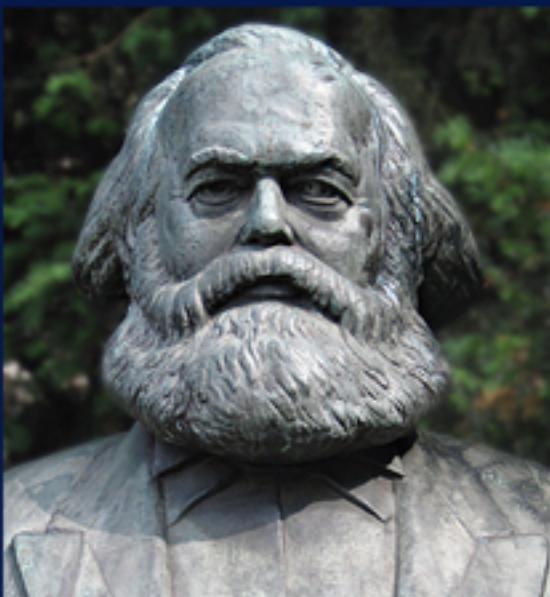


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# The Nation Should Come First

Marxism and Historiography  
in East Central Europe



# Introduction

## Writing Comparative Histories of Historiography

In her recently published, brilliant book about Romantic-era historiographies of Central and Eastern Europe, the Hungarian historian Monika Baár comes to the conclusion that the presumed differences between these historiographies and their supposed detachment from dominant Western European historiographies were not as compelling as had been heretofore believed. Similarities are so frequent, and so deeply ingrained, that “on closer inspection the historical narrative reveals the existence of a general template of national historiography in our era, which comprised a core story and numerous omnipresent tropes.”<sup>1</sup> Not only do national historiographies share similar narrative patterns – they also relate to the same myths and images. For example, one of the things they share is the belief in the uniqueness of their own story.

Romantic-era historiography, which in Central and Eastern Europe is associated with founding father figures or innovators who reframed the task of the historian, shaped our ways of thinking about the past. In time, Romantic narratives came to be criticised and opposed, but the voices rejecting the domination of national historiography by the Romantic idea can often be seen singing the same tune. While taking positions similar to the ones chosen by Romantic historians, the critics also employed similar arguments. At first, Marxism served as an inspiration for a research attitude opposed to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century modes of historical thinking. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it has inspired social scientists. Its influence in Central and Eastern Europe peaked in the 1960s. Polish and Hungarian historians especially enjoyed success in using their methodological backgrounds and local competencies in cooperative work with the foremost scholars of France or the United States. In general, the encouraging climate for comparative research in economic and social history of the region and beyond contributed to what may have been the most productive period in the modern history of Polish and Hungarian historiography. The more austere regimes in other Eastern bloc countries – such as the GDR or Czechoslovakia –

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1 Monika Baár, *Historians and Nationalism: East-Central Europe in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford 2010, 295.

made similar development decidedly harder to achieve, but even there one could find scholars who combined Marxist thought with an interest in comparative history and international cooperation.

Before this Marxism-inspired intellectual ferment began, each Eastern bloc country went through a more or less prolonged period of forcible, swift Sovietisation. Marxism ceased to be just one of the many options that could be embraced in one's methodology or worldview. Reframed as Marxism-Leninism, or historical materialism, it became the publicly endorsed doctrine that defined the boundaries of history, as well as science. This book discusses four Marxist-Leninist historiographies in three real-socialist countries: Poland, Czechoslovakia and the GDR. My attention will focus on the way these historiographies dealt with the tradition of national historiography. Approaching revolutionary manifestos and projected institutional or methodological changes with caution, I inquire how Czech, Slovak, Polish and East-German self-declared Marxist historians approached dominant national discourses about the past. To what lengths were they prepared to go in reinterpreting the Romantic framework in a Marxist vein (as described by Monika Baár)? And if the two were irreconcilable, were historians ready to leave tradition behind or subordinate Marxist terminology and a materialist philosophy of history to a traditional way of thinking about the past?

There is, then, at least one reason why a comparative analysis suits Marxist historiographies better than historiographies of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Here, the similarities are not limited to traits generally common to all Western historiographies. The correspondences, perhaps enforced, but nonetheless, real, also grew out of the region's existing political situation and the imposition of a singular methodology. This makes the dearth of actual comparative research on the Communist era even more unusual. The "singularity" of the GDR's historical narrative, which Matthias Middell observed at the turn of the millennium, often proves to have been made up of elements common to history writing in other Eastern Bloc countries as well.<sup>2</sup>

This attempt to partially fill the gap is based on a set of straightforward assumptions. Two of them seem to be of key importance in the context of my research. At the same time, they rather pointedly illustrate the problems faced by comparative history, bound up as they are with a specific practical example.

First, the comparison in question must not fail to take account of mutual influences, the interactions between different historiographies, as well as the influence of Soviet historiography on East Central European historians. Otherwise

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2 Matthias Middell, "Kulturtransfer und Historische Komparatistik – Thesen zu ihrem Verhältnis," *Comparativ* 10 (2000), 1, 30.

the image resulting from the comparison would amount to nothing more than a schematic juxtaposition. According to Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, this is one of the major dangers of comparative study. However, it can be averted if the comparative study is informed by knowledge gained from the study of cultural transfers. Werner and Zimmermann propose a *histoire croisée*, which „breaks with a one-dimensional perspective that simplifies and homogenizes, in favour of a multidimensional approach that acknowledges plurality and the complex configurations that result from it. Accordingly, entities and objects of research are not merely considered in relation to one another but also *through* one another, in terms of relationship, interactions and circulation.”<sup>3</sup> In relation to Marxist historiographies discussed in this book, this translates into the necessity not only to take mutual influences into account, but also to reflect on the relationships between these countries and other states beyond East Central Europe. The image of Slovak historiography – whether Marxist or not – is never complete if it does not reflect on its relationship to the work of Hungarian historians. A similar focus is necessary when studying the works from GDR historians, whose attitude toward West German historians and historical narratives is particularly relevant to the study of East German historiography. As I also believe, it is important to note that no transfer of ideology or interpretative framework culminates in a state of total domination or the formation of one historiography by another. This observation is particularly useful when considering the relationships between any one of the Eastern bloc historiographies and Soviet historical sciences. Even if one could never treat them as equal, to describe any one of these relationships in terms of unilateral domination would be fundamentally inaccurate. Middell’s idea of comparative history moving from bilateral toward multilateral perspectives finds an apt illustration in the comparative study of Marxist-Leninist historiographies.<sup>4</sup> By juxtaposing two examples “cleansed” of non-bilateral influences, not only would we produce a distorted image, we would also make it more difficult to develop a proper reading of the complex processes behind the adoption of intellectual currents, ideologies or even systems of science.

Second, I believe that a comparison should not be “rigid,” i.e., limited to an analysis of the way each historiography treats a specific, narrowly defined topic. Already in its heroic period during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, historiography was both an inspiration for the study of problems faced by the community and a source of answers to such problems – concerning questions of the community’s genealogy, its rightful territory, or characteristics of its collective psychology.

3 Michael Werner, Bénédicte Zimmermann, “Beyond Comparison: Histoire croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity,” *History and Theory* 45 (2006), 38.

4 Middell, “Kulturtransfer,” 39-40.

At the same time, historians gave substance to the fundamental myths undergirding these communities. As a rule, they aimed to make their compatriots happy rather than forcing them to critically rethink their own positions or self-evaluations. If we focus on the themes that recur throughout different national cultures, the myths that tell the same old story with the support of different details, then chronological turning points will prove to be of secondary importance. Instead of rigidly comparing Marxist interpretations of specific epochs, I begin my analysis by examining the role particular historical phenomena played in the collective memory as well as in the historiography of a given nation, which is important because historiography comprises both a part of that memory and a medium for its dissemination. I believe that this kind of functional comparison can yield many positive results, even if it often leads one to connect ostensibly unrelated facts. The reader of this book will easily notice that this functional comparison is used, for instance, to set the Czech and Slovak national revival against the Polish uprisings. The Medieval expansion of East German feudal lords or the battle of the Teutoburg Forest, that pitted Germanic barbarian tribes against the Roman legions, are seen simply as different examples of the same historiographical narrative. Looking for instances of social revolt against growing feudal oppression, Marxists from different countries of the Eastern bloc traversed national histories with apparent ease, building analogies between events as far apart as the Great Peasant Revolt and the activities of the Carpathian robbers. Such unusual juxtapositions grow out of Thomas Welskopp's Max Weber-inspired idea of fashioning comparative models that can prove useful in describing different circumstances.<sup>5</sup> The goal is not to come up with a universal schema, but rather – as Welskopp and Weber claim – to lend substance to an idea of how things would have developed had history taken a different route. A comparative study produces data about *potential* possibilities of historical development, which, while speculative, are still more realistic than pure speculation.

The history of historiography in general, and particularly the history of Marxist historiography, can benefit greatly from this kind of comparative study, or *histoire croisée*, and not only because new facts might be uncovered, relations between different countries highlighted, and mutual inspirations and borrowings underlined. In my opinion, however, the greatest premium which this kind of approach can provide us is the rare chance to take temporary leave of our own backyard and look at it from the outside, through the eyes of another. In this

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5 Thomas Welskopp, "Stolpersteine auf dem Königsweg. Methodenkritische Anmerkungen zum internationalen Vergleich in der Gesellschaftsgeschichte," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 35 (1995), 365-367.

light, what once was considered exceptional often proves extremely typical and schematic, that which seemed dangerously pathological becomes the grim norm, and that which looked quite obvious seems suddenly inexplicable. The comparative approach is therefore useful outside of comparative studies as well. Some of its tools appear to be indispensable if we are to advance any reliable historical claims that go beyond stating obvious facts.

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The circle of people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude for the help and inspiration they offered during my work on this book is very broad and continues to expand. To all those whom I thanked in the Polish (2007) and German (2011) editions, I would like to add the employees of my home institution, the Institute of History at the Polish Academy of Sciences, without whose aid this considerable undertaking would not have gained the necessary financial support. The translator, editor and publisher know how highly I value their involvement in our common work. Finally, at the risk of sounding ingratiating, I would like to thank the quite sizeable group of reviewers of previous editions of my book. The differences between the successive editions are to a significant extent due to their critical observations.