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PREFACE

The proposal to publish a collection of my scholarly essays as a volume in the Variorum Collected Studies Series generously offered by Ivan Berend, encouraged me to think in more general terms about the results of the historical research that I have conducted over a period of half a century. Most of my books and essays concern two basic problems of European history: firstly, the social and political aspect of the transition from pre-modern, feudal, traditional societies to modern, capitalist ones and the uneven pace of this transition across Europe. The second aspect of my research focuses on the creation of national identity during the nineteenth century, particularly among the “smaller” European nations, i.e. those without statehood.

If these two topics are not represented equally in this volume, the explanation is more technical and political than scientific. I did most of my research on different aspects of social change in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries during the decades of Communist rule in Czechoslovakia, making it rather difficult to publish in English (everything that I published was in Czech or German). The situation partially changed in the mid-1980s, and allowed two books of mine to be published in English: *Ecclesia Militans: The Inquisition*¹ and *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe*² (as an enlarged and heavily revised translation from my German book published already in 1968³). Although the first attracted little interest, the second one was successful and became a text much quoted by historians and social scientists in various European countries, except my own.

At the same time, important changes in the former Soviet block countries (but also in Spain, Belgium and Great Britain) demonstrated the significance of studies on “nationalism” and my book – although the result of research done

¹ Miroslav Hroch, Anna Skybova, *Ecclesia Militans: The Inquisition*, Dorset Press, Edition Leipzig 1988.

² Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe. A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations*, Cambridge UP 1985.

³ *Die Vorkämpfer der nationalen Bewegung bei den kleinen Völkern Europas. Eine vergleichende Analyse zur gesellschaftlichen Schichtung der patriotischen Gruppen* (Acta Universitatis Carolinae, Monographia XXIV), Prague 1968.

during the 1960s – became stimulating and inspiring. By the 1990s, my research and publications focused on the study of nations and nationalisms. The end of Communist rule across Eastern Europe led to a greater exchange of academic thought; I was invited to participate in several international projects and conferences and as a result of this, the core of this volume is formed from this new wave of studies on “nationalism”, even though my basic concept of the nation and the methodological approach to studying the process of nation-formation originated during an earlier period. Some of my essays that were published in English during the 1990s, were partially based on earlier work first published in Czech. A book of mine focusing on comparative studies of national demands was published in English⁴ and a generalizing conclusion of all my recent research was published in German in 2005.⁵

The most important argument of my academic work, and where I disagree with the majority of contemporary research, is the belief that we cannot study the process of nation-formation as a mere by-product of nebulous “nationalism”. We have to understand it as a part of a social and cultural transformation and a component of the modernization of European societies, even though this modernization did not occur synchronically and had important regional specificities. Because of this, I have included my critical discussion on the (non)sense of using the term “nationalism” as the central tool of analysis in the second part of volume.

As a historian, I was strongly interested in the role of history, and of “collective memory” in the process of nation-formation and undertook some research on this issue. Even though I am well aware that systematic comparative studies will have to be undertaken in the future, I have included some of my preliminary results in part three as a way of trying to provoke and inspire this research.

The last part – on “Social change” – is, for the aforementioned reasons, only a very limited selection and may be regarded as a small and not very representative example of this sometimes forgotten component of my historical research. What is, unfortunately, totally absent, are my studies on the Thirty Years War and its economic aspects,⁶ and on the “crisis” of the seventeenth century,⁷ since I have not published any of my work on these subjects in English.

⁴ *In the National Interest. Demands and Goals of European National Movements of the Nineteenth Century: A Comparative Perspective*, Prague 2000.

⁵ *Das Europa der Nationen. Die moderne Nationsbildung im europäischen Vergleich*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck-Ruprecht 2005.

⁶ *Handel und Politik im Ostseeraum während des Dreissigjährigen Krieges. Zur Rolle des Kaufmannskapitals in der aufkommenden allgemeinen Krise der Feudalgesellschaft* (Acta Universitatis Carolinae, Monographia), Prague 1976.

⁷ *Das 17. Jahrhundert – Krise der Feudalgesellschaft?* (co-author Josef Petran), Hamburg, Hoffmann & Campe 1981.

Aside from case-studies, the first section includes the essays that I regard as essential to understanding my concept of nation-formation. Sometimes, this concept is called “theory”, but it was never my intention to create an analytical framework. My aim is far more modest: to determine which social circumstances were favorable to the emergence of the idea of nationhood among a “non-dominant ethnic group” and what were the reasons for the success of most national movements. If I had any ambitions beyond the realm of empirical research, these lay in the field of methodology. I have tried to check and to demonstrate the utility of the comparative approaches that became the crux of my research during the 1960s, when its use was not yet commonplace in European (and even less in Czech) historiography. Since today the comparative approach belongs ostensibly to the self-evident part of methodology in social sciences, it seems to me to be useful to present, at the end of my introduction, a short overview of my concept of the comparative method. Although an important part of my work is comparative, this method as such is not explicitly presented in the essays published in this volume.

Perhaps it would be interesting for new researchers to read a shortened version of my now forty-year old attempt to characterize the comparative method, published in my book *Die Vorkämpfer der nationalen Bewegung* (1968). In this work I distinguished the comparative method, as a complex of various procedures and techniques, from simple comparison and stressed that its application has to follow four basic requirements.

Firstly, the object being compared must be defined as precisely as possible: it must be known in advance that the comparison is between objects belonging to the same category, without regard to the level of abstraction used. It also has to be decided if the comparison is to be made between processes or singular structures of events.

Secondly, the aim of the comparative procedure must be stated. Several kinds of results may be pursued. An elementary procedure is the simple search for similarities and differences between two or more objects of comparison. A more complex procedure uses the similarities and differences between the objects of comparison as the starting point or instrument of typology. An even more challenging objective is the interpretation of causal relations, of social or cultural determinants and the search for general models of causality. The search for similarities and differences can also be used in an “asymmetrical” way, when comparing a larger number of objects with a single one regarded as central, by ascertaining which characteristic of that central object are of general application, and which ones are specific to it. This procedure plays an important role as a corrective to the study of the history of one individual nation, city or region.

Thirdly, the relation of comparative procedure to the chronological axis has to be clarified. Generally, the comparative method can be applied both

diachronically, i.e. along the chronological axis, and synchronically, i.e. across the chronological axis. The comparison of events and data along the historical axis is one of commonest procedures of historical research: we confront prior with consequent occurrences. A synchronic comparison in the narrower sense of the word involves the comparison of historical processes or events occurring in different countries at the same time. These processes might be mutually related and interdependent, or they might occur relatively independently. Nevertheless, another type of synchronic comparison may be more productive: comparison according to analogous historical situations. If we can establish that the objects of comparison passed through the same stages of development, we can compare these analogous stages, even if from the standpoint of absolute chronology they occurred at different times.

Fourth, the criteria of analysis used for all the objects of comparison must be established. The criterion of comparison means the feature (distinction) with reference to which the comparison is made: the qualities being compared must always be applicable to each of the objects of comparison: The criterion of comparison between a carriage and a motor car could be the length of the chassis, the carrying capacity, the weight, but definitely not the power of the motor or the petrol consumption. It is, however, not enough to make sure that we are in a position to apply the chosen criterion to all the objects of comparison; it is also necessary that this criterion is relevant to the problem to be solved and adequate to the aim in view. The more complex the problem and the process, the greater the number of criteria of comparison required. The greater the number of objects of comparison, the more advantageous it is to restrict the number of criteria of comparison to a minimum. In the first case, there is the risk of parallel narratives with minimum comparative results, in the second case, using one or two aspects isolated from the complexity of life means that the results must be interpreted as partial, although they can serve as inspiration for further research.

In some of my essays I have used the comparative perspective only as an implicit methodological approach in the context of transnational history. Sometimes, I used asymmetric comparison in order to characterize a crucial point in national history. With the exception of the three case-studies in the first section, I have always preferred to use the European dimension of my comparative or generalizing reflections. Naturally, the dimensions of Europe usually correspond to the place of origin of the observer. European history looks different if observed from Prague than if observed from Paris or from Helsinki. Differences in perspective are inevitable, but it is preferable if they do not disturb traditional consensual opinions.

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