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Is Berlin in Central Europe?

Finding the Centre of Europe is hard enough – but defining the limits of this centre is almost impossible. The case has even been made for Milano and Vilnius as part of Central Europe, at the time when these great cities were true meeting points between East and West. So why not Berlin? What we need to ask is not so much where as when and how. If Central Europe is really the middle swathe of our continent that has been tragically battered by successive empires, than how can the capital of more than one empire be part of it? Yet Berlin was also divided between occupying forces of East and West for half of the last century.

If Central Europe is Slavonic, how can a Germanic city be part of it? Yet German was the native language of so many citizens in Breslau-Wrocław, or even Königsberg-Królewiec-Kaliningrad, the language that Franz Kafka wrote in. And where do the Magyars fit in? The only thing we can say with any degree of certainty about the centre is that it is not the edge. No clear borders, many identities crossing and flowing into each other. At its best, the centre acts as a bridge between different peripheries. The question is when this ever was or can be true of Berlin.

North and South

In the early modern period, the concepts of East and West in Europe did not yet exist. Europeans preferred to divide their continent into North (where Russia, Poland-Lithuania and Sweden were fighting for control of the Baltic) and South (where the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires rivalled with France around the Mediterranean). The division was not a simple one of Protestant North and Roman Catholic South. Then as now there was much mixing in the centre – away from the seacoast – but the lines were drawn in a different direction.

Only in the seventeenth century did Berlin gain importance as the capital of Brandenburg-Prussia. After the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), Berlin grew rapidly, and by 1800 it was the second largest city in the Holy Roman Empire, surpassed only by Wien.

Windows of Enlightenment

In the age when Berlin was expanding, St Petersburg was built as an imperial "window on the West". Just because it connected East and West however, that does not mean that it was in the centre.

Can we not say the same for Berlin? Like Petersburg, it flowered in the age of what some still call "enlightened absolutism". This was the time when the rational philosophy of the eighteenth century was used by rulers to further the strong arm of government. Exemplifying this pragmatism, Berlin's growth was based on the influx of the Dutch, Huguenots and Jews, who were offered religious toleration in return for furthering the economic prosperity of the city. The Prussian kings and queens patronised the great minds of the age, including LEIBNIZ, WOLFF and PUFENDORF.[1]

Berlin was the capital of the Prussian State throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was the Prussian Prime Minister, Otto VON BISMARCK, who led the drive towards a unified Germany, and, in 1871, the Prussian King was crowned Kaiser Wilhelm I. Did this affirm Berlin's true role as a Western "Window on the East" from which another Empire could expand into the centre?

Partition

This view of Berlin fits like a glove for many Central Europeans. One example is the Polish national story of suffering under partition between three empires ruled from Moskva, Wien and Berlin.

Poland's greatest romantic poets sought comfort in the doctrine of messianism, a term coined by philosopher Józef Maria HOENE-WROŃSKI after a personal revelation in 1803.[2] Juliusz SŁOWACKI expressed this clearly in his poetry; Poland, like the Messiah, had been crucified – partitioned – for the good of the world, and would rise again.

[1] JERSCH-WENZEL Stefi, *Zuwanderung als Entwicklungshilfe*; KÖNIG Detlef, *Frühaufklärung in Brandenburg-Preußen* both in WINDT Franziska et al. (eds.), *Preussen 1701: Eine europäische Geschichte II – Essays*. Berlin, 2001. 109–120, 148–155.

[2] Polska Akademia Nauk, *700 lat myśli polskiej tom V*. Warszawa, 1978, 108, 110.

A jednak nie wątpię, bo sie pora zbliża,
że to wielkie światło - na niebie zapali.
I Polski Ty, o Boże, nie odepniesz z krzyża,
Aż będziesz wiedział, że się jako trup nie zwali.[3]

(And yet I do not doubt, because the time is coming
When the great light will be lit in the heavens
And You, o Lord, will not force Poland down from the cross
Until you know that she will not collapse as a corpse.)

The romantic suffering view of Polish history remains the schoolbook one, despite the efforts of much later writers such as Witold GOMBROWICZ to challenge it. The protagonist of his *Transatlantyk* wishes "do diabła z ojcem i ojczyzną! Wypuść chłopaków z ojcowskiej klatki!" ("To hell with father and fatherland! Free the youths from their paternal cage!")[4]

This is just one suffering and partition story, in which Berlin played its part. Such stories come from other Central European nations; the Magyars were divided by the Austrians and Turks in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, for example. Could not Berlin tell the same story – it was after all partitioned between the Western allies and USSR for almost half a century?

Yet the whole of Germany was also divided into East and West during this period, and I would stop arguing that this made the German nation part of Central Europe. Surely that takes the centre too far West? And why did others move in to partition Germany and Berlin in the first place?

Totalitarianism – Berlin Voices

As in Warszawa, the royal castle in Berlin was razed to the ground in the Second World War. And, as in Warszawa, the wish to restore the castle was great. The Poles were organised enough to complete their castle a couple of decades ago. Yet the Germans still have the

[3] 'A jednak nie watpie…' in SŁOWACKI Juliusz, *Krąg pism mistycznych*. Wrocław, 1982.

[4] GOMBROWICZ Witold, *Transatlantyk (1951)*. Kraków, 1988. 60. The protagonist rejects the ideal of fighting for one's country, deciding not participate in World War II, and reacts against the émigré community in Argentina who are enslaved by romantic views of Poland, poetry and heroism.

Socialist Palace of the Republic, an unusable asbestos-filled skeleton of history, on the site of the old Prussian Schloß. There is no money to even tear this down, let alone to build an "historical" wedding cake in its place – the city is almost bankrupt.

Berlin has lurched in the twentieth century from being the heart of its National Socialist empire to being a divided satellite capital of another empire, the Soviet one. The traces of all these layers of imperial rule are visible at every turn in the city architecture today. Should the Berliners really remove one imperial palace to replace it with the copy of another? That depends on what the Berliners think of themselves. Do they feel part of Central Europe, is it their own identity? A woman and a man from Berlin might give us some answers.

The poet Mascha KALÉKO was born to a Russian father and an Austrian mother in Poland in 1907, and spent her school years and youth in Berlin – a child of the Empire, a child of the Centre of Europe? She published and was very popular throughout the 1930s, praised by the likes of Thomas MANN, a friend of Martin BUBER. As a Jew, she was forced to flee and left for New York in

1938, from where she went on to live in Jerusalem and die in Zürich. She came back to Berlin for readings – for the first time in 1956 – but never to live, she never settled anywhere.[5] She passed this homelessness on to her son:

Du hattest gerade deinen ersten Zahn,
Da setzten sie aufs Dach den Roten Hahn.
Der Schwarze Mann, die Bittre Medizin,
Sie hieß: Berlin.
Du lerntest wieder aufstehn, wenn man fällt.
Dein Kinderwagen rollte um die Welt.
Du sagtest Danke, Thank you und Merci
Du Sprachgenie…
Du, den ich liebte, lang bevor er war,
Du ferner Glanz aus einem Augenpaar,
Ich leg dies Buch in deine kleine Hand,
Du Emigrant.

When KALÉKO was young in the 1920s and 1930s, Berlin was an important cultural centre, arguably part of Central Europe, but as she grew up, and when her son was born, had Central Europe left Berlin? In later poems she notes how the Americans react to her Europeanness as "sentimental, hopelessly continental", and writes a Kaddish for the lost lives of her people in Poland. These are part of her past though. She has no reason to go back.[6]

Another citizen of Berlin, Stefan HEYM, made a similar journey to KALÉKO, emigrating to New York when Adolf HITLER came to power. After the war, however, he returned to the German Democratic Republic and became one of its star writers. Still, he came to understand the reasons why KALÉKO did not return to Berlin.

His novel *Die Architekten*, set in Berlin in 1956, was written in the 1960s but only published in 2000. It brings alive the reality under and after STALIN through the story of Arnold SUNDSTROM, chief archi-

[5] See BOGUCKA-KRENZ Katarzyna (ed.), *Poetki z Ciemności-Dichterinnen aus dem Dunkel*. Kraków, 1995, 76.

[6] *Einem kleinen Emigranten*, *Kaddisch, New Yorker Sonntagskantate* in KALÉKO Mascha, *Verse für Zeitgenossen*. Hamburg, 1980. 39, 46, 65.

tect of the new Berlin, and of his wife Julia. Julia does not know that Arnold denounced her parents to the Gulag, but when a ghost from the past returns, she begins to find out buried secrets. HEYM recreates wonderfully the deadening atmosphere in the East of the city.

The Russians are everywhere, the vodka flows, the West might as well not exist – or does it? Already in the second chapter, Julia is shocked to find that her colleagues are using architecture sketches from West Berlin as models for their own designs. And that these are rather better than what the rest of the collective can produce. These sketches from the other half of her city are the first crack in the façade that begins to fall all around her. East and West are still connected.

So when Berlin was partitioned, did it become truly Central European? Certainly the ties with Central European neighbours grew closer. A Central European who has much to say about the totalitarian empires of the twentieth century brings our picture of the city closer up to date. KERTÉSZ Imre studied in East Berlin in 1980, and recorded his impressions.

KERTÉSZ's East Berlin, "monströses Symbol des Absurden", is a stifled, deadened city where nobody smiles. It takes him days to work out what eerie sound accompanies him everywhere he goes – the rattling of ceremonial flagpoles in the wind. For KERTÉSZ, as for Julia, the West is clearly connected to the East in Berlin. At the Brandenburger Tor, the Westerners come in buses to look over the Wall. At Checkpoint Charlie, the traffic is heavy. And when he goes out to dinner with an Austrian and the woman from the Ministry of Culture, she will not leave him alone: "Überebende Juden haben für deutsche Frauen offenbar eine sexuelle Anziehungskraft." (Jewish survivors are clearly sexually attractive to German women.) The city's past is still very present.[7] It is a past that is deeply connected to the Centre of Europe, but not always on an equal footing. Berlin's relationship to Central Europe has been one of close cultural and political ties, but also one of dominance.

All of these temporary Berliners – indeed a real Berliner is in many ways a temporary one, coming from somewhere else and going to

[7] KERTÉSZ Imre, *Galeerentagebuch* (tr. SCHWAMM Kristin). Berlin, 2002. 95–103.

somewhere else but, for now, making this city their home – found in Berlin a place where East and West were still connected over the Wall. Did they find a Centre to unite these two halves?

Wiedervereinigung

In today's Berlin you have to look for the signs of a city divided between East and West. You do not have to search hard, however. Only the old East has trams – they were ripped out in favour of private cars in the old West. The city has three airports, three opera houses, three universities. On the Warschauer Brücke and Potsdamer Platz you can see the cracks which have not quite been painted over, yet, where the Wall used to run. East and West Berliners are united in their contempt for authority however. Forbid something, be it barbecuing in public parks or playing football in front of the Bundestag, and Berliners flock to do just that.

Westerners are pouring in. The universities are oversubscribed with Wessis, Americans, Brits and French who colonise the newly hip districts of former East Berlin with their art galleries and boutiques, replacing the coal stoves with central heating as they come. No surprise that the original East Berliners might feel ready to move.

So are the Easterners. If you do not hear English or French on the bus, it's Polish, Russian, Turkish. The original West Berliners' currywurst stands are being taken over by falafel and börek on every corner.

Perhaps the true Central Europeans in Berlin are the increasing number of Kurds – today's people without a polity, partitioned three ways between Turkey, Iran and Iraq, caught up in a "clash of civilisations" between the forces East and West whose power games deny them a state. So is Diyarbakir the new Central Europe? If so, why not Berlin?

In favour of Berlin today, it is a place where it is possible for East and West to meet each other on the neutral ground, in the mixture of tolerance and indifference that makes a true city. Against Berlin, although it is a meeting point, it is not always a mixing point. East and West – even the old East and West Berliners – can live side by side without communicating.

Is Central Europe too a place of tolerance mixed with indifference? Central European states have had their own expansionist tendencies, their own problems with minorities, at different points in their history. They are far from being the eternal martyrs that the romantic messianists would have us believe. So why exclude Berlin from their number?

The traces of history are everywhere, but perhaps Berlin has been reabsorbed into the West, as it became part of a unified Germany and joined the European Union. Does this then mean that the states which join the EU next year are automatically part of the Western club and the new Wall between East and West will be the EU's Eastern border? Many people think so.

Berlin has been in Central Europe and probably will be again, but not all the time. I hope I have raised enough questions to help you decide when – if ever – the city fulfils your criteria for what makes Central Europe. For me, the centre is a bridge, the place where the edges collide and identities mix. This happened for example in 1989, when Berlin was the focus of the world as the Wall came down. Pockets of this collision between East and West are still present in Berlin today, but as the new German capital it is well on the way to becoming a Western metropolis. Who knows how long it will remain so…

Suggested Reading

BOGUCKA-KRENZ Katarzyna (ed.), *Poetki z Ciemności-Dichterinnen aus dem Dunkel*. Kraków, 1995.

GOMBROWICZ Witold, *Transatlantyk (1951)*. Kraków, 1988.

HEYM Stefan, *Die Architekten (1960s)*. München, 2002.

KERTÉSZ Imre, *Galeerentagebuch* (tr. SCHWAMM Kristin). Berlin, 2002. KERTÉSZ Imre, *Gályanapló*. Budapest, 1992.

KALÉKO Mascha, *Verse für Zeitgenossen*. Hamburg, 1980.

SŁOWACKI Juliusz, *Krąg pism mistycznych*. Wrocław, 1982.

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