Milan Kundera: The Tragedy of Central Europe

1.

In November 1956, the director of the Hungarian News Agency, shortly before his office was flattened by artillery fire, sent a telex to the entire world with a desperate message announcing that the Russian attack against Budapest had begun. The dispatch ended with these words: "We are going to die for Hungary and for Europe."

What did this sentence mean? It certainly meant that the Russian tanks were endangering Hungary and with it Europe itself. But in what sense was Europe in danger? Were the Russian tanks about to push past the Hungarian borders and into the West? No. The director of the Hungarian News Agency meant that the Russians, in attacking Hungary, were attacking Europe itself. He was ready to die so that Hungary might remain Hungary and European.

Even if the sense of the sentence seems clear, it continues to intrigue us. Actually, in France, in America, one is accustomed to thinking that what was at stake during the invasion was neither Hungary nor Europe but a political regime. One would never have said that Hungary as such had been threatened; still less would one ever understand why a Hungarian, faced with his own death, addressed Europe. When Solzhenitsyn denounces communist oppression, does he invoke Europe as a fundamental value worth dying for?

No. "To die for one's country and for Europe"-that is a phrase that could not be thought in Moscow or Leningrad; it is precisely the phrase that could be thought in Budapest or Warsaw.

2.

In fact, what does Europe mean to a Hungarian, a Czech, a Pole? For a thousand years their nations have belonged to the part of Europe rooted in Roman Christianity. They have participated in every period of its history. For them, the word "Europe" does not represent a phenomenon of geography but a spiritual notion synonymous with the word "West." The moment Hungary is no longer European-that is, no longer Western-it is driven from its own destiny, beyond its own history: it loses the essence of its identity.

"Geographic Europe" (extending from the Atlantic to the Ural Mountains) was always divided into two halves which evolved separately: one tied to ancient Rome and the Catholic Church, the other anchored in Byzantium and the Orthodox Church. After 1945, the border between the two Europes shifted several hundred kilometers to the west, and several nations

that had always considered themselves to be Western woke up to discover that they were now in the East.[1]

As a result, three fundamental situations developed in Europe after the war: that of Western Europe, that of Eastern Europe, and, most complicated, that of the part of Europe situated geographically in the center-culturally in the West and politically in the East.

The contradictions of the Europe I call Central help us to understand why during the last thirty-five years the drama of Europe has been concentrated there: the great Hungarian revolt in 1956 and the bloody massacre that followed; the Prague Spring and the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968; the Polish revolts of 1956, 1968, 1970, and of recent years. In dramatic content and historical impact, nothing that has occurred in "geographic Europe," in the West or the East, can be compared with the succession of revolts in Central Europe. Every single one was supported by almost the entire population. And, in every case, each regime could not have defended itself for more than three hours if it had not been backed by Russia. That said, we can no longer consider what took place in Prague or Warsaw in its essence as a drama of Eastern Europe, of the Soviet bloc, of communism; it is a drama of the West-a West that, kidnapped, displaced, and brainwashed, nevertheless insists on defending its identity.

The identity of a people and of a civilization is reflected and concentrated in what has been created by the mind-in what is known as "culture." If this identity is threatened with extinction, cultural life grows correspondingly more intense, more important, until culture itself becomes the living value around which all people rally. That is why, in each of the revolts in Central Europe, the collective cultural memory and the contemporary creative effort assumed roles so great and so decisive-far greater and far more decisive than they have been in any other European mass revolt.[2]

It was Hungarian writers, in a group named after the Romantic poet Sándor Petőfi, who undertook the powerful critique that led the way to the explosion of 1956. It was the theater, the films, the literature and philosophy that, in the years before 1968, led ultimately to the emancipation of the Prague Spring. And it was the banning of a play by Adam Mickiewicz, the greatest Polish Romantic poet that triggered the famous revolt of Polish students in 1968. This happy marriage of culture and life, of creative achievement and popular participation, has marked the revolts of Central Europe with an inimitable beauty that will always cast a spell over those who lived through those times.

3.

One could say: We'll admit that Central European countries are defending their threatened identity, but their situation is not unique. Russia is in a similar situation. It, too, is about to lose its identity. In fact, it's not Russia but communism that deprives nations of their essence, and which, moreover, made the Russian people its first victim. True, the Russian language is suffocating the languages of the other nations in the Soviet empire, but it's not because the Russians themselves want to "Russianize" the others; it's because the Soviet bureaucracy-deeply a-national, antinational, supranational-needs a tool to unify its state.

I understand the logic. I also understand the predicament of the Russians who fear that their beloved homeland will be confused with detested communism.

But it is also necessary to understand the Pole, whose homeland, except for a brief period between the two world wars, has been subjugated by Russia for two centuries and has been, throughout, subject to a "Russianization"-the pressure to conform to being Russian-as patient as it has been implacable.

In Central Europe, the eastern border of the West, everyone has always been particularly sensitive to the dangers of Russian might. And it's not just the Poles. Frantisek Palacky, the great historian and the figure most representative of Czech politics in the nineteenth century, wrote in 1848 a famous letter to the revolutionary parliament of Frankfurt in which he justified the continued existence of the Hapsburg Empire as the only possible rampart against Russia, against "this power which, having already reached an enormous size today, is now augmenting its force beyond the reach of any Western country." Palacky warned of Russia's imperial ambitions; it aspired to become a "universal monarchy," which means it sought world domination. "A Russian universal monarchy," Palacky wrote, "would be an immense and indescribable disaster, an immeasurable and limitless disaster."

Central Europe, according to Palacky, ought to be a family of equal nations, each of which- treating the others with mutual respect and secure in the protection of a strong, unified state- would also cultivate its own individuality. And this dream, although never fully realized, would remain powerful and influential. Central Europe longed to be a condensed version of Europe itself in all its cultural variety, a small arch-European Europe, a reduced model of Europe made up of nations conceived according to one rule: the greatest variety within the smallest space. How could Central Europe not be horrified facing a Russia founded on the opposite principle: the smallest variety within the greatest space?

Indeed, nothing could be more foreign to Central Europe and its passion for variety than Russia: uniform, standardizing, centralizing, determined to transform every nation of its

empire (the Ukrainians, the Belorussians, the Armenians, the Latvians, the Lithuanians, and others) into a single Russian people (or, as is more commonly expressed in this age of generalized verbal mystification, into a "single Soviet people").[3]

And so, again: is communism the negation of Russian history or its fulfillment?

Certainly it is both its negation (the negation, for example, of its religiosity) and its fulfillment (the fulfillment of its centralizing tendencies and its imperial dreams).

Seen from within Russia, this first aspect-the aspect of its discontinuity-is the more striking. From the point of view of the enslaved countries, the second aspect-that of its continuity-is felt more powerfully.[4]

4.

But am I being too absolute in contrasting Russia and Western civilization? Isn't Europe, though divided into east and west, still a single entity anchored in ancient Greece and Judeo-Christian thought?

Of course, moreover, during the entire nineteenth century, Russia, attracted to Europe, drew closer to it. And the fascination was reciprocated. Rilke claimed that Russia was his spiritual homeland, and no one has escaped the impact of the great Russian novels, which remain an integral part of the common European cultural legacy.

Yes, all this is true; the cultural betrothal between the two Europes remains a great and unforgettable memory.[5] But it is no less true that Russian communism vigorously reawakened Russia's old anti-Western obsessions and turned it brutally against Europe.

But Russia isn't my subject and I don't want to wander into its immense complexities, about which I'm not especially knowledgeable. I want simply to make this point once more: on the eastern border of the West-more than anywhere else-Russia is seen not just as one more European power but as a singular civilization, an other civilization.

In his book Native Realm, Czeslaw Milosz speaks of the phenomenon: in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Poles waged war against the Russians "along distant borders. No one was especially interested in the Russians.... It was this experience, when the Poles found only a big void to the east that engendered the Polish concept of a Russia situated 'out there'-outside the world."[6]

Kazimierz Brandys, in his Warsaw Diary, recalls the interesting story of a Polish writer's meeting with the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. The Pole was complaining: his works-all of them-had been banned.

She interrupted: "Have you been imprisoned?"

"No."

"Have you at least been expelled from the Writers' Union?"

"No."

"Then what exactly are you complaining about?" Akhmatova was genuinely puzzled.

Brandys observes:

Those are typical Russian consolations. Nothing seems horrible to them, compared to the fate of Russia. But these consolations make no sense to us. The fate of Russia is not part of our consciousness; it's foreign to us; we're not responsible for it. It weighs on us, but it's not our heritage. That was also my response to Russian literature. It scared me. Even today I'm still horrified by certain stories by Gogol and by everything Saltykov-Shchedrin wrote. I would have preferred not to have known their world, not to have known it even existed.

Brandys's remarks on Gogol do not, of course, deny the value of his work as art; rather they express the horror of the world his art evokes. It is a world that-provided we are removed from it - fascinates and attracts us; the moment it closes around us, though, it reveals its terrifying foreignness. I don't know if it is worse than ours, but I do know it is different: Russia knows another (greater) dimension of disaster, another image of space (a space so immense entire nations are swallowed up in it), another sense of time (slow and patient), another way of laughing, living, and dying.

This is why the countries in Central Europe feel that the change in their destiny that occurred after 1945 is not merely a political catastrophe: it is also an attack on their civilization. The deep meaning of their resistance is the struggle to preserve their identity - or, to put it another way, to preserve their Westernness.[7]

5.

There are no longer any illusions about the regimes of Russia's satellite countries. But what we forget is their essential tragedy: these countries have vanished from the map of the West. Why has this disappearance remained invisible? We can locate the cause in Central Europe itself.

The history of the Poles, the Czechs, the Slovaks, the Hungarians has been turbulent and fragmented. Their traditions of statehood have been weaker and less continuous than those of the larger European nations. Boxed in by the Germans on one side and the Russians on the other, the nations of Central Europe have used up their strength in the struggle to survive and to preserve their languages. Since they have never been entirely integrated into the consciousness of Europe, they have remained the least known and the most fragile part of the

West - hidden, even further, by the curtain of their strange and scarcely accessible languages.

The Austrian empire had the great opportunity of making Central Europe into a strong, unified state. But the Austrians, alas, were divided between an arrogant Pan-German nationalism and their own Central European mission. They did not succeed in building a federation of equal nations, and their failure has been the misfortune of the whole of Europe. Dissatisfied, the other nations of Central Europe blew apart their empire in 1918, without realizing that, in spite of its inadequacies, it was irreplaceable. After the First World War, Central Europe was therefore transformed into a region of small, weak states, whose vulnerability ensured first Hitler's conquest and ultimately Stalin's triumph. Perhaps for this reason, in the European memory these countries always seem to be the source of dangerous trouble.

And, to be frank, I feel that the error made by Central Europe was owing to what I call the "ideology of the Slavic world." I say "ideology" advisedly, for it is only a piece of political mystification invented in the nineteenth century. The Czechs (in spite of the severe warnings of their most respected leaders) loved to brandish naively their "Slavic ideology" as a defense against German aggressiveness. The Russians, on the other hand, enjoyed making use of it to justify their own imperial ambitions. "The Russians like to label everything Russian as Slavic, so that later they can label everything Slavic as Russian," the great Czech writer Karel Havlicek declared in 1844, trying to warn his compatriots against their silly and ignorant enthusiasm for Russia. It was ignorant because the Czechs, for a thousand years, have never had any direct contact with Russia. In spite of their linguistic kinship, the Czechs and the Russians have never shared a common world: neither a common history nor a common culture. The relationship between the Poles and the Russians, though, has never been anything less than a struggle of life and death.

Joseph Conrad was always irritated by the label "Slavic soul" that people loved to slap on him and his books because of his Polish origins, and, about sixty years ago, he wrote that "nothing could be more alien to what is called in the literary world the 'Slavic spirit' than the Polish temperament with its chivalric devotion to moral constraints and its exaggerated respect for individual rights." (How well I understand him! I, too, know of nothing more ridiculous than this cult of obscure depths, this noisy and empty sentimentality of the "Slavic soul" that is attributed to me from time to time!)[8]

Nevertheless, the idea of a Slavic world is a commonplace of world historiography. The division of Europe after 1945-which united this supposed Slavic world (including the poor Hungarians and Rumanians whose language is not, of course, Slavic-but why bother over

trifles?)-has therefore seemed almost like a natural solution.

6.

So is it the fault of Central Europe that the West hasn't even noticed its disappearance?

Not entirely. At the beginning of our century, Central Europe was, despite its political weakness, a great cultural center, perhaps the greatest. And, admittedly, while the importance of Vienna, the city of Freud and Mahler, is readily acknowledged today, its importance and originality make little sense unless they are seen against the background of the other countries and cities that together participated in, and contributed creatively to, the culture of Central Europe. If the school of Schönberg founded the twelve-tone system, the Hungarian Béla Bartók, one of the greatest musicians of the twentieth century, knew how to discover the last original possibility in music based on the tonal principle. With the work of Kafka and Hasek, Prague created the great counterpart in the novel to the work of the Viennese Musil and Broch. The cultural dynamism of the non-German-speaking countries was intensified even more after 1918, when Prague offered the world the innovations of structuralism and the Prague Linguistic Circle.[9] And in Poland the great trinity of Witold Gombrowicz, Bruno Schulz, and Stanislas Witkiewicz anticipated the European modernism of the 1950s, notably the so-called theater of the absurd.

A question arises: was this entire creative explosion just a coincidence of geography? Or was it rooted in a long tradition, a shared past? Or, to put it another way: does Central Europe constitute a true cultural configuration with its own history? And if such a configuration exists, can it be defined geographically? What are its borders?

It would be senseless to try to draw its borders exactly. Central Europe is not a state: it is a culture or a fate. Its borders are imaginary and must be drawn and redrawn with each new historical situation.

For example, by the middle of the fourteenth century, Charles University in Prague had already brought together intellectuals (professors and students) who were Czech, Austrian, Bavarian, Saxon, Polish, Lithuanian, Hungarian, and Rumanian with the germ of the idea of a multinational community in which each nation would have the right of its own language: indeed, it was under the indirect influence of this university (at which the religious reformer Jan Huss was once rector) that the first Hungarian and Rumanian translations of the Bible were undertaken.

Other situations followed: the Hussite revolution; the Hungarian Renaissance during the time of Mathias Korvin with its international influence; the advent of the Hapsburg Empire as

the union of three independent states-Bohemia, Hungary, and Austria; the wars against the Turks; the Counter-Reformation of the seventeenth century. At this time the specific nature of Central European culture appeared suddenly in an extraordinary explosion of baroque art, a phenomenon that unified this vast region, from Salzburg to Wilno. On the map of Europe, baroque Central Europe (characterized by the predominance of the irrational and the dominant position of the visual arts and especially of music) became the opposite pole of classical France (characterized by the predominance of the rational and the dominant position of literature and philosophy). It is in the baroque period that one finds the origins of the extraordinary development of Central European music, which, from Haydn to Schönberg, from Liszt to Bartók, condensed within itself the evolution of all European music.

In the nineteenth century, the national struggles (of the Poles, the Hungarians, the Czechs, the Slovaks, the Croats, the Slovenes, the Rumanians, the Jews) brought into opposition nations that - insulated, egotistic, closed-off-had nevertheless lived through the same great existential experience: the experience of a nation that chooses between its existence and its nonexistence; or, to put it another way, between retaining its authentic national life and being assimilated into a larger nation. Not even the Austrians, though belonging to the dominant nation of the empire, avoided the necessity of facing this choice: they had to choose between their Austrian identity and being submerged by the larger German one. Nor could the Jews escape this question. By refusing assimilation, Zionism, also born in Central Europe, chose the same path as the other Central European nations.

The twentieth century has witnessed other situations: the collapse of the Austrian empire, Russian annexation, and the long period of Central European revolts, which are only an immense bet staked on an unknown solution.

Central Europe therefore cannot be defined and determined by political frontiers (which are inauthentic, always imposed by invasions, conquests, and occupations), but by the great common situations that reassemble peoples, regroup them in ever new ways along the imaginary and ever-changing boundaries that mark a realm inhabited by the same memories, the same problems and conflicts, the same common tradition.

7.

Sigmund Freud's parents came from Poland, but young Sigmund spent his childhood in Moravia, in present-day Czechoslovakia. Edmund Husserl and Gustav Mahler also spent their childhoods there. The Viennese novelist Joseph Roth had his roots in Poland. The great Czech poet Julius Zeyer was born in Prague to a German-speaking family; it was his own

choice to become Czech. The mother tongue of Hermann Kafka, on the other hand, was Czech, while his son Franz took up German. The key figure in the Hungarian revolt of 1956, the writer Tibor Déry, came from a German-Hungarian family, and my dear friend Danilo Kis, the excellent novelist, is Hungario-Yugoslav. What a tangle of national destinies among even the most representative figures of each country!

And all of the names I've just mentioned are those of Jews. Indeed, no other part of the world has been so deeply marked by the influence of Jewish genius. Aliens everywhere and everywhere at home, lifted above national quarrels, the Jews in the twentieth century were the principal cosmopolitan, integrating element in Central Europe: they were its intellectual cement, a condensed version of its spirit, creators of its spiritual unity. That's why I love the Jewish heritage and cling to it with as much passion and nostalgia as though it were my own.

Another thing makes the Jewish people so precious to me: in their destiny the fate of Central Europe seems to be concentrated, reflected, and to have found its symbolic image. What is Central Europe? An uncertain zone of small nations between Russia and Germany. I underscore the words: small nation. Indeed, what are the Jews if not a small nation, the small nation par excellence? The only one of all the small nations of all time which has survived empires and the devastating march of History.

But what is a small nation? I offer you my definition: the small nation is one whose very existence may be put in question at any moment; a small nation can disappear and it knows it. A French, a Russian, or an English man is not used to asking questions about the very survival of his nation. His anthems speak only of grandeur and eternity. The Polish anthem, however, starts with the verse: "Poland has not yet perished...."

Central Europe as a family of small nations has its own vision of the world, a vision based on a deep distrust of history. History, that goddess of Hegel and Marx, that incarnation of reason that judges us and arbitrates our fate-that is the history of conquerors. The people of Central Europe are not conquerors. They cannot be separated from European history; they cannot exist outside it; but they represent the wrong side of this history; they are its victims and outsiders. It's this disabused view of history that is the source of their culture, of their wisdom, of the "nonserious spirit" that mocks grandeur and glory. "Never forget that only in opposing History as such can we resist the history of our own day." I would love to engrave this sentence by Witold Gombrowicz above the entry gate to Central Europe.

Thus it was in this region of small nations who have "not yet perished" that Europe's vulnerability, all of Europe's vulnerability, was more clearly visible before anywhere else. Actually, in our modern world where power has a tendency to become more and more

concentrated in the hands of a few big countries, all European nations run the risk of becoming small nations and of sharing their fate. In this sense the destiny of Central Europe anticipates the destiny of Europe in general, and its culture assumes an enormous relevance.[10]

It's enough to read the greatest Central European novels: in Hermann Broch's The Sleepwalkers, History appears as a process of gradual degradation of values; Robert Musil's The Man without Qualities paints a euphoric society which doesn't realize that tomorrow it will disappear; in Jaroslav Hasek's The Good Soldier Schweik, pretending to be an idiot becomes the last possible method for preserving one's freedom; the novelistic visions of Kafka speak to us of a world without memory, of a world that comes after historic time.[11] All of this century's great Central European works of art, even up to our own day, can be understood as long meditations on the possible end of European humanity.

8.

Today, all of Central Europe has been subjugated by Russia with the exception of little Austria, which, more by chance than necessity, has retained its independence, but ripped out of its Central European setting, it has lost most of its individual character and all of its importance. The disappearance of the cultural home of Central Europe was certainly one of the greatest events of the century for all of Western civilization. So, I repeat my question: how could it possibly have gone unnoticed and unnamed?

The answer is simple: Europe hasn't noticed the disappearance of its cultural home because Europe no longer perceives its unity as a cultural unity.

In fact, what is European unity based on?

In the Middle Ages, it was based on a shared religion. In the modern era, in which the medieval God has been changed into a Deus absconditus, religion bowed out, giving way to culture, which became the expression of the supreme values by which European humanity understood itself, defined itself, identified itself as European.

Now it seems that another change is taking place in our century, as important as the one that divided the Middle Ages from the modern era. Just as God long ago gave way to culture, culture in turn is giving way.

But to what and to whom? What realm of supreme values will be capable of uniting Europe? Technical feats? The marketplace? The mass media? (Will the great poet be replaced by the great journalist?)[12] Or by politics? But by which politics? The right or the left? Is there a discernible shared ideal that still exists above this Manichaeanism of the left and the

right that is as stupid as it is insurmountable? Will it be the principle of tolerance, respect for the beliefs and ideas of other people? But won't this tolerance become empty and useless if it no longer protects a rich creativity or a strong set of ideas? Or should we understand the abdication of culture as a sort of deliverance, to which we should ecstatically abandon ourselves? Or will the Deus absconditus return to fill the empty space and reveal himself? I don't know, I know nothing about it. I think I know only that culture has bowed out.

9.

Franz Werfel spent the first third of his life in Prague, the second third in Vienna, and the last third as an emigrant, first in France, then in America-there you have a typically Central European biography. In 1937 he was in Paris with his wife, the famous Alma, Mahler's widow; he'd been invited there by the Organization for Intellectual Cooperation within the League of Nations to a conference on "The Future of Literature." During the conference Werfel took a stand not only against Hitlerism but also against the totalitarian threat in general, the ideological and journalistic mindlessness of our times that was on the verge of destroying culture. He ended his speech with a proposal that he thought might arrest this demonic process: to found a World Academy of Poets and Thinkers (Weltakademie der Dichter und Denker). In no circumstance should the members be named by their states. The selection of members should be dependent only on the value of their work. The number of members, made up of the greatest writers in the world, should be between twenty-four and forty. The task of this academy, free of politics and propaganda, would be to "confront the politicization and barbarization of the world."

Not only was this proposal rejected, it was openly ridiculed. Of course, it was naive. Terribly naive. In a world absolutely politicized, in which artists and thinkers were already irremediably "committed," already politically engage, how could such an independent academy possibly be created? Wouldn't it have the rather comic aspect of an assembly of noble souls?

However, this naive proposal strikes me as moving, because it reveals the desperate need to find once again a moral authority in a world stripped of values. It reveals the anguished desire to hear the inaudible voice of culture, the voice of the Dichter und Denker. [13]

This story is mixed up in my mind with the memory of a morning when the police, after making a mess of the apartment of one of my friends, a famous Czech philosopher, confiscated a thousand pages of his philosophic manuscript. Shortly after we were walking through the streets of Prague. We walked down from the Castle hill, where he lived, toward

the peninsula of Kampa; we crossed the Manes Bridge. He was trying to make a joke of it all: how were the police going to decipher his philosophical lingo, which was rather hermetic?

But no joke could soothe his anguish, could make up for the loss of ten years' work that this manuscript represented-for he did not have another copy.

We talked about the possibility of sending an open letter abroad in order to turn this confiscation into an international scandal. It was perfectly clear to us that he shouldn't address the letter to an institution or a statesman but only to some figure above politics, someone who stood for an unquestionable moral value, someone universally acknowledged in Europe. In other words, a great cultural figure. But who was this person?

Suddenly we understood that this figure did not exist. To be sure, there were great painters, playwrights, and musicians, but they no longer held a privileged place in society as moral authorities that Europe would acknowledge as its spiritual representatives. Culture no longer existed as a realm in which supreme values were enacted.

We walked toward the square in the old city near which I was then living, and we felt an immense loneliness, a void, the void in the European space from which culture was slowly withdrawing.[14]

10.

The last direct personal experience of the West that Central European countries remember is the period from 1918 to 1938. Their picture of the West, then, is of the West in the past, of a West in which culture had not yet entirely bowed out.

With this in mind, I want to stress a significant circumstance: the Central European revolts were not nourished by the newspapers, radio, or television-that is, by the "media." They were prepared, shaped, realized by novels, poetry, theater, cinema, historiography, literary reviews, popular comedy and cabaret, philosophical discussions-that is, by culture.[15] The mass media-which, for the French and Americans, are indistinguishable from whatever the West today is meant to be-played no part in these revolts (since the press and television were completely under state control).

That's why, when the Russians occupied Czechoslovakia, they did everything possible to destroy Czech culture.[16] This destruction had three meanings: first, it destroyed the center of the opposition; second, it undermined the identity of the nation, enabling it to be more easily swallowed up by Russian civilization; third, it put a violent end to the modern era, the era in which culture still represented the realization of supreme values.

This third consequence seems to me the most important. In effect, totalitarian Russian civilization is the radical negation of the modern West, the West created four centuries ago at the dawn of the modern era: the era founded on the authority of the thinking, doubting individual, and on an artistic creation that expressed his uniqueness. The Russian invasion has thrown Czechoslovakia into a "postcultural" era and left it defenseless and naked before the Russian army and the omnipresent state television.

While still shaken by this triply tragic event which the invasion of Prague represented, I arrived in France and tried to explain to French friends the massacre of culture that had taken place after the invasion: "Try to imagine! All of the literary and cultural reviews were liquidated! Every one, without exception! That never happened before in Czech history, not even under the Nazi occupation during the war."

Then my friends would look at me indulgently with an embarrassment that I understood only later. When all the reviews in Czechoslovakia were liquidated, the entire nation knew it, and was in a state of anguish because of the immense impact of the event.[17] If all the reviews in France or England disappeared, no one would notice it, not even their editors. In Paris, even in a completely cultivated milieu, during dinner parties people discuss television programs, not reviews. For culture has already bowed out. Its disappearance, which we experienced in Prague as a catastrophe, a shock, a tragedy, is perceived in Paris as something banal and insignificant, scarcely visible, a non-event.

11.

After the destruction of the Austrian empire, Central Europe lost its ramparts. Didn't it lose its soul after Auschwitz, which swept the Jewish nation off its map? And after having been torn away from Europe in 1945, does Central Europe still exist?

Yes, its creativity and its revolts suggest that it has "not yet perished." But if to live means to exist in the eyes of those we love, then Central Europe no longer exists. More precisely: in the eyes of its beloved Europe, Central Europe is just a part of the Soviet empire and nothing more, nothing more.

And why should this surprise us? By virtue of its political system, Central Europe is the East; by virtue of its cultural history, it is the West. But since Europe itself is in the process of losing its own cultural identity, it perceives in Central Europe nothing but a political regime; put another way, it sees in Central Europe only Eastern Europe.

Central Europe, therefore, should fight not only against its big oppressive neighbor but also against the subtle, relentless pressure of time, which is leaving the era of culture in its

wake. That's why in Central European revolts there is something conservative, nearly anachronistic: they are desperately trying to restore the past, the past of culture, the past of the modern era. It is only in that period, only in a world that maintains a cultural dimension, that Central Europe can still defend its identity, still be seen for what it is.

The real tragedy for Central Europe, then, is not Russia but Europe: this Europe that represented a value so great that the director of the Hungarian News Agency was ready to die for it, and for which he did indeed die. Behind the iron curtain, he did not suspect that the times had changed and that in Europe itself Europe was no longer experienced as a value. He did not suspect that the sentence he was sending by telex beyond the borders of his flat country would seem outmoded and would not be understood.

NOTES

[1] The responsibility of Central European communists who, after the war, did so much to set up totalitarian regimes in their countries is enormous. But they would never have succeeded without the initiative, the violent pressure, and the international power of Russia. Just after the victory, Central European communists understood that not they but the USSR was the master of their countries; from that point began the slow decomposition of Central European regimes and parties.

[2] For the outside observer this paradox is hard to understand; the period after 1945 is at once the most tragic for Central Europe and also one of the greatest in its cultural history. Whether written in exile (Gombrowicz, Milosz), or taking the form of clandestine creative activity (in Czechoslovakia after 1968), or tolerated by the authorities under the pressure of public opinion-no matter under which of these circumstances-the films, the novels, the plays and works of philosophy born in Central Europe during this period often reach the summits of European culture.

[3] One of the great European nations (there are nearly forty million Ukrainians) is slowly disappearing. And this enormous, almost unbelievable event is occurring without the world realizing it.

[4] Leszek Kolakowski writes (Zeszyty literacke, no. 2, Paris, 1983): "Although I believe, as does Solzhenitsyn, that the Soviet system has surpassed Czarism in its oppressive character... I will not go so far as to idealize the system against which my ancestors fought under terrible conditions and under which they died or were tortured or suffered humiliations.. I believe that Solzhenitsyn has a tendency to idealize Czarism, a tendency that neither I nor, I'm sure, any other Pole can accept."

[5] The most beautiful union between Russia and the West is the work of Stravinsky, which summarizes the whole thousand-year history of Western music and at the same time remains in its musical imagination deeply Russian. Another excellent marriage was celebrated in Central Europe in two magnificient operas of that great Russophile, Leos Janacek: one of them based on Ostrovski (Katya Kabanova, 1921), and the other, which I admire immensely, based on Dostoevsky (The House of the Dead, 1928). But it is symptomatic that not only have these operas never been staged in Russia, but their very existence is unknown there. Communist Russia repudiates misalliances with the West.

[6] Czeslaw Milosz's books The Captive Mind (1953) and Native Realm (1959) are basic: the first close analyses that are not Manichaean toward Russian communism and its Drang nach West.

[7] The word "central" contains a danger: it evokes the idea of a bridge between Russia and the West. T.G. Masaryk, the founding president of Czechoslovakia, had already spoken of this idea by 1895: "It's often said that Czechs have as our mission to serve as a mediator between the West and the East. This idea is meaningless. The Czechs are not next to the East (they are surrounded by Germans and Poles, that is, the West), but also there is no need whatsoever for a mediator. The Russians have always had much closer and more direct contacts with the Germans and the French than with us, and everything the Western nations have learned about the Russians they have learned directly, without mediators."

[8] There is an amusing little book named How to be an Alien in which the author, in a chapter titled "Soul and Understatement," speaks of the Slavic soul: "The worst kind of soul is the great Slav soul. People who suffer from it are usually very deep thinkers. They may say things like this: 'Sometimes I am so merry and sometimes I am so sad. Can you explain why?' (You cannot, do not try.) Or they may say: 'I am so mysterious.. I sometimes wish I were somewhere else than where I am.' Or 'When I am alone in a forest at night and jump from one tree

to another, I often think that life is so strange."' Who would dare to make fun of the great Slavic soul? Of course the author is George Mikes, of Hungarian origin. Only in Central Europe does the Slavic soul appear ridiculous.
[9] Structuralist thinking started toward the end of the 1920s in the Prague Linguistic Circle.
It was made up of Czech, Russian, German, and Polish scholars. During the 1930s, in this very cosmopolitan environment, Mukarovsky worked out his structuralist aesthetics. Prague structuralism was organically rooted in Czech formalism of the nineteenth century. (Formalist tendencies were stronger in Central Europe than elsewhere, in my opinion, thanks to the dominant position of music and, therefore, of musicology, which is "formalist" by its very nature.) Inspired by recent developments in Russian formalism, Mukarovsky went beyond its onesided nature. The structuralists were the allies of Prague avant-garde poets and painters (thereby anticipating a similar alliance that was created in France thirty years later). Through their influence the structuralists protected avant-garde art against the narrowly ideological interpretation that has dogged modern art everywhere.
[10] The problem of Central European culture is examined in a very important periodical published by the University of Michigan: Cross Currents: A Yearbook of Central European Culture.
[11] With this constellation of Central European writers, with Kafka, Hasek, Broch, and Musil, a new post-Proustian, post-Joycean aesthetic of the novel, it seems to me, arises in Europe. Broch is the one I personally care for the most. It's high time this Viennese novelist, one of the greatest of this century, were rediscovered.
[12] If journalism at one time seemed to be an appendix to culture, today, by contrast, culture finds itself at the mercy of journalism; it is part of a world dominated by journalism. The mass media decide who will be known and to what degree and according to which interpretation. The writer no longer addresses the public directly; he must communicate with it through the semi-transparent barrier of the mass media.
[13] Werfel's speech was not at all naive and it has not lost its relevance. It reminds me of another speech, one that Robert Musil read in 1935 to the Congress for the Defense of Culture in Paris. Like Werfel, Musil saw a danger not only in fascism but also in communism. The defense of culture for him did not mean the commitment of culture to a political struggle (as everyone else thought at the time) but on the contrary it meant the protection of culture from the mindlessness of politicization. Both writers realized that in the modern world of technology and mass media, the prospects for culture were not bright. Musil's and Werfel's opinions were very coolly received in Paris. However, in all the political and cultural discussions I hear around me, I would have almost nothing to add to what they have said, and I feel, in such moments, very close to them-I feel, in those moments, irreparably Central European.
[14] At last, after hesitating, he sent the letter after all-to Jean-Paul Sartre. Yes, he was the last great world cultural figure: on the other hand, he is the very person who, with his theory of "engagement," provided, in my opinion, the theoretical basis for the abdication of culture as an autonomous force, particular and irreducible. Despite what he might have been, he did respond promptly to my friend's letter with a statement published in Le Monde. Without this intervention, I doubt whether the police would have finally returned (nearly a year later) the manuscript to the philosopher. On the day Sartre was buried, the memory of my Prague friend came back to my mind: now his letter would no longer find a recipient.
[15] By reviews I mean periodicals (monthly, fortnightly, or weekly) run not by journalists but by people of culture (writers, art critics, scholars, philosophers, musicians); they deal with cultural questions and comment on social events from the cultural point of view. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe and Russia, all of the important intellectual movements formed around such reviews. The German Romantic musicians clustered around the Neue Zeitschrift für Musik founded by Robert Schumann. Russian literature is unthinkable without such reviews as Sovremennik or Viesy, just as French literature depended on the Nouvelle Revue Fransaise or Les Temps Modernes. All of Viennese cultural activity was concentrated around Die Fackel directed by Karl Kraus. Gombrowicz's entire journal was published in the Polish review Kultura. Etc., etc. The disappearance of such reviews from Western public life or the fact that they have become completely marginal is, in my opinion, a sign that "culture is bowing out."
[16] Five hundred thousand people (especially intellectuals) were pushed out of their jobs.
One hundred twenty thousand emigrated. About two hundred Czech and Slovak writers have been forbidden to publish. Their books have been banned from every public library and their names have been erased from history textbooks. One hundred and fortyfive Czech historians have been fired. From a single faculty of the university in Prague, fifty teachers were dismissed. (At the darkest moment of the Austro-Hungarian empire, after the revolution of 1848, two Czech professors were driven out of the university-what a scandal at the time!) Every literary and cultural journal has been liquidated. The great Czech cinema; the great Czech theater no longer exist.
[17] The weekly publication Literarni noviny (Literary Journal) which had a circulation of 300,000 copies (in a land of ten million people), was produced by the Czech Writers' Union.
It was this publication that over the years led the way to the Prague Spring and was afterward a platform for it. It did not resemble such weeklies as Time which have spread throughout Europe and America. No, it was truly literary: in it could be found long art chronicles, analyses of books. The articles devoted to history, sociology,

and politics were not written by journalists but by writers, historians, and philosophers. I don't know of a single European weekly in our century that has played as important a historical role or played it as well. The circulation for Czech literary monthlies varied between ten thousand and forty thousand copies, and their level was remarkably high, in spite of censorship. In Poland reviews have a comparable importance; today there are hundreds of underground journals there.

By, Translated from the French by Edmund White

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http://www.euroculture.upol.cz/dokumenty/sylaby/Kundera_Tragedy_%2818%29.pdf