The Heart of Europe: a history of Central Europe

Lecturer: Dr. Marcel Jesenský
Session: Winter 2018 Session
Wednesdays, January 10th – February 14th
1:30 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.
Room 124, Leeds House Building

Schedule of topics:

**Week 1**
The Medieval Tradition
Central Europe
The Apostles of Slaves
The Rise of Hungary
The Árpád, Piast and Přemyslid Kings

The recorded history of the Slavs, a central and dominant ethnic group in Central Europe, begins with their contacts with the Greco-Roman world. In 863, Saints Constantine and Methodius, the Greek brothers, visited present-day Slovakia and laid the foundations for the relations of the various Slavic peoples with Byzantium and the future of the whole Central Europe. In 896, the Hungarians, as the Magyars were called by their neighbors, permanently settled on both sides of the middle Danube. National dynasties, well established from the beginning in Bohemia, Poland and Hungary, came to an end in the fourteenth century.

**Week 2**
Renaissance Developments
Renaissance and Reformation
The Polish-Lithuanian Union
The Ottoman Pressure
The Habsburg Advance

The Jagellonian Union of Poland and Lithuania, founded in the fourteenth century, extended from the Baltic to the Black Sea. The Union transformed Central Europe in a political system free from the German, Ottoman, and Muscovite empires, members of that dynasty were kings of Bohemia and of Hungary. The Hungarians, themselves divided into partisans of the Habsburgs and a national party, faced the decisive battle against the Ottoman overwhelming power. Their defeat had far-reaching consequences for all Central Europe.

**Week 3**
Time of Troubles

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After the battle of Mohács in 1526, the Habsburg dynasty realized its agelong objective, to establish its hereditary rule in Bohemia and Hungary. The important section of Central Europe, associated before with Poland, was now connected with Austria, and the common dynasty tried to make that connection as close as possible. This was the centralizing and Germanizing trend of the Habsburg era. The three partitions of Poland, in 1772, 1793, and 1795, eliminated one of the largest and oldest countries of Europe and completed the absorption of a whole region of Europe by neighboring empires.

**Week 4**

Nationalism Versus Imperialism

The usual identification of state and nation leaves the peoples of Central Europe, absorbed by the empires controlling the region, without any history and political aspirations in the nineteenth century. Yet even they were by no means peoples without history, they continued to remember their historic past and to be inspired by their national traditions. The national movements in Central Europe were usually connected with revolutionary trends of a constitutional and social character. Whatever the evils of the excessive nationalism of small peoples of Central Europe, it was not that nationalism which was responsible for the end of peace in 1914.

**Week 5**

Twenty Years of Freedom

The idea of equal rights for all nations led to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, at the beginning of period in which the national rights of almost all the peoples in Central Europe triumphed at least temporarily. Poland was by far the largest country in the restored Central Europe and the sixth largest state in Europe. Czecho-Slovakia was a new creation with the union of Czechs and Slovaks in one state. Hungary’s frontiers drastically changed by the Trianon Treaty and created serious difficulties both in the cultural and in the economic fields. The pressure from two sides, as in the successive crises of 1938 and 1939, was unfortunately the normal condition of Central Europe throughout the whole course of history.

**Week 6**

During and After World War II

World War II was preceded by a whole series of aggressions committed against various countries in Central Europe in 1938. Soon after, the whole of Central Europe was in the hands of Germany. By the spring of 1945, the region was to be freed from the Germans, when Roosevelt and Churchill made another series of concessions to Stalin at Yalta,
the real peace conference after World War II. In 1989, the peoples of Central Europe "returned" back to Europe. The year 2004 inaugurated a new era, Europe ceased to be limited to Western Europe and received Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia to the European Union.

**Recommended readings for continued learning:**

Norman Davies, *Heart of Europe: the past in Poland's present* (Oxford; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001)
George Sanford, *Poland: the conquest of history* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 1999)

**Other interesting resources:**

Embassy of Hungary in Ottawa - [https://ottawa.mfa.gov.hu/eng](https://ottawa.mfa.gov.hu/eng)
The Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Ottawa - [https://www.mzv.sk/web/ottawa-en](https://www.mzv.sk/web/ottawa-en)