

Austro-Hungarian Heritage: Living Tradition or a History Covered with Dust?

Natasza Styczynska, Jagiellonian University, Kraków

After 1989 and the collapse of Communism, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe progressively joined the structures of the European Union and NATO, emphasizing their Europeaness and intentions to become rightful members of the European sphere. During that time most of them had made the effort to define their borders in opposition to the “Other”, the notion which was attributed mostly to the Orthodox (Russian) “East”. Those activities brought the rebirth of the idea of Central Europe/*Mittleuropa*, as Gerard Delanty noticed:

the notion of *Mittleuropa* suggests an alternative to the more all-embracing and hegemonic notion of Europe as the West. It is an affirmative statement of the cultural diversity of the continent and a reminder that there is more to Europe than the Western ideology'.¹ This concept could also be useful making efforts to create Europe as a multicultural sphere: 'It can also be seen as an alternative form of integration to that of the current wave of nationalism and one appropriate to the political culture of post Cold War.'²

Nations of the region emphasized their deep affiliation to European values and culture, and proclaimed their “return to Europe” after years of communist domination. Other currents have also been rediscovered in post-communist countries - regionalization and the revival of a common heritage of an imperial origin. Some of these regional ties were established during the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the fall of the Berlin Wall slowly awakened these old sentiments.

The Habsburg heritage may be seen across all Central European countries, not only in Poland, the Czech Republic or Hungary, but also in Slovenia, Bosnia and the northern part of Italy. In this paper I would like to focus on those collaborative initiatives and actions which were born in the area of the former Austro-Hungarian empire's northern parts - in the former Polish Galicia. As mentioned above, the revitalization of such sentiments has been most visible in recent decades, mainly after 1989. During the last 20 years in countries of Central and Eastern Europe some scholars, politicians and public intellectuals have recalled the Habsburg myth, stating that ‘the Habsburg legacy, especially in the early years of the transition, came to represent all that was true, good, beautiful and, above all, European.’³ Recalling this part of regional history was used as a legitimization of the Central European presence in European structures.

History of the region

The Polish state was partitioned by Russia, Austria and Prussia between 1772 and 1795, and disappeared from the European map until 1918 and the end of World War I. Galicia arose in the late 1700s, when the whole southeastern part of Poland, including Kraków and Lwów,⁴ was incorporated into the Austrian empire. After Austria's defeat in the war with Prussia the political regime changed into one of dualism (establishing the Austro-Hungarian Empire), and Galicia gained privileges and autonomy. The province of Galicia was granted its own parliament, with competences

restricted to local issues such as culture, education, health care and economy. The parliament as well as the Galician government and its governor who, incidentally, was always a Pole, was located in Lwów.

Under Austrian rule Poles and Ukrainians nevertheless managed to establish several institutions and cultivate their own culture, customs and religion. Eventually the region became the only part of what once used to be Poland which obtained any notable autonomy. ⁵ The Austro-Hungarian Empire, which encompassed several nations and ethnic groups, established a policy respecting local culture and religions on the understanding that all the groups in the empire respect Emperor Franz Joseph as the uniting element of such a large political entity. One should remember that Central and Eastern Europe used to be a very multicultural space at that time. While we identify Galicia mostly with Poles and Ukrainians, in fact the province was inhabited by more than six nationalities.

‘None of the European countries, except maybe half-Asian Russia, is as heterogeneous when it comes to national composition as the Austro-Hungarian Empire’ Leon Wasilewski wrote in 1902. ⁶ While the whole of the Habsburg empire was inhabited by Germans, Hungarians, Czechs, Poles, Ukrainians, Jews and ethnic groups from the Balkans (most notably Bosnians, Serbs and Croats) as well as Roma, in the Galicia region Poles and Ukrainians were in the majority, but Jews, Germans, Armenians and Roma also inhabited the territory.

In contrast to the rest of the annexed Polish territories, in Galicia local cultural, religious, political and economic life was tolerated. The Austrian authorities were never as heavy-handed as Prussian or Russian rulers and as a result Polish political activity quickly gained momentum - Poles began to join Habsburg cabinets and established their own club in the parliament. ⁷ Other ethnicities inhabiting the province also had their representatives in the parliament (this is how the first Polish and Ukrainian political parties gained parliamentary experience).

Polish language was privileged not only in administration: from 1871 Polish was restored as the official language at both the province’s universities in Kraków and Lwów. Ukrainian was spoken in schools, but was not allowed in the universities. Thanks to Austrian politics, national elites gradually became Polish/Ukrainian/Jewish speaking Austrians, which made them appear as full-fledged Europeans. The Habsburg project of *unity in diversity* was to represent ‘an organic pluricultural, pluriethnic and multinational totality, cemented by the legitimacy of the ruling house and a web of geopolitical alliances.’ ⁸

From the data collected in the 1900s, the inhabitants of Galicia were 54% Poles and 42% Ukrainians (4% of citizens spoke German, Hungarian and other languages). ⁹ One can notice the absence of the *Yiddish* language - this is because the Austrian census contained a question about *umgangssprache* (language spoken in daily use). The query did not provide the option to choose a Jewish language - so usually they had to indicate Polish as spoken at home. ¹⁰

The multicultural co-existence of ethnicities, religions and languages formed the idealization of the Habsburg Empire and became a basis for the Habsburg myth not

only in Galicia but within the territory of the whole former Austro-Hungarian empire.

However, the notion of being local (*tutejszy*) is particularly important, thus any hint of fluid, composite and heterogeneous regional identity must be perceived only in the context of belonging to the same land. As Bruno Schulz wrote in his memoirs: 'I am a public employee, an Austrian, a Jew, a Pole - all at once within an afternoon.'¹¹ The rise of the Habsburg myth was enabled by the cultural icon of Emperor Franz Josef. His image has been an emblematic one throughout more than a century, and after 1989 it can easily be found in Kraków, Prague, Budapest or other post-Habsburg cities.

Closing this section I would like to focus on dividing Galician public space along national and ethnic lines. The process became stronger after the electoral reform implemented in the late 1890s. The new rules of law emphasized the individual's role as a member of an ethnic group, which apparently diminished the validity of the *unity in diversity* policy. While Poles complained about being dominated by Germans, Ukrainians started to express their dissatisfaction with what they perceived as Polish oppression and exploitation. The end of the XIX century brought the expansion of nationalism, which had a huge impact on forming modern Ukrainian theories of nationality. Although locally people lived in peace and coexistence, the elites claimed more influence in governing the province. Polish elites underestimated the importance of such propositions. What was significant was that Polish-Ukrainian relations were strongly marked by Polish cultural imperialism. Some Polish elites went even so far as to claim that Ukrainians formed a part of Polish nationhood, and that all of their national ambitions were instigated by Habsburg Austria.¹²

The next decades brought the rise of national ideologies as well as conceptions of self-governing nation states. The Habsburg Empire crumbled as a result of World War I, and several nation states were established. The discourses of ethnocentrism and nationalism brought an end to the possibilities of a truly multicultural space in the centre of Europe. After World War II new boundaries (designated by the Curzon Line) divided Galicia between Poland and the Soviet Union.¹³ Mass resettlements took place in the name of cleaning up the post-Habsburg territories,¹⁴ while the Nazi's so-called "final solution" policy had eliminated 5.4 million Central and Eastern European Jews.¹⁵ 1989 brought yet another change on the geopolitical map of Europe. The elites of Central and Eastern European countries started to recall the Habsburg myth and regional identity, which they treat as proof of the Europeaness of the region.

The Revival of Regional Identity

Contemporary regionalism is not a new issue: initiatives towards closer regional integration date back to the end of the XIX century. According to the definition proposed by Joseph Nye, regionalism is the formation of interstate associations or groupings on the basis of regions.¹⁶ However, other concepts reduce regionalism to the economic, political or heritage dimensions.¹⁷ Regional issues could be defined according to the European Union definition, which claims that a region is a coherent area with an effective mechanism of transferring heritage, and where its inhabitants cultivate common values as well as make attempts to protect and develop their

uniqueness in order to stimulate cultural, economical and social progress.¹⁸ The author of this article will make use of this definition as it includes not only political or economical but also cultural particles.

The issues of regional identity have become visible in the conception of a “Europe of Regions”. Many agencies, associations and chambers of commerce have adopted the idea as an obvious advantage.¹⁹ The sense of belonging to a particular region may serve as a ground for a particular identity. Anssi Passi emphasizes that ‘regional identity has been recognized as a key element in the making of regions as social/political spaces, but it is difficult to elucidate what this identity consists of.’²⁰ He identifies regional identity as an important tool in regional planning and development.

The notion of region could be seen from many perspectives, but from the Galician point of view the most important issue seems to be the revival of cooperation between post-Habsburg countries. Exemplary in the field is the pact on Visegrad Cooperation, established between Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. As Simonyi Andras emphasizes:

The Visegrad Cooperation is one of the most effective sub-regional cooperative arrangements in Europe established after the sweeping political changes of 1989. The reason for this, in part, stems from the distinctiveness of Central Europe, a region with its own identity and dynamism, one that brings a special value to the international arena. A common history and culture bind us together, and, despite some significant differences among us, we pursued the same path following the democratic transformations in our countries.²¹

Numerous cultural initiatives are undertaken by Austrian organizations, which are seen as a kind of modern patronage, for instance: the Austrian Institute, Neuwaldegg Institute or the Institute for Human Sciences. As the paper’s interest is in the former Galician area, the organizations operating in Poland and Ukraine are of most significance. The question of regional identity consists of at least two aspects - cultural/historical and economic/political. The evolution of regional identity might depend on the political circumstances as well.

In 2004, Poland, among other ex-communist countries, joined the European Union, which as a consequence has brought a strengthening of the Eastern border which happens to be the eastern EU frontier, dividing what is perceived as the proper Europe from its Eastern “Other”. Polish governments have expressed their constant support for Ukrainian struggles to join European structures, but the area of Galicia has proved to be a subject of difficult relations since 1989. During the period of communist domination any discussions on the issues of nationality were silenced both in Poland and in Ukraine. After the Soviet Union collapsed the renaissance of discourses on nationhood in Poland embraced the symbolic role of the country’s lost *Kresy* (eastern territories). A similar process could be noted in Ukraine - the new elites have had to confront the role of Polish colonialism and Polish theories of nationality. However, both countries have also had to come to terms with the memory of the often brutal struggles for the borderlands in recent history.²² Hopefully, all nations of South,

Central and Eastern Europe are now able to learn from the multiethnic and multicultural heritage of the Habsburg Empire.

Anssi Passi has noted that one of the first steps in the framework formation of any regional entity is precisely the establishment of a distinct set of territorial symbols, the most important of these being the name through which the region as a whole takes shape and which makes the concept of region real. 23

Over the past two decades the Habsburg legacy has been discussed, rediscovered and employed as a commercially viable product. Galicia is presented as a multicultural, multinational and open place where European values have always been celebrated. Kazimierz Sowa pointed out that Galicia is a powerful myth, still alive in the culture of both nations; a myth that is heterogeneous enough to be perceived by both countries as the ideal of the past and at the same time a path towards the future. 24 In Kraków and Lwów one can notice the empire as a kind of fashionable merchandise (the portraits of the Great Emperor Franz Joseph hang in numerous cafes and restaurants). The fashion is being adopted by the tourism industry as a strategy to make the city of Kraków unique. 25 One can easily find several guided trips across the Galicia region and tourist companies specializing in organizing trips to western Ukraine exclusively (the former Eastern Galicia). What is extremely interesting is that at the same time Galicia faces a growing interest in genealogy tours from Israel, the United States and Canada. A great number of Galician Jews emigrated to the USA and Canada in the XIX and at the beginning of the XX Century. The majority of them were connected with Chasidism and stressed their Galician roots. There are special web sites such as *Galician Cousins*, *polishroots.com*, *halgal.com* (from Halyhyna and Galicia). For some of the visitors, the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and, more recently, Poland's access to the European Union has created the first opportunity to visit the land of their ancestors. On the other hand, Habsburg motifs can be found on different goods: the mineral water (*Zywiec*) cookies (*Krakowski Kredens*) and beer, to name just a few. One can spot a large number of such symbols at restaurants and pubs such as Vienna Café, CK Brewery, CK Inn. 26

In 2009 there were 83 registered companies in Poland with names including Galicia in any form (the range includes radio stations, estate agencies, event agencies, shops, hotels and local food producers), some of them lacking any connection either with Habsburg history or heritage. What is symptomatic of both Polish and Ukrainian Galician societies is that these regions eagerly express their conviction of being different than the rest of their respective countries. The citizens of Kraków, Nowy Sacz or Sanok gladly emphasize their deep belief that Galicia is inhabited by people of a different culture than those from Warsaw or Gdansk. The same occurs in Ukrainian Lwów and its surroundings - this was evident during the Orange Revolution, when the majority of western Ukraine voted for the pro-European candidate Wiktor Juszczenko. Voters often stressed the fact that Lwów has always been a European city - one of the most important in the northern part of the Habsburg Empire.

Non-governmental organizations also have a strong influence on developing Polish-Ukrainian relations. Kraków is the headquarters of several influential organizations: the Galicia Museum, the International Cultural Center (which focuses on Central

European heritage), the Kresy Association, Saint Vlodymir Foundation (promoting Ukrainian culture in Poland). The main Polish cities (such as Kraków, Nowy Sącz, Sanok, Rzeszów) in the area of former Galicia have established links with western Ukrainian cities (especially Lwów, but also Sambor and Tarnopol). This cooperation includes bilateral visits and the organization of cultural events. ²⁷ There are strong hopes that such cooperation will flourish during the preparation for the Euro 2012.

Conclusions

In discussing the process of forming and developing regional identity in the former province of Galicia one should take into account the fact that one of its consequences is a growing interest in identity issues as well as the acknowledgement of common needs and interests across the region. The Habsburg myth has been present in Central and Eastern Europe from the late 1980s but a new regional identity has also been revived. Post-communist countries, the so-called 'New Europe' eagerly emphasize their belonging to European culture, recalling multicultural and multiethnic traditions cultivated in the area. Remembering Habsburg Galicia could be one of the best ways to create and implement regional cooperation.²⁸ As Luiza Bialasiewicz points out: 'regional identity is therefore a shared geographical representation that induces coherent behaviour and that, over time, can act to consolidate the region. The myth of Galicia can play this role in the near future.'²⁹

The different ways in which the Habsburg myth is being adopted show the many dimensions of this process. I would argue that Galicia has the potential to become a space of shared values, culture and cooperation on both cultural/historical and political/economic grounds.

1. G. Delanty, 'The resonance of Mitteleuropa: A Habsburg Myth Or Antipolitics', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 13(4) (1996), 93-108 (p.93)
2. Ibid.
3. L. Bialasiewicz, 'Another Europe: remembering Habsburg Galicia', *Cultural Geographies*, 10 (2003), 21-44 (p. 23)
4. The city is also known as Lwów (in Ukrainian) or Lemberg (in German)
5. More in: S. Grodziski, 'Zarys ustroju politycznego Galicji', in *Galicja i jej dziedzictwo*, ed. by W. Bonusiaka and J. Buszko (Rzeszów, 1996)
6. L. Wasilewski, *Narodowosci Austro-Wegier* (Krakow, 1902), p.3
7. Alfred Potocki and Kazimierz Badeni were the only non Germans to hold the office of prime minister of the Austrian Government.
8. Bialasiewicz, p.25

9. Jews made up 30% of the population of Lwow and Krakow, and over 50% of other big cities in Galicia, such as Stanislawów, Sanok, Brody, Tarnopol.
10. P. Thaler, 'Fluid Identities In Central European Borderlands', *Europe History Quarterly*, 31 (4) (2001), 519-548 (p. 538).
11. B. Schulz, *Z listów odnalezionych*, (Warsaw: Wydawn, 1993)
12. More in: J. Chlopecki, 'Galicja- skrzyzowanie dróg', in *Galicja i jej dziedzictwo*. ed. by J. Chlopecki and H. Madurowicz-Urbanska (Rzeszów: WSP, 1996) 27-48.
13. Krakow and west Galicja were annexed into Poland, whereas Lwow and east Galicja were incorporated into the Soviet Union. The south areas near the Carpathians were handed over to Czechoslovakia.
14. 1,4 million individuals were transferred between Poland and the Soviet Union.
15. B. Kordan, 'Making borders stick: population transfer and resettlement in the trans Curzon territories, 1944-1949', *International Migration Review*, 31 (3) (1997), 704-720 (p. 704)
16. J. Nye, *International Regionalism* (Boston: Little, Brown and co., 1968)
17. European integration was based on the economical cooperation - the European Economic Community was entirely an economic entity.
18. A. Noble, *Przewodnik po Unii Europejskiej*, (Oprawa: Twarda, 2000) p.98
19. More in: A. Passi, 'Region and place: regional identity in question', *Human Geography*, 27 (4) (2003), 475-485 (p.475).
20. Passi, p.477
21. Andras Simonyi, *Visegrad Cooperation: A 15-Year-Old Success Story*, www.visegradgroup.eu
22. Bialasiewicz, p.23
23. A. Passi, 'The institutionalization of regions: a theoretical framework for understanding the emergence of regions and the constitution of regional identity', *Fennia*, 164 (1986) 105-146 (p.125)
24. K. Sowa, 'Słowo wstepne', in *Galicja i jej Dziedzictwo*, ed. by J. Chlopecki and H. Madurowicz-Urbanska, (Rzeszow: WSP, 1994), p. 6.

25. More in: N. Styczynska, 'Galicyjski Krakow - mit czy produkt pop kultury', *100 refleksji o miescie conference paper* (Krakow, 2009)
26. The shortening to CK refers to the dual Austro-Hungarian monarchy
27. N. Styczynska, 'The revival of regional identity. The former Habsbourg Galicja's case', *Central-European Case Studies*, 2 (2008) 191-200 (p.197)
28. Styczynska, 2008, p.198
29. Bialasiewicz, p. 37

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