

## MUNDUS NOVUS

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When *Nationalities Papers* was founded in 1972, it was in the context of a bipolar world. At the time two impressions of the Soviet-American global hegemony prevailed: 1) that the international community enjoyed a measure of stability, thanks to the US's and USSR's tacit acceptance of their respective spheres of influence; and 2) that the shared supremacy of the two super-powers would remain a constant, lasting well into the twenty-first century (Andrei Amalrik's provocative "Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?" notwithstanding). Fundamental change seemed unlikely.

But, as usual, Clio had her proverbial last laugh. Thirteen years later, in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev unwittingly allowed the Soviet Union to unravel, with his twin reform policy of *perestroika* and *glasnost'*. The rest has become history. What George Bush naïvely welcomed in 1991 as the start of a "New World Order" has, instead, metamorphosed into a messy and often tragically bloody *disorder* in both Eastern Europe and in the ex-Soviet successor states. The relatively peaceful collapse of the Soviet empire and of the Soviet Union, from East Germany to the Pacific, along with the suicidally violent dismembering of Yugoslavia, has destabilized a vast territory in which ethno-politics has resurfaced, often with a brutal vengeance. From Central Europe to Central Asia, from Czechia to Tajikistan, ethno-minority-related conflicts tear apart societies, governments, and states. Twenty years later, as *Nationalities Papers* enters its third decade, basic change is the prevailing reality.

For much too long, the scholarly world has been mesmerized by the drama of day-to-day events in the wake of the great *Raspad*, the revolutionary collapse of Soviet Communism. Only slowly have attempts been made to breathe meaning into the phenomenon of mass political disintegration that occurred in the USSR in 1991, in Czechoslovakia in 1992, and continues with unparalleled ferocity in the former Yugoslavia, tears apart Caucasia, threatens many parts of Central Asia, and is now making ominous rumblings in the Russian Federation. The imminent future suggests still more global dislocation rather than any progress towards any "new world order." If the Czechs and Slovaks can split apart, so may bi-ethnic Kazakhstan; if Yugoslavia can fragment, so can (as it seems to at the time of writing) Georgia; if Armenia and Azerbaijan can fall into mutually self-defeating chronic undeclared war over Nagorno-Karabakh, so can Serbia and Albania over Kosovo, or Serbia and Bulgaria (and Greece) over Macedonia; if East Germany can be high-handedly appended to West Germany, so, in time, may Moldova by Romania; and, above all, if the USSR can disintegrate into fifteen independent unequally viable republics, who is to say that the

“core empire,” the Russian Federation, might not eventually fall victim to its own crisis at the center and to regional centrifugal forces emanating from eighty-eight administrative units straining for autonomy and independence? The process of change has become the new constant.

The less than brave new world that is arising Phoenix-like out of the rubble of the dismantled Berlin Wall in 1989 has generated considerable confusion and poses major challenges of conceptualization. Scholars and policy-makers alike are confronted with an unprecedented tempo of change that need both description, explanation, and theoretical analysis to help the uninitiated comprehend the tectonic changes set off by the retreat of Muscovite power.

How best analogically to characterize the 1985–1992 era in Eastern Europe and beyond? What frame of reference is more applicable in order to come to grips with the watershed developments presently shaking beneath Europe and Eurasia? Is 1985 and beyond comparable to 1944–48, or 1917–21, or 1848–52? or even 1789–1815? Some have reached back to 1618–1648 in search of comparable models of international rearrangements of power.

One thing is clear, aspects of the past—unfinished agenda (none more so than unresolved ethnic aspirations and interethnic conflicts)—have surfaced with renewed and often lethal vigor. Former ethnic minorities have become national majorities (such as the Estonians and Slovenians), or powerful pluralities (such as the Kazakhs); the former homogeneous ethnic Russian majority is now a number of far-strewn of minorities: large (in Ukraine), sizeable (in Latvia), or small but prominent (as in Estonia). Formerly relatively small ethnic minorities (such as the Hungarians in Czechoslovakia), have become far larger proportionately in the context of an independent Slovakia. Muslims have been transformed, *force majeure*, increasingly into strategically significant minorities in Bosnia, Bulgaria, and Macedonia, while Gypsies (for decades an officially invisible but fast-growing minority) have become social and political issues from the Czech Republic to Ukraine. And everywhere, the perennial “Jewish Question” is re-emerging hydra-headed in each post-communist country, once again serving as a major litmus test of *bona fide* democratization, of reliable transitional change towards pluralistic, open liberal societies.

Ironically, or better, as should have been expected, European history did not end with the fall of Communism. On the contrary, as some have argued, history has actually returned to Eastern Europe after decades of denial. The Soviet Socialist experiments in and outside the USSR were unnatural, exclusively future oriented, increasingly lacking substantive grassroot popular support. For decades, ethno-history lay dormant, frozen, until its startling resurrection and liberation from the autocratic fetters of Marxist-Leninist anti-ethnic ideology and politics. Suddenly, a new dynamic—an admixture of democratic, xenophobic, monoethnic, pluralistic, capitalistic, anti-communist, neo-socialist, and secessionist/irredentist ethno-nationalism, a veritable witches’ brew—drives the disunited parts of the former Soviet *ancien regime*, giving birth to a Europe and Eurasia whose outlines are by no means clear—other than to allow

one to say to these progeny of change, “Welcome to Mundus Novus!” All expected a rose garden, but most are presently sitting on thorns and a long way from harvesting the blossom.

*Nationalities Papers* is pleased to celebrate its twentieth anniversary with a special volume expressly devoted to the problematics of this “New World” challenging our community of scholars. It is hoped that the insights of the several contributors will provide a measure of clarification to much that would otherwise remain obscure. The readers should take note that all essays were written during 1992 and reflect the “new” world at that point. In the interim, the stream of change has not ceased to flow; nevertheless, the bulk of the observations retain their validity and relevance despite the passing of a year of additional turmoil.