or Walachia and Moldavia (equated with today's Romania and Moldova). This meta-national master-narrative continues with the period of “great re-awakening of nations” in the nineteenth century, which from the etic perspective, was the busy age of creating ethnolinguistically defined nations by activists through education, the printing press, societies, and statistics.

The formal decision taken in 1872 by Central Europe's non-national empires and polities to include in censuses the “language question” as a measure of nationality (or one's membership in a nation) furnished national activists with officially “scientific data” on the demographic sizes of the postulated nations. It was an argument that carried increasingly more weight in the region's parliaments and regional diets, effectively coaxing the non-national ruling elites to give concessions to speakers of different languages, seen as nations-in-making with some inherent political rights. The target groups, thanks to these concessions and spreading elementary education in national languages, began to believe in this national message, facilitating the creation of postulated nations, often signaled by the rise of ethnonational parties. Gradually, this national message transformed into a novel national identity bridged the centuries-old gaping cleavage between nobles and serfs (peasants). The common national language began to trump birth-right, which had firmly kept nobility separate from the serfdom-bound peasantry for over half a millennium.

Few authors and researchers, even if not enamored of the ideology of nationalism, see languages (*Einzelsprachen*) as artifacts, creations of humans and their groups. Most share the stereotypical and quite mythologized view of languages as near-natural, near-eternal and immutable entities (“living organisms”) that exist independent of human will. Obviously, as in the case of nations, there is no evidence that today's languages of Czech, Hungarian, Norwegian, Romanian, Russian, Slovak, or Turkish existed a millennium ago. But this claim is equally believed by nationalists and non-nationalists. Indeed, the Finno-Ugric, Germanic, Slavic, Romance, or Turkic dialect continua—from which the aforementioned languages (*Einzelsprachen*) stem—were around a thousand years ago, but at that time Finno-Ugric-, Germanic-, Slavic-, Romance, or Turkic-speakers in their vast majority were unaware of the Judeo-Graeco-Latin concept of *Einzelsprache* (“a language”). Furthermore, they were illiterate, and their loyalty was to a monarch and a monotheistic religion, not to a language. With few exceptions, standard languages began to be created across Central Europe on the model of prestigious Latin or (New Testament) Greek only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Literature is readily available on the subject of when the first-ever grammar or dictionary of a given language, and the earliest book or newspaper in this language, were written and published. However, this information does not seem to dispel the myth of Central Europe's millennium-old languages, because this myth is so useful for “proving” the supposedly long-existence of the extant ethnolinguistic nations connected to these *Einzelsprachen*. In addition, educational systems in Central Europe's nation-states quite unanimously reproduce this myth from generation to generation, because it constitutes the basis of ethnolinguistic nationalism employed across the region for creating, legitimizing, and maintaining statehood since the early twentieth century.

If Central Europe's nations and languages are deemed to be a product of nature or divine will, the same must be true of these ethnolinguistic nations' nation-states. In the meta-national master narrative, the rise of nation-states was seen as inevitable, thus, “naturally” contributing to the delegitimation and destruction of the region's non-national empires and polities. Somehow, the fact that many of these non-national polities existed much longer than any present-day nation-state (for instance, the Holy Roman Empire, 962–1806) does not dispel this myth of inevitability. On the contrary, it is proposed that today's nation-states in one way or another correspond to this or that non-national medieval or early modern polity.

It is rarely noticed that available records point to many more unsuccessful projects of building nations, languages, and states than those that were realized, and at present commonly qualified with the adjective “national.” National historiographies disregard these failed projects or briefly lasting entities, or retroactively appropriate them for this or that nation. Researchers from outside Central Europe, not trained to follow the tenets of ethnolinguistic nationalism, are not any better at noticing the aforementioned short-lived or failed projects, because so much was written on the national success stories, leaving the short-lived and unrealized projects in the shadows of history. What is more, non-existent states cannot extend grants to interested researchers, while from the perspective of Central Europe’s extant nation-states, research on such non-national or failed national projects is not conducive to strengthening national master narratives. Hence, grant-making agencies, as branches of their respective nation-states’ administrations, do not prioritize research of this type. And in many cases such research is actively discouraged.

However, the “remembrance of things past” is as much composed from what is remembered as from what is cast into oblivion. What is forgotten and repressed constitutes the “dark matter” of history. But without recovering some of this dark matter, it is impossible to understand the emergence of the sociopolitical reality as it currently obtains. This is the practical value of making an effort to look into the neglected corners and nooks of the past, which is, at present, considered taboo by various national master narratives.

Map 18 offers an overview of the short-lived politics in Central Europe whose emergence was generated by the widespread political, economic, and social instability of the “long Great War in the East,” which commenced with Greece’s annexation of the Cretan State in 1908 and the Balkan Wars (1913–1914), and came to an end with the conclusion of the Russian Civil War (1922) and the Turkish War of Independence (1923). The map’s end caesura of 1924 alludes to the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate, which sent reverberations across the entire Muslim world during the 1920s, from Morocco and Egypt to British India and the Dutch East Indies.

During the first part of the 1908–1924 period, the aforementioned instability was at its highest in the Balkans, due to Greece’s expansionist policies of irredenta and the Balkan Wars; and at the beginning of the Great War in the western borderlands of the Russian Empire, which found themselves under the Central Powers’ occupation. The collapse of previous (typically imperial) administration, occupation and frequent changes in front lines and frontiers sent millions of refugees, deportees, and expellees one way or another on account of their “incorrect” religion or language. Hence, in these areas, short-lived politics emerged, be it the Free State of Icaria in the Aegean or the Republic of Central Albania in the south of Central Europe, while in the north, Land Ober Ost. However, it was the famine and economic collapse in 1916/1917–1918, painfully felt from Scandinavia to the Middle East, and from France to Russia, combined with the marauding armies increasingly left to their own devices, which triggered an entire avalanche of such short-lived politics. Map 18 records almost 80, but it is by no means an

exhaustive list. Research and literature available on such politics is scant and often fully incorporated into the respective master narratives, which do not acknowledge any genuine agency to such short-lived politics’ leaderships.

The total, or near-total, collapse of the old order, the virtual disappearance of statehood (understood as state administration and services) across vast swaths of Central and Eastern Europe left the inhabitants with no choice but to take the care of their own villages, towns, cities, regions, or communities, into their own hands. As a result, hundreds (if not thousands) of workers’, peasants’ and soldiers’ council emerged between 1917 and 1921. Nowadays, the history of these councils is either disregarded or wholesale apportioned to the history of the Soviet-style or Soviet-led communist movement, because the Russian-language word “council,” *совет soviet*, is invariably and confusingly rendered as “soviet” in English, although to Central Europe’s inhabitants who lived at that time, these councils were known as *савет saviyet* in Belarusian, *съвет svet* in Bulgarian, *савет savet* in Serbian, *rada* in Czech or Polish, *nõukogu* in Estonian, *neuvosto* in Finnish, *conseil* in French, *Rat* in German, *συμβούλιο symvoúlio* in Greek, *tanács* in Hungarian, *padome* in Latvian, *taryba* in Lithuanian, *råd* in Swedish, *konseyi* in Turkish, *рада rada* in Ukrainian, or *רַאָט rat* in Yiddish. But prior to, or despite, any ideological choices, the councils, first of all, took care to feed, clothe, and house the populations in their self-appointed charge. For months and even years, they provided rudimentary administration, education, local (token) currencies, postal services, military defense, and a variety of other services across Central Europe. Quite a few were indistinguishable from states, but in name. Political, ethnic, and ideological entrepreneurs time and again seized such state-like organizations and proclaimed them to be politics in their own right. A single polity of this kind could, in a matter of days and weeks, change from a revolutionary (Soviet style) polity to a national one, and then to a non-national one. In most cases it hardly mattered to the population under such a polity’s control, the priority being food, clothes, housing, and mere biological survival in the dead of winter.

However, from the sample of the short-lived politics depicted on the map, it is readily visible that at least half of them subscribed to a national program of sorts, over one-quarter to (Soviet-style) socialism (communism), while only one-fifth to some non-national and non-socialist prewar forms of statehood creation and legitimation. Although it is only a sample compiled from readily available sources, this allows the conclusion that the distinctive political preference was for nationalism and socialism (communism), while the traditional forms of statehood creation, legitimation, and maintenance were generally rejected. The “traditional” forms of politics and statehood, as developed in the post-Napoleonic nineteenth century, were not trusted any longer, and generally blamed, alongside the traditional (noble) elites, for the unprecedented continent-scale conflagration of the Balkan Wars, the Great War, and the related national, revolutionary, and peasant wars. The hope was that something new must be tried to stop a repeat of this tragedy, which for almost two decades, destroyed the peace and livelihood of tens of millions.

Short-lived Polities in Central Europe, 1908–1924



1 CRETAN STATE (9 Dec 1898-1 Dec 1913) **Ο** **Ἰ** **ῥ** **Gr** **Ε** **†**
2 FREE STATE OF ICARIA (18 Aug-Nov 1912) **Gr** **Ε**
3 PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT OF ALBANIA (4 Dec 1912-22 Jan 1913) **AL**
4 PROVISIONAL (later INDEPENDENT) GOVERNMENT OF WESTERN THRACE (31 Aug-Oct 1913) **Ο** **Ἰ** **ῥ**
5 REPUBLIC OF CENTRAL ALBANIA (16 Oct 1913-7 Mar 1914) **AL**
6 REPUBLIC OF NORTHERN EPIRUS (28 Feb-27 Oct 1914) **Gr** **Ε**
7 EMIRATE OF ALBANIA (May 1914-May 1915) **Ο** **Ἰ** **ῥ**
8 LAND OBER OST (1915-18) **BL** **GL** **La** **L** **Li** **PL** **Y** **ῥ**
9 STATE OF THESSALONIKI (PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE) (Sept 1916-15 Jun 1917) **Gr** **Ε**
10 REGENCY KINGDOM OF POLAND (5 Nov 1916-6 Oct/6 Nov 1918) **PL**
11 REPUBLIC OF KORITSA (10 Dec 1916-16 Feb 1920) **AL** **FL**
12 AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN PROTECTORATE OF ALBANIA (24 Jan 1917-Oct 1918) **AL** **GL**
13 ITALIAN PROTECTORATE OF ALBANIA (3 Jun 1917-2 Aug 1920) **AL** **IL**
14 UKRAINIAN PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC (23 Jun 1917/25 Jan 1918-18 Mar 1921) **U** **Ḳ**
15 ISKOLAT (EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE SOVIET OF WORKERS, SOLDIERS, AND THE LANDLESS IN LATVIA) (12 Aug 1917-20 Feb 1918) **R** **Ḳ** **La** **L**
16 CRIMEAN PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC (13 Dec 1917-Jan 1918) **CT** **Ἰ** **R** **Ḳ**
17 DON (SOVIET) REPUBLIC (10 Dec 1917-4 May 1918) **R** **Ḳ**
18 NAISSAAR (SOVIET REPUBLIC OF SOLDIERS AND FORTRESS-BUILDERS) (Dec 1917-26 Feb 1918) **R** **Ḳ** **EL**
19 MOLDAVIAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC (15 Dec 1917-9 Apr 1918) **M(Ro)** **Ḳ** **/L**
20 UKRAINIAN PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF SOVIETS (25 Dec 1917-19 Mar 1918) **U** **Ḳ** **R** **Ḳ**
21 FINNISH SOCIALIST REPUBLIC (29 Jan-5 May 1918) **F** **IL**
22 ODESSA SOVIET REPUBLIC (31 Jan-13 Mar 1918) **R** **Ḳ**
23 DONETSK-KRIVOI ROG SOVIET REPUBLIC (12 Feb-29 Mar 1918) **R** **Ḳ**
24 DUCHY OF COURLAND AND SEMIGALLIA (8 Mar-18 Nov 1918) **GL**
25 UKRAINIAN SOVIET REPUBLIC (19 Mar-Apr 1918) **U** **Ḳ** **R** **Ḳ**
26 TAURIDA SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLIC (19 Mar-30 Apr 1918) **R** **Ḳ**
27 BELARUSIAN PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC (25 Mar 1918-5 Jan 1919) **B** **Ḳ** **/L**
28 DON REPUBLIC (ALMIGHTY DON HOST) (18 May 1918-Feb 1920) **R** **Ḳ**
29 UKRAINIAN STATE (HETMANATE) (29 Apr-14 Dec 1918) **U** **Ḳ**
30 CRIMEAN REGIONAL GOVERNMENT (25 Jun 1918-Apr 1919) **CT** **Ἰ** **R** **Ḳ** **GL**
31 ZAKOPANE REPUBLIC (13 Oct-16 Nov 1918) **PL**
32 STATE OF SLOVENES, CROATS AND SERBS (29 Oct-1 Dec 1918) **SIL** **SCL** **/Ḳ**
33 EAST MORAVIAN-SILESIA REPUBLIC (Oct 1918-28 Jul 1920) **GL**
34 REGIONAL NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR SILESIA (30 Oct 1918-28 Jul 1920) **Cz** **L**
35 NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CIESZYN SILESIA (1 Nov 1918-28 Jul 1920) **PL**
36 ZONE OF THE STRAITS (30 Oct 1918-9 Nov 1936) **Ο** **Ἰ** **/TL**
37 FREE TERRITORY (MAKHNOVIA) (Nov 1918-Sept 1921) **R** **Ḳ**
38 KOMAN'CHA REPUBLIC (5 Nov 1918-27 Jan 1919) **Ru** **Ḳ**
39 UNITED BALTIC DUCHY (5-28 Nov 1918) **GL**
40 TARNOBREZEG REPUBLIC (6 Nov 1918-Jan 1919) **PL**
41 REPUBLIC OF POLAND IN LUBLIN (7-12/17 Nov 1918) **PL**
42 PRZEMYŚL REPUBLIC (7-18 Nov 1918) **PL**
43 OSTRÓW REPUBLIC (10-26 Nov 1918) **PL**
44 REPUBLIC OF GERMAN-AUSTRIA (12 Nov 1918-21 Oct 1919) **GL**
44a BOHEMIAN FOREST (Nov-Dec 1918) **GL**
44b GERMAN BOHEMIA (29 Oct-14 Dec 1918) **GL**
44c GERMAN SOUTH MORAVIA (2 Nov-27 Dec 1918) **GL**
44d SUDETENLAND (30 Oct-18 Dec 1918) **GL**
45 REPUBLIC OF HEINZENLAND (22-24 Nov 1918) **GL**
46 BANAT, BAČKA AND BARANJA (GREAT NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF SERBS, BUNJEVACS AND OTHER SLAVS) (25 Nov-1 Dec 1918) **SC/Se** **Ḳ** **/L**
47 COMMUNE OF THE WORKING PEOPLE OF ESTLAND (29 Nov 1918-18 Jan 1919) **R** **Ḳ** **EL**
48 LEMKO REPUBLIC (5 Dec 1918-Mar 1920) **Ru** **Ḳ**
49 SUPREME PEOPLE'S COUNCIL (5 Dec 1918-19 Aug 1919) **PL**
50 FIUME (7 Dec 1918-11 Sept 1919) / **FIUME** (12 Sept 1919-7 Sept 1920) / **ITALIAN REGENCY OF CARNARO** (8 Sept-30 Dec 1920) **IL**
51 SLOVAK (SLOVJAK) PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC (11-29 Dec 1918) **SL** **HL**
52 LITHUANIAN SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLIC (16 Dec 1918-26 Feb 1919) **Li** **L** **R** **Ḳ**
53 LATVIAN SOCIALIST SOVIET REPUBLIC (17 Dec 1918-13 Jan 1920) **La** **L** **R** **Ḳ**
54 FREE STATE OF UPPER SILESIA (late Dec 1918-May 1922) **GL** **PL**
55 REPUBLIC OF PERLOJA (1918-1923) **R** **Ḳ** **PL** **Li** **L**
56 HUTSUL REPUBLIC (9 Jan-11 Jun 1919) **Ru** **Ḳ**
57 FREE STATE OF SCHWENTEN (6 Jan-10 Aug 1919) **GL**
58 SLOVAK SOVIET REPUBLIC (16 Jan-7 Jul 1919) **SL** **HL**
59 NORTH INGRIA (23 Jan 1919-5 Dec 1920) **F** **IL**
60 LIT-BEL (LITHUANIAN-BELARUSIAN SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLIC) (17 Feb-19 Jul 1919) **B** **Ḳ** **Li** **L** **R** **Ḳ**
61 HUNGARIAN SOVIET REPUBLIC (21 Mar-1 Aug 1919) **HL**
62 BAVARIAN SOVIET REPUBLIC (6 Apr-3 May 1919) **GL**
63 KHOLODNYI IAR REPUBLIC (10 Apr 1919-Mar 1922) **U** **Ḳ**
64 CRIMEAN SOCIALIST SOVIET REPUBLIC (28 Apr-26 Jun 1919) **R** **Ḳ**
65 BESSARABIAN SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLIC (11 May-late Sept 1919) **M(Ro)** **Ḳ** **/L** **R** **Ḳ**
66 ZONE OF SMYRNA (İZMİR) (15 May 1919-9 Sept 1922) **Gr** **Ε**
67 REPUBLIC OF PREKMURJE (28 May-6 Jun 1919) **SIL**
68 UPPER SILESIA PLEBISCITE AREA (11 Feb 1920-10Jul 1922) **En** **L** **FL** **GL** **IL** **PL**
69 GOVERNMENT OF SOUTHERN RUSSIA (4 Apr-16 Nov 1920) **R** **Ḳ**
70 GALICIAN SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLIC (15 Jul-21 Sept 1920) **PL** **U** **Ḳ** **Y** **ῥ**
71 MEMEL TERRITORY (10 Feb 1920-17 Feb 1923) **FL** **GL** **Li** **L**
72 REPUBLIC OF CENTRAL LITHUANIA (12 Oct 1920-18 Apr 1922) **PL**
73 LAJTABÁNSÁG (BANAT OF LEITHA) (4 Oct-5 Nov 1921) **HL**
74 SERBIAN-HUNGARIAN BARANYA-BAJA REPUBLIC (14-20 Aug 1921) **Se** **Ḳ** **HL** **CL** **GL**

Languages

A Albanian
B Belarusian
C Croatian
CT Crimean Tatar
Cz Czech
E Estonian
En English
Fi Finnish
F French
G German
Gr Greek
H Hungarian
I Italian
La Latvian
Li Lithuanian
M Moldavian
Ο Osmanlıca (Ottoman Turkish)
P Polish
R Russian
Ro Romanian
Ru Rusyn
S Slovak
SC Serbo-Croatian
Se Serbian
SI Slovenian
T Turkish
U Ukrainian
Y Yddish

Writing systems

Ἰ Arabic
Ḳ Cyrillic
Ε Greek
ῥ Hebrew
L Latin

Religions

☾ Islam
† Orthodox Christianity

Polities

POLAND Stable interwar state
MEMEL TERRITORY Non-national and non-revolutionary polity
SUDETENLAND National polity
NAISSAAR Revolutionary or Soviet-style polity
FREE STATE OF UPPER SILESIA Unrealized polity project