

## NATIONAL PERCEPTIONS AND THEIR STEREOTYPIZATION<sup>1</sup>

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The authors of this interdisciplinary volume—Slovak and German historians, ethnologists, and Slavicists—focused on an exploration into the historically contextualized objects of national perception in the form of stereotypes. They thematize them as the self-perception (self-stereotypes) and perception of others (heterostereotypes). Stereotypes are looked upon as simplified and emotionalized images, characteristics, concepts as well as prejudices, which are used both for orientation and for manipulation and often also for confirming and strengthening one's identity with respect to others. The contributions describe stereotypes and images of the self and others in everyday life and in politics. Action forms and institutions are also exposed to stereotypization. Descriptions of the stereotypes related to the Slovak and German national perceptions have a high cognitive value. Mention is made of the stereotypes referring to the Slovaks, Germans, French, Jews, Russians, and Americans; but also of the stereotypes of East and West, of national food, national architecture, and of the transition of existing and already used stereotypes from one historical-political context to another. The authors based their studies of various processes of stereotypization on dictionaries, lexicons, guidebooks, travelogues, cookbooks, period caricatures, pictures, and last but not least, political, historical and scientific discourse. Here I want to mention projections of stereotypes of East and West in the German and Soviet historiography of ancient Greece and Rome. The methodological approaches and reflections of the authors on the issues of stereotypization are based on knowledge of the particular socio-scientific writings which are often referred to, stimulating the reader to further exploration. The contributions chiefly relate to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Geographically speaking, the contributions deal with the predominantly extremely ambiguous region of central Europe which is undergoing remarkable changes. Its protean character is given by both its original anthropological diversity and the projects and facts of power and political organization. Central Europe can be referred to as the Europe of the Habsburgs, as German or as east-central Europe, and there were times when central Europe ceased to exist and was split into East and West.

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Henning Hahn, Elena Mannová, (Hrsg.). *Nationale Wahrnehmungen und ihre Stereotypisierung. Beiträge zur historischen Stereotypenforschung.* (National perceptions and their stereotypization.) Unter Mitarbeit von Stephan Scholz und Tobias Weger. *Mitteleuropa Osteuropa.* Oldenburger Beiträge zur Kultur und Geschichte Ostmitteleuropas Band 9. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag 2007, 530 pp.

Central Europe can, however, also be understood as a zone. That is how the Polish historian Oscar Halecki who lived in the USA, saw it. He denoted it as the “borderlands of western civilization”; it was principally the zone of “small nations”, the zone of the countries spread between Germany and Russia. Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, who not only founded the Czechoslovak state, but was first and foremost a remarkable central European political thinker and author of “The world revolution!”, perceived the centre of Europe in a similar way: as a zone of “small nations” which were the foundation stones of the New Europe being shaped after WWI. However, those nations had not saved their sovereignty; on the contrary, they became the objects of power of their powerful neighbours. Nor was the vision of Milan Hodža fulfilled, who said in his 1931 speech that central European nations might build up a new civilization paradigm on the basis of their intellectual and moral values. In this respect, investigation into the stereotype of “New Europe” is recommended because, in this zone of Europe, ambitious and unfounded ideas about its own input, about its function as the “bridge” and mediator between East and West were widespread and part of national self-perceptions.

The idea of Europe as a non-crystallized and changeable centre is connected with the incapability of the “historical” dynastic state to implement political modernization. We refer to the part of Europe that was once the playground of the ethnic nationalisms which not only changed the political map of the region but also the way in which state and society were regarded. The determining symbol of the ethnic nationalisms was the fact that their protagonists—nationalists—a special type of intellectual, i.e. originally a non-political elite, initiated a movement whose focal point was not the institutional reconstruction of the existing political order but a philosophical-historical establishment of a national story of linguistic collectivities that based cultural and later political demands on their identity, on the quality of their collective being. In order to characterize it in brief, the primary point was not institutional but identity politics. From the perspective of a classic ideal of modern society based on the freedom and equality of individuals, where the nation was an entity of citizens, the type of politics mentioned represented a new phenomenon in the political movement, postulating the freedom of a nation as a cultural entity. Such freedom of the nation, freedom, so to say, of ethnic genuineness was often more desirable than the idea of “purely” or “only” civic freedom. Political recognition of the public rights of the national language was *conditio sine qua non*. There is no need to emphasize that politics based on the protection of the collective self also implied a clash of identity ideologies and naturally a conflict with the official nationalism of the historical state.

The stereotypes analyzed in the contributions have become increasingly explosive particularly because they were part of ethnically connoted policy, which, in our part of Europe, led to changes on the political map, demolishing the so-called historical and building new nation-states usually with strong ethnic minorities living in mutual antagonism. The historical deficiency of central Europe was the inability to create a democratic European superpower, which would be able to pin together national particularisms and indispensable universalism.

Model political modernization consisting of the gradual inclusion of the population in the political process had to face the fact of linguistically and culturally diverse inhabitants of the old states, whose elites were unable to find a recipe for consensual political modernization. That means that there was a tension between the historical states and their inhabitants of different ethnicities, i.e. the multiethnic population, which had long been the source of political instability. There was a competition between top-down and bottom-up modernization, between the existing state and an aspiring nation. The Habsburg monarchy can serve as an instructive

example. We can say that the monarchy failed to establish a stable political civilization corresponding to the needs and arrangement of the region; it did not succeed in constructing a supraethnic order that would take care of the justified ethnic, linguistic and cultural demands. There was no constructive input of the region of central Europe in the history of political thought and no central European political civilization was created. The political weakness of the regional centre of Europe culminated in the human and civil disasters of the first half of the twentieth century. This led to the split of Europe into east and west. This division of Europe, also in the sense of the political order, lasted until 1989. It should also be mentioned that the end of the Cold War brought not only the renaissance of nation states but, at the same time, it led to the process towards European integration. A process of Europeanization has been launched.

Reading the contributions integrated in this book and being aware of this background, I can say that they bring a wealth of thought-provoking data and material. They seek to solve the issues that are topical even today and indirectly raise questions regarding the style of national historiographies in our region of Europe, whose countries, having been established after WWI, resulted from the activities of ethnic nationalisms. These, based on the identity of a nation and less on state tradition as an institution, traced the duration of the national collectivity back to the distant past and symbolically proved their identity by long-gone fame or the olden days. History and national historiography were thus drawn into politics and into the political struggle in a special way. Later they became a strong argument from which specific demands and political programmes were derived and confirmed. In such a nationally sensitive identity, the histories, images and stereotypes of the adversary played a key role. The enemy was not simple positioned as an opponent but as “the other”. The history of the nation was for the most part built on the ‘us—them’ relationship. Ethno-national history is therefore marked by a phenomenon of the essentialization of national groups perceived as organisms and by a groupism distorting the reality of cultural diversity as a picture of particularistic groups. Politics was in this context transformed into a particularizing, and not a universalizing activity. The separate study of national stereotypes, but naturally also stereotypes of “the other” are essential aids in thinking about the possibilities of alternative historiographies, which would be able to thematize history from wider perspectives, that is to say, from an institutional and universal viewpoint emphasizing not that which divides but that which connects. There is a need for historical sociology which is not mutually exclusive to historical narration but, which conversely enriches it. The necessity of studying self-stereotypes and heterostereotypes is also proved by the current example of compiling joint history textbooks of the neighbouring European nations and countries.

A social reality inclusive of individuals and groups is diverse, contradictory and fragmented. To be able to orient oneself in this reality, the individual simplifies it; simplification means a reduction in the diversity and wealth of the features and characteristics of individuals and groups of people. This results in stereotypes. The authors of this collection of papers deconstruct them and uncover their manipulating purpose, often dictated by the ruling ideology. The editors Hans Henning Hahn and Elena Mannová are right to warn against the possibility of the opposite extreme: the exclusion of stereotypes from human communication as a whole. Life without stereotypes is hard to imagine. However, the point is that through their construction and use, there is a critical border and traversing it generates harmful communication practices, naturalizing and brutalizing forms of human contact, hindering reasonable political action. *National perceptions and their stereotypization* is a work

of critical historiography. The book serves as a source of knowledge about mechanisms as well as about particular cases of stereotypization of social and national groups in history.

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