

Maciej Górný, *The Nation Should Come First. Marxism and Historiography in East Central Europe (Warsaw Studies in Contemporary History, vol. 1)*, Peter Lang Verlag, Frankfurt am Main/Bern etc. 2013, 302 pp., Hardcover, 57,95 €.

“Among the Czech political parties only the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, comprising workers irrespective of nationality, has always stood for the concept of the Slovaks being a separate nation bound by history and interests to close co-operation with a brotherly Czech nation. This is one of the reasons why the Communists so largely gained the confidence of the Slovak people”. These words were written not by a historian, but by a politician, the Sudeten German political émigré and communist deputy in the pre-war Czechoslovak parliament Gustav Beuer, in a book marking his return from wartime exile in London to Prague and then on to East Berlin in 1946.¹ Nonetheless, Beuer’s historically-grounded visions of and hopes for the ‘New Czechoslovakia’, and the way he chose to express them here, are closely related to the key themes addressed in Maciej Górný’s fascinating new comparative, four-way study of the relationship between national traditions and Marxist(-Leninist) historiographies in the post-1945 Czech, Slovak, Polish and East German contexts.

Marxism as an academic discipline, as Górný reminds us, had its roots in the late nineteenth-century ‘cult of science’.² It reached its apogee in the Soviet-controlled Eastern bloc of the 1960ies, when, in its official Leninist guise, it claimed to have caught up with and overtaken Western social science methodologies when it came to establishing general laws of historical development. In the history of historiography in East-Central Europe, it is often depicted as representing a sharp break with older national narratives, including those which might loosely be described as liberal or universalist in approach and those which looked back to early nineteenth-century Romanticism, with its stress on the uniqueness of eras and events, and cyclical ideas of nations rising, falling and being ‘reborn’. Yet according to Górný, for all their alleged subservience to Soviet (or Russian) traditions, Central European Marxist scholars of the 1950ies and 1960ies could not escape or detach themselves from the legacy of pre-1945 forms of historical writing, whether of the Romantic, Prussian, conservative, pan-Slav or liberal-universalist variety. Instead, in his own words, they had to adjust to pre-existing traditions when constructing their own nationally-distinct “historical narratives, rhetoric, style, [and] strategies of argumentation” (p. 19).

The power of different national traditions can be seen in the first instance in the varying length of time it took to recruit and train a core of Marxist professors who could establish communist domination of the history profession in universities and research institutes. Before 1945 very few, if any, Marxists had been appointed to senior academic positions in the countries under discussion. East Germany led the way in reversing this trend, but even here it took until the late 1950ies to fully marginalise non-Marxist or ‘bourgeois’ faculty members. In Czechoslovakia, academics joined the party in large numbers, but largely out of a desire to conform rather than from inner conviction. In Poland, meanwhile, communists were thin on the ground in the universities even after 1956, and most professors remained studiously aloof from the ruling Polish United Workers’ Party PZPR. The result was a profession “led by ‘bourgeois’ historians” who were “forced to endlessly negotiate with the authorities” (p. 39). However, – as the author acknowledges – these findings are not especially surprising and largely confirm

¹ *Gustav Beuer, New Czechoslovakia and her Historical Background*, London 1947, p. 61.

² On the legacy and significance of the nineteenth-century ‘Wissenschaftskult’ see also *Axel Fair-Schulz, Loyal Subversion: East Germany and its Bildungsbürgerlich Marxist Intellectuals*, Berlin 2009, p. 98.

conclusions reached by John Connelly in an earlier comparative study of universities in the 1940ies and 1950ies.³

More original is Górný's discussion of a second dimension in the relationship between national tradition and the establishment of Marxist history writing, namely the production of new textbooks for use in schools and universities. Such collectively-written works were supposed to challenge 'bourgeois' ways of thinking by offering a superior account of the past that was "national in form, socialist in content" (p. 33). Again, these textbooks took much longer than expected to come to fruition and experienced numerous and diverse stumbling blocks along the way. One problem was how to navigate the constant shifts in ideological direction, from notions of 'people's democracies' and 'national roads to socialism' in the immediate post-war period, through Stalinism and intense pressure to conform to the Soviet model in the late 1940ies and early 1950ies, to de-Stalinisation after 1953 – the latter process occurring more slowly in Czechoslovakia and the GDR than in Poland. In Slovakia, for instance, the August 1944 National Uprising against the collaborationist Tito regime formed an important part of the national story in the immediate post-war years. It was then recast in a very negative light during the 1950ies, when several senior Slovak party functionaries, including the future party general secretary Gustáv Husák, were imprisoned for 'rightist-nationalist leanings', only for it to be reassessed yet again and 'returned to official memory' against the background of the 'Slovak Spring' and belated condemnation of the Stalinist 'cult of personality' from 1963 on (pp. 44f.).

Another problem for textbook writers was connected to questions of periodisation. Should dates and periods of *national* significance be given precedence over events deemed to be critical junctures in world history and in particular the history of socialism? The GDR historian Fritz Klein, for example, who was asked to contribute a volume on Imperial Germany for the textbook series used in East German universities, was forced to revise his original manuscript in 1961 so that his account finished in 1917 (outbreak of the October revolution in Russia) rather than 1918 (abdication of the German Kaiser and end of the First World War). When he rather cheekily asked officials from the scientific department of the SED Central Committee whether a Marxist history of the Eskimos would also have to acknowledge October 1917 as a great turning point, he was told in all seriousness that the answer was yes (pp. 87f.). In Poland, on the other hand, where Sovietisation had a much smaller impact on academic life, historians had more or less returned to national forms of periodisation by the late 1950ies. In spite of this, or maybe partly because of it, the Polish textbook was never finished. Marxist scholars in Czechoslovakia were caught in the middle, having to choose between 1917 (the most significant year in communist history) and 1918 (quite literally a foundational year in Czechoslovak national history, yet also a year of defeat for prospects of proletarian revolution in Central Europe).

Finally, textbook production could also be delayed by intense personal rivalries between Marxist academics which sometimes took the form of disputes over the 'correct' stance to take on particular aspects of national history. Fritz Klein's former PhD supervisor, Alfred Meusel, thus famously clashed with Ernst Engelberg in the 1950ies over the interpretation of Bismarck's place in German history, with Engelberg at this point taking a markedly critical line, in contrast to the position he adopted in the 1980ies.⁴ Similar, although by no means identical, cases could also be found in the Czech, Slovak and Polish contexts.

Moving away from textbooks to the writing of history more generally, Marxist academics had to address the issue of how and where to locate 'progressive traditions' in the national narrative, pointing to the final – and inevitable – victory of socialism. One obvious solution was to link the national question with the social question, and thereby equate demands for national liberation from foreign or domestic tyranny with the historical struggles of ordinary people (workers and peasants) for social justice and freedom from economic exploitation. The problem then was how to explain the numerous set-

³ John Connelly, *Captive University. The Sovietization of East German, Czech, and Polish Higher Education, 1945–1956*, Chapel Hill/London 2000.

⁴ Engelberg's largely positive treatment of the Iron Chancellor in his two volume biography: *Ernst Engelberg, Bismarck: Urpreuße und Reichsgründer*, Berlin 1985; and *idem, Bismarck: Das Reich in der Mitte*, Berlin 1990, cemented his reputation in the West as one of the best-known and influential East German scholars but also pointed to a significant change in his views since the 1950s and 1960s.

backs and defeats for 'democratic forces' which littered the past without falling into the trap of presenting national history before 1945 as a record of constant misery and thwarted revolutionary promise. Thus the 1848 revolutions failed when the indigenous urban bourgeoisie sided with the defenders of the old feudal-militarist order against the will of the masses. Likewise, any socialist elements in the 1918 revolutions in Central Europe were swiftly crushed, for example when the leaders of the Czech and Polish independence movements, Tomáš Masaryk and Józef Piłsudski, put their trust in reactionary, 'bourgeois' France instead of opting for the more 'popular' and socially more 'advanced' model of national liberation pioneered by Lenin in Russia. Such events were explicable to Marxists via the method of dialectical materialism, but they also undermined the sense of a heroic or progressive path to nationhood, and had the potential to tempt academics into more romantic, traditional or statist views of the emergence of national consciousness.

Admittedly, East German Marxists had the least cause, and the least inclination, to dally with such alternative ways of writing national histories. Instead, both 1848 (the publication by Marx and Engels of the Communist Manifesto) and 1918/19 (the foundation of the KPD) could be presented in the 1960ies in positive terms as landmark events on the German road to socialism, even if the revolutions during these years failed – in contrast to 1789 in France and 1917 in Russia. In this narrative, the theologian Martin Luther, the secular moderniser and conqueror of German-speaking Central Europe Napoleon Bonaparte, representatives of the nineteenth-century 'bourgeoisie' (including the Prussian Junker Bismarck) and even Social Democrats such as Friedrich Ebert (committed supporter of Imperial Germany's involvement in the First World War and first President of the Weimar Republic) were all easily cast aside as 'enemies of socialism' and 'counter-revolutionaries'. Czech Marxists, on the other hand, found it harder to jettison previously revered 'fathers of the nation', such as the religious reformer Jan Hus, the historian František Palacký and the philosopher-statesman Masaryk, even though these individuals were difficult to integrate into a socialist narrative of national history. At the same time, they often chose to ignore some of the more proletarian or radical 'competing traditions', especially those linked with 'German' peasant revolt and labour protest in the Bohemian lands. Engels was of course less serviceable in this respect than he was to the East Germans, given his well-known and all too 'severe judgment of the Czech national movement' in 1848/49 (p. 240).

In Poland, there was no agreement at all about what was and was not progressive in the national past, apart from the unanimous enthusiasm shown for the incorporation of the Western territories 'recovered' from Germany in 1945. In Slovakia, meanwhile, consensus was only possible during a brief moment in the 1960ies when, criticism of both the 1848/49 and 1956 Hungarian revolutions as 'reactionary' enabled a short-lived meeting of minds between those who defined the Slovak nation territorially (and therefore as part of Hungarian history before 1918) and those who defined it in terms of language, ethnicity and culture (and therefore as radically separate from Hungarian history). Yet, if Slovak 'progressive traditions' were now delineated from instances of Hungarian elitism and 'reaction', some of the more nationally-minded Slovak scholars continued to place equal stress on the differences between the Czech and Slovak national pasts, deliberately choosing to down play the elements they had in common or at least questioning what was held to be the 'one-sided' repression of the Slovak national tradition during the Stalinist era (p. 245). All of this helps to explain why even party card-carrying Marxist intellectuals in Czechoslovakia and Poland were less firmly attached to the communist state and its deep-rooted sense of historic destiny than their counterparts in the GDR, as witnessed by events in 1968 and 1976–81, and again in 1989.

The final part of Górný's book examines Marxist interpretations of and recourse to pre-1945 traditions and innovations in (East-)Central European historiography, particularly in regard to how to write scientifically-valid histories of the nation or the state. These conceptual and methodological borrowings, he suggests, can help us to understand why, at the international historians' congress in Vienna in 1965, which took place in a far less tense political atmosphere than the previous conference in Stockholm in 1960, historians from East and West were able to find a common framework of understanding. "Scholars from the West", he writes in what is probably the most important passage in the book, were "surprised to see that they were dealing with actual historians and not Party functionaries" (p. 43). It is indeed precisely by taking note of these East-West contacts and encounters that we can see the shortcomings of approaches which treat Soviet and East-Central European Marxist historiographies

in the Cold War era as a radically separate and exclusive 'other', following entirely different rules and traditions to Western historiography. In fact, the two competing sides were linked by a common European past, even if they did not always know or acknowledge it.

Yet for all his efforts to uncover diverse patterns of "continuity in historical thought" (p. 29) between East and West and between the pre-communist and communist eras, Górný misses what is perhaps the most important continuity of all: the continuity between the Marxism of Communist party intellectuals during the inter-war period and the Marxist-Leninist history writing of the 1950ies and 1960ies. For instance, when the East German labour historian Jürgen Kuczynski argued in 1956 that the nineteenth-century conservative scholar Leopold von Ranke had, through his establishment of new scientific standards, made an important step towards "uncovering [...] the real past", and then continued to assert this position against an avalanche of internal party criticism in 1957/58, he did so because he was convinced that he was defending the correct Marxist-Leninist interpretation, not because he was "tied to existing traditions of historical thinking". His critics in turn accused him of being a "revisionist", not a "nationalist" (pp. 247 and 260).

If scholars in Czechoslovakia and Poland had greater respect for the importance of national tradition above party and ideology, this says more about the ability of communist regimes to fit their scientific policies to the needs and peculiarities of particular East-Central European countries than it does about the direct influence of pre-1945 or nineteenth-century historiographical trends. Even during the Stalinist period, and certainly before and after this, Marxist historians had some flexibility to work within their own national contexts. Not surprisingly, there is evidence for a persistence of 'national paradigms' and even traces of 'old nationalist myths' in academic discourses on history through to the 1960ies and beyond, as communist regimes sought to underpin their legitimacy.⁵ Indeed, Stefan Berger, among others, has justifiably criticised East European Marxists of the 1960ies for their largely unquestioning acceptance of such traits. Górný adds to this that "assessments of particular national heroes, uprisings, national movements, and so forth, could change without shifting the foundations and mechanisms of Marxist historiography" (p. 261). However, this does not mean that Marxist-Leninist historiography itself was always deliberately or inherently prone to putting the nation *first*, as his title suggests. At best his argument works for particular, disconnected and rather atypical moments in the late 1950ies and 1960ies, but not for the communist era in general.

Overall, then, this book contains some very interesting material and offers much food for thought, especially on the challenges faced by communist historians in producing new textbooks in the first two decades after the Second World War. However, the case for continuities in or Marxist 'absorptions' of traditional national narratives across the rupture of 1945 is a lot less compelling than the author claims. Newness was the hallmark of historical writing in the Soviet bloc after 1945. At the same time, divided but inter-linked experiences of the Cold War were just as important as cultural influences stemming from a real or imagined common past when it came to determining patterns of communication and non-communication between Central European historians on either side of the Iron Curtain.

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⁵ See *Stefan Berger*, National Paradigm and Legitimacy: Uses of Academic History Writing in the 1960s, in: *Patrick Major/Jonathan Osmond* (eds.), *The Workers' and Peasants' State. Communism and Society in East Germany under Ulbricht, 1945–71*, Manchester 2002, pp. 244–261 (here: pp. 255f.).