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NATIONAL BORDERS, NATURAL BOUNDARIES: Transition, Liminality, and the Environment in Central Europe

Rachel May

I. Introduction

Articles about the transition in Central Europe never fail to mention the critical environmental problems facing the region. Nor can a visitor to Budapest fail to notice them. On a warm summer day the air along the city's main roads is thick with exhaust fumes. Viewed from one of the high vantage points on the Buda side of the river, Pest lies shrouded in smog. If you look closely at the Danube you may wish you hadn't: members of our group reported seeing severed pig's heads drifting past the deck of our elegant floating hotel. And noise pollution is a constant in the city.

The problem is not limited to big cities or to aesthetic impositions on the observer. Budapest may have the worst air quality of any city in the region, but the so-called Black Triangle (from the south of the former East Germany and Poland down into the northern Czech Republic) is one of the most toxic in the world from a general environmental perspective. For soil and water quality, Bulgaria is likewise infamous. Throughout the region, life expectancies have been falling, and for men are as much as ten years shorter than in parts of western Europe. Environmental problems are so stark in the region that they were a rallying point for the movements that overthrew the Soviet-backed regimes.

When I arrived in Budapest I was interested in learning more about how the political and economic transition was affecting the natural environment of the region. This question was addressed at length by our first two speakers and will better be left to them to describe in this volume. What came to fascinate me was a particular cultural dimension of the problem related to the geographical and historical realities of Central Europe: the borderlands factor. The fact that the countries of this region are located in a liminal region, between East (including Russia and Turkey) and West (Western Europe and the U.S.), and that they themselves have historically unstable borders that do not match natural geographical barriers or boundaries, has a profound effect on their ecological status and environmental degradation. Ecosystems do not respect political boundaries, and countries with ancient enmities or at least deep cultural rivalries are forced to be ecological bedfellows, sharing riverbeds and watersheds, mountain ranges and air currents. The practical consequences, in terms of environmental protection, or lack thereof, are apparent throughout the region. The cultural implications may be more submerged, but they bear strongly upon the possibilities for future amelioration of the region's stark problems.

II. Borders and Boundaries

Those of us who live on a reasonably well-defined cross-section of a continent have a hard time understanding the impact of unstable national borders on the societies they contain. Moreover, the United States has served for centuries as the West's west; no amount of immigration or contact with Asian countries will make us question its place in Occidental society. Countries like Hungary and Yugoslavia, on the other hand, have been battlegrounds between "East" (the Mongol Horde, the Ottoman Empire, the Soviet Empire) and "West" for most of their history. For the two weeks of the seminar that I attended, every speaker who addressed us was careful to define his country against those of its neighbors and to place it within the East–West continuum.

It is no simple matter to define the region made up of the former Soviet satellites. Western Europe is accustomed to calling itself simply Europe, as in "European Union." Russia is bor-

dered on the east by Ukraine, which in Slavic means “on the edge” or “on the frontier.” If Ukraine is the edge of the Russian world to the east, then Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria are the edge of Europe to the west. Much as our Czech, Hungarian, and Serbian speakers insisted on the quintessentially European nature of their heritage, and no matter how widespread the moniker “Central Europe” becomes, the fact remains that the region is psychologically only on the margins of Europe. Some modifier (previously “East,” now “Central”) will continue to be required. In this century these countries represent first and foremost a liminal area, between Europe and Russia, between eras of European and Soviet dominance, between totalitarian and democratic political systems, socialist and capitalist economic models.

The liminal situation of the countries of East Central Europe, between East and West, also has an impact on their huge environmental problems. The extremities of the Soviet empire took much of the brunt of Moscow’s wasteful and dangerous environmental policies. Pushed into over-rapid industrialization, the Warsaw Pact countries fueled industries and homes inefficiently with brown coal, built and used excessively polluting automobiles, and invested in needlessly dangerous nuclear power plants. Czechoslovakia’s rich uranium deposits were mined without care for the environmental consequences. Those areas that lie downwind from Chernobyl played the role of dumping ground most obviously, but the entire region feels the impact of an economic system that took no account of the costs of environmental degradation. (In theory, a centrally planned economic system would internalize environmental “externalities”: a government that owns the natural resources, as well as the industries that use them, should account for the costs of depleting or polluting those resources and should, ultimately, protect them. In fact, Soviet economists who wished to include environmental costs in decision-making had to surmount legal obstacles imposed by the Marxist “labor theory of value,” which saw natural resources as “free gifts,” since they were not the products of human labor.¹ This, combined with an absolute priority on industrial output, made the Soviet-type economies some of the most wanton exploiters of natural resources in the world.)

Now that these countries have shifted to become satellites of Western Europe, they are still likely to be seen as an environmental dumping ground, sites for aged, polluting industries that no one else wants and a vast potential market for consumer goods and their attendant energy and disposal problems. Moreover, as they shift into the more open market economic system, pressure to attract foreign investment leads countries to compete to offer the least environmental and labor regulation. Imposition of Western models could jeopardize the few ecological advantages these countries possess. Their excellent public transportation networks are facing huge cuts in government support. They also have good records on saving species from extinction and reintroducing endangered species.² "Buccaneer capitalism" is a terrible threat to endangered species. If animals or plants are exotic, they become more valuable to poachers as they become more rare; if not, the market has no use for them anyway.

Not only are these nations caught between East and West, they are distinctly uneasy with one another, and their borders are constantly in dispute. Every Hungarian contributor to our seminar repeatedly invoked the three million Hungarians who live across Hungary's borders, especially in Slovakia and Romania, as a result of the partitioning of Hungary after World War I. Equally important to them all is that for most of modern history Hungary has had only fleeting moments of independence, usually ending in catastrophe, so that it is difficult for them to think of Hungary in isolation. The Czech Republic has dealt very recently with border disputes in its so-called Velvet Divorce from Slovakia in 1992, a split that many now regret. And Yugoslavia, of course, has seen nothing but challenges to its borders since the collapse of its federal system in 1991, from the relatively peaceful secession of Slovenia to the savage clashes of Serbs, Croats, and Bosnian Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Tensions and competition among the countries within the region of Central Europe were evident in the rhetoric of our speakers. We heard, for instance, competing explanations for the fact that Hungary has more grassroots activism than the Czech Republic does. A Czech speaker claimed that when the Soviets took power, they encountered great resistance from ordinary Czech citizens and so imposed a more restrictive regime, whereas the more passive Hungarians got more leeway from

their leaders. A Hungarian offered the explanation that after the Hungarian uprising of 1956, the government realized it was forced to negotiate with the people and allow them some headroom. Both are probably self-serving simplifications, extolling their own nation's vigor at the expense of the other's passivity. The clearest rhetorical indication of this kind of internal competition came from another Hungarian speaker who referred, in passing, to "the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the failed Czech uprising of 1968," as if one had been more glorious and effective than the other. Such jockeying for moral high ground, even among otherwise self-consciously antinationalistic speakers, explains why the region has thus far been unable to cooperate in realms that would have assisted their transition to date.

The factors that make the borders of these countries so unstable are closely related to the factors that make environmental cooperation among them so important. In *The Earth and the State*,³ Derwent Whittlesey outlines the geographical preconditions for a stable nation-state. Foremost among them are the presence of a natural nucleus, such as a market center accessible by land and water, and the protection of natural barriers, such as mountains or bodies of water. If a group can establish long-term dominance in the nucleus, eventually it will assimilate other groups within the natural boundaries until a unified state is formed. France is an example he cites. In East Central Europe this process has been thwarted because, generally speaking, there are no natural nuclei and, whenever a group has tried to take advantage of natural boundaries, there has always been a stronger neighbor on the other side of them (Germany, Turkey, Russia) that has overrun and occupied the area. This has led to a "fanatical and enduring national feeling" but poorly defined boundaries and much linguistic interpenetration.⁴ When the states have become independent, their borders have cut across natural trade routes, including rivers, railways, and roads, severed rural areas from their natural market centers, and set up other sources of economic and social frustration.

Whittlesey describes the political effects of these arbitrary boundaries. They also have important environmental effects, because they cut not only across trade routes but across ecosystems. To an unusually high degree, the countries of East Central Europe share water resources, forests, plains, even air. Accord-

ing to a 1991 report to the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 96 percent of the rivers flowing through Hungary originate outside the country.⁵ The Tisza River enters Hungary from Romania in a severely degraded state, which has been a source of tension between the two countries, as has the Oder River between the Czech Republic and Poland.⁶ Poland in 1990 received half its airborne sulfur dioxide from across its borders. Forests in then-Czechoslovakia were subject to severe damage from imported contaminants, though the country "'exports' 20–60 percent more sulfur pollution than it imports."⁷ Understandably, it is difficult to persuade people to be environmentally responsible when they can simply export their pollution, especially to rivals across their borders.

The problems of coordination of environmental protection arose particularly starkly in the Gabčíkovo-Nagymáros Dam project on the Danube River. Dams were planned along 170 kilometers of the Danube between Bratislava and Budapest, but the Hungarian portion of the project was eventually canceled for environmental reasons. When the dam at Gabčíkovo in Slovakia was completed in 1992, it had a predictable adverse impact on the quality of water downstream and now threatens drinking water supplies for towns in northern Hungary. Janos Vargha, a founder of the grassroots Danube Project (whose goal was to prevent the damming of the river), addressed our group at length about the battle to halt the building of this dam. In the course of his comments he mentioned several borderlands issues that inhibited protection of the river. First, the environmental movement in Czechoslovakia was much weaker than that in Hungary, because of the tighter controls on Czech society in the Soviet era. Second, the majority of people living along the Danube in Slovakia are ethnic Hungarians; even if they had organized in opposition to the dam, they represent a weak minority within their country. Third, Hungary has strained relations with Slovakia, having to do with border changes imposed on Hungary after World War I. Much the same is true of its relations with other nations through which the Danube passes downstream, which would otherwise be allies in this struggle. Moreover, one could assume that Slovakia would welcome hydroelectric power to replace some of the deadly and inefficient brown coal it has depended on for decades, regardless of

its high price tag and its effects on those downstream. (This offers a slight mitigating circumstance for Hungary, too, since it already unwillingly imports a great deal of airborne sulfur dioxide emissions from Slovakia; a shift to hydroelectric power might reduce those imports somewhat.) Thus the dam project serves as a case study in the complexities and tradeoffs of trans-border environmental problems, and how they are intertwined with political, social, and economic factors in the region.

The obvious first step in addressing East Central Europe's environmental crisis is regional cooperation. A hopeful sign was the establishment of the Regional Environmental Center in Budapest in 1990. It was initiated by the U.S. Government and funded by the EC and Canada, among other nations, as a "neutral and non-profit Hungarian institution."⁸ Its purposes are education and training, collection and dissemination of information resources, and the promotion of nongovernmental initiatives on the environment, particularly in the realms of environmental health, pollution prevention, and energy efficiency. Unfortunately, regional cooperation has not been high on the center's agenda. The EETBE report proudly notes, "A certain degree of competition has been generated among the nations of the region—all eager to have a slice of the Regional Center's action."⁹ The free market view of competition as leading to greater efficiency is flawed in this case, where the whole point is, or should be, cooperation. Moreover, the center's very identity as a "neutral Hungarian" institution raises questions in light of the obvious rivalries among the nations it serves. Our speakers indicated that the center has funded a number of projects, but that its decisions have been contentious and biased toward established institutions rather than grassroots organizations. Moreover, much of the money has probably not gone directly to the region but to outside consultants. The EETBE report states uncritically that (as of early 1991) 80 to 90 percent of project proposals had come from the United States.¹⁰ (This is, incidentally, typical of aid to the region. We were told that of the money allocated to the region by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 70 percent went to Western consultants and only 30 percent went directly to Eastern Europe.) It would seem that the center's goals are not regional cooperation, but small local projects. One such project that made the news

during our stay is for turning a small village in Hungary, near the border with Slovakia, into a demonstration center on sustainable agrarian techniques and renewable energy, with an eye also to attracting ecotourism. It is a worthy project, but its remote location makes it unlikely to serve broad regional goals (or, for that matter, to attract many tourists).

On the whole, the outlook for surmounting the borderlands problem is bleak. Dr. Bedřich Moldan told us that regional cooperation on environmental protection was “practically nonexistent,” except in the matter of preserving the ozone layer. Only the most visionary environmentalists, he says, are working to break down boundary-oriented mentalities. He cited the Society for Sustainable Living as an example of an organization truly concerned with human values and the quality of life; as evidence of its broad outlook he commented that it has insisted on defining itself as a “Czecho-Slovak” society even after the breakup of Czechoslovakia.

III. Environmental Nationalism

One disturbing feature of the way environmental consciousness has developed in the societies of the former East Bloc is its close affiliation with nationalist impulses. Green parties and ecological movements have frequently made seamless alliances with right-wing nationalists. Authors and artists who are drawn to the rural landscape see in its degradation a metaphor for lost cultural purity as well. The fight to preserve the land from thoughtless development is tantamount to a fight for national traditions.

Environmental nationalism seems at first glance an unlikely phenomenon in countries that cohabit ecosystems. But it cannot simply be ascribed to the nationalist impulses that pervade all questions of culture and geography in the region. The cultural understanding of nature in East Central Europe is as different from that in the United States as are our respective understandings of the living importance of national boundaries.

Environmental awareness in the United States has focused first on unspoiled nature, on the protection of wilderness, and only to a lesser degree on threats to human health. In this, we follow an old form of nationalism of our own, whereby the for-

mer colonies sought to distinguish themselves from the Old World by exalting wildness as a source of strength, of affinity to God. By contrast, in East Central Europe environmental activists have understandably been more concerned with the effects of pollution on human health. And even when they do address the question of "nature," they generally do not have in mind wild crags or old-growth forests, but a more pastoral environment, filled, to be sure, with plants and waterways and undomesticated animals, but also the habitat of "unspoiled" people, the traditional rural population. Hence, one source of the movement's affinity for nationalism, which lionizes "the people" or "the folk" as the purveyors of virtue, wisdom, and the national *Geist*. In Hungarian writer Ferenc Sánta's story "God in the Wagon," a peasant reluctantly acknowledges that the mysterious old man who has appeared in his wagon is God. He says, "I didn't think you looked like this. You are just like the old people around here. You look just like them!"¹¹ Thus, affinity to God is where you find it, be it in a wild canyon or an old Hungarian peasant. (In St. Stephen's Basilica in Budapest we passed a religious-education display showing scenes from nature: a sunset over the hills, wildflowers by streams, a glade in the woods. Assuming that the captions said something about how one could be close to God in nature, I asked our guide for a translation. "There is no vacation from prayer," he read, and his translation continued with a set of homilies about how summer might take one far from the church, but it was still necessary to pray. Nature was seen as a distraction, rather than a source of worshipful inspiration.)

In general, the concept of wilderness is alien to Europeans. Most European languages do not even have a word for it other than equivalents of "desert" or "wasteland." Hemmed in as they are by old civilizations on all sides, East Central Europeans have no "wild" areas left. For the most part, they do not even have access to oceans, which can serve the imagination in the same ways dark forests or great deserts can. Hungarian landscape painting depicts natural scenes and elemental forces (such as violent thunderstorms), but nearly always with a visible human presence. Celebrations of nature tend less toward wildness than toward pastoral, cultivated beauty, or toward the interplay of human traditions and the natural landscape. In "Sullen Horse,"

an early twentieth-century short story by Zsigmond Móricz, the Hortobágy *puszta*, one of the Hungarian great plains regions, appears as an organism: "Dawn is breaking. The thirty-thousand-acre back of the Hortobágy gives a great shudder."¹² The story treats the obstinacy and brutality of the region's herdsmen as they try to preserve their traditional way of life against modern pressures, but rather than indict that way of life, it affirms that the herdsmen are simply part of the great organism that is the *puszta*. "The Hortobágy laughs as dusk falls," concludes the story. "The Hortobágy laughs with the delight of a thousand, a million years, at the frailty of the human race."¹³

The countries of the region have a long tradition of protecting natural treasures in national parks and preserves. The difference is that their nature preserves are scientific domains, closed to the public, while the national parks are as much cultural preserves as scenic ones. For example, there are two large preserves now in the *puszta*, and their main attractions are herdsman-cowboy settlements complete with traditional dress and spectacular shows of horsemanship. And Dr. Moldan described a biosphere reserve in southern Bohemia that is popular among Czech tourists precisely because it is not wild. It consists of 670 square kilometers of what were uninhabited marshes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which were later drained by a nobleman who created fish ponds and planted forests. Now the reserve contains a representative range of landscape types, from wetlands to close approximations of the primitive forests, which Moldan described as "spiritually attractive" and beautiful. The U.S. has many restored wildlife refuges and national parks that celebrate American history, but the original impulse for the park system was to preserve "unspoiled" nature (even if it meant purging the land of its native human populations). Thus, we see the imprint of national self-definition throughout the environmental movements of East Central Europe, and, by contrast, within our own as well.

IV. Bringing the Liminal into the Center

Liminality is a concept crucial to many fields, such as politics, history, and ecology. Those of us who study national cultures would do well to look to the edges also, as areas of ferment, of

traveling influences, of challenge. I expect my teaching and research on Russian culture to feel the effect of this challenge. I hope that my work on the relationship between Russian and American culture will be enriched by a new sense of the gradations of intermediary cultures, of the geographical, economic, cultural, and psychological transition between what I have been accustomed to thinking of as "East" and "West" (not to mention a new hesitation to use such terms). My current research project on cultural constructions of nature in Russia and the U.S. will benefit from attention to peripheral forces, if only because I understand better the need to justify drawing disciplinary borders across natural ecosystems and traditional "culturesystems." A study, for example, of the role national parks play in the cultures of the whole region would be a fascinating way to explore varieties of nature awareness and the phenomenon of environmental nationalism. Likewise, my teaching on Russian literature and on the cultural roots of Russian nationalism has tended always toward the center of Russian culture, the major cities, the undisputedly "Russian" writers. The fact that what makes them Russian is often determined at the borders (literally, in Ukraine, "on the edge") I have heretofore mostly ignored; this summer's exposure to the world on the other side of that edge will spur me to explore issues of liminality more. It would take some presumption on my part to offer a course on Central and East European literature, but the rewards could be enormous. For its culture and history, for its importance as an economic and political crucible, and for what we can learn about borderlands and their crucial role in the modern world, East Central Europe is undoubtedly a region worth bringing out of the academic shadows and more to the attention of our students.

Notes

1. Joan DeBardeleben, *The Environment and Marxism-Leninism* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1985).
2. Lech Ryszkowski, "The Integrated Development of the Countryside in Central and Eastern European Countries," *Nature and Environment*, no. 70, (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Press, 1994): 31.
3. Derwent Whittlesey, *The Earth and the State* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1939).
4. *Ibid.*

5. *Eastern European Telecommunications, Broadcasting, and the Environment*. Report of a staff study mission to Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, November 11 – 17, 1990, to the Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991): 12.
6. Ryszkowski, "The Integrated Development of the Countryside in Central and Eastern European Countries," 19.
7. *Eastern European Telecommunications, Broadcasting, and the Environment*, 12.
8. *Ibid.*, 15.
9. *Ibid.*, 16.
10. *Ibid.*, 16.
11. Ferenc Sánta, "God in the Wagon" in *The Kiss: 20th Century Hungarian Short Stories*, Albert Tezla, trans., István Bart, ed. (Budapest: Corvina Books, 1995).
12. Zsigmond Móricz, "Sullen Horse" in *The Kiss: 20th Century Hungarian Short Stories*, George F. Cushing, trans.: 12.
13. *Ibid.*, 43.