

# Discourses of Collective Identity in Central and Southeast Europe (1770-1945), Texts and Commentaries, Volume I

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*Discourses of Collective Identity in Central and Southeast Europe (1770-1945), Texts and Commentaries, Volume I: Late Enlightenment – Emergence of the Modern ‘National Idea’* is a collection of primary texts and mini-essays, the first volume in a series of four which are products of a collective endeavor. By bringing together the fundamental texts that contributed to and/or reflection upon the formation of narratives of national identity in Central and Southeast Europe (according to the working definition of the project these coincide more or less accurately with the territory of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires) and whose ideological function and appropriations mattered greatly (also when seen in a *longue durée* perspective), it aims, firstly, to challenge the self-centered and ‘isolationist’ historical narratives and educational canons prevalent in the region and, secondly, to create the possibility of an inter-textual reading of these cultures.

On the pages of these readers a framework is suggested that strives to combine two crucial aspects: the transformation of cultural patterns and the emergence of national ideologies and movements (p.9). In other words, this series of ‘Identity Readers,’ of which the first volume is under review here (the other three are *National Romanticism – The Formation of National Movements*, *Modernism – Creating Nation States* and *Anti-Modernism – Radical Revisions of Collective Identity*) presents “canons of identity building texts” (where identity building is not understood in an ontological sense, but is simply an operational tool of the project) with an unprecedented temporal and territorial scope, a large number of participants and it also has an interpretative aspect. On top of these, most of the texts included have not appeared in English before.

Through these aspects, this endeavor ought to significantly contribute to the fostering of discussion of the respective intellectual traditions in a comparative manner *through* tackling the core of the national discourse. In my view, it thereby shows a way to succeed at the difficult non-nationalist task of scholars. Namely, it avoids the typical pitfalls of anti-nationalism, which frequently prefers to denounce or ignore national traditions often at the cost of understanding and sensitively dealing with them, as well as those regionalists who (somewhat self-servingly) claim that structural similarities prevail over national differences. A relevant illustration might be that while the national traditions that are dealt with here often make claims to their uniqueness and incomparability, such claims also need to be reflected upon, historicized and compared, and not only discarded or generalized (in a denigrating and/or dismissive way) to the region as a whole.

Some words are due concerning the composition and organization of the reader: next to ‘mainstream’ and seemingly successful national discourses (approximately two-thirds of all the texts), the competing and/or suppressed attempts (texts that formulated alternative projects of collective identity or critically examined the contemporary mainstream) were also included. While cross-cultural links and shared experiences are investigated, the contributors also pay attention to plurality and specific characteristics. The organization of the material is neither nationally determined, nor is it strictly chronological, but is rather thematic.

This first volume titled *Late Enlightenment – Emergence of the Modern 'National Idea'* has four sections, "The Transformation of Symbolic Geography," "Cultural and Historiographical Narratives of Identity," "Creating an Enlightened National Public" and "Reform and Revolution: Formatting the Enlightened Polity," though admittedly texts potentially fitting into more than one of these is the rule rather than an exception. Prior to each of the forty-four excerpts in *Late Enlightenment – Emergence of the Modern 'National Idea'* there is basic information on the text and its author(s), and, crucially, under the heading of "Context," there is a short 'contextualization' and textual analysis with a focus on questions of ideological tendencies, historical influence and function in the respective canon. In short, on the pages of *Discourses of Collective Identity in Central and Southeast Europe (1770-1945)* the heterogeneity of the canons and the composite nature of national identity are presented through primary documents. Next to these forty-four excerpts, the book also includes two rather brief introductory texts by eminent experts, László Kontler and Paschalis M. Kitromilides.

It would be beyond the limits of this review to relate to all the forty-four texts in turn, so let me present a few short illustrations of what the reader can find on the pages of this book. There is Moisioudax's "Apology" (from 1780), a text that, among other things, conceptualizes two geographical entities, which at the time just started to emerge symbolically, namely 'Greece' and 'Europe,' (in its own primary context) innovatively referring to Europe in positive terms. There is Seliminski's "Letter to Georgi Zolotovitch" (from 1843) about the author of which it is stated that he was "decorated for his participation in the Greek independence movement and who used predominantly the Greek language in his writings, [but] was a most fervent critic of the hellenization of the Bulgarian school and church," since he believed, in a way consistently, that a Bulgarian 'Enlightenment' would only be possible in the 'mother tongue' (pp.183-4). Curiously, when Şinasi was envisioning a radically new, secularized and democratic Ottoman polity (in 1862), his portrayal of how it would be was heavily laden with religious connotations (pp.190-1). There is also Vasa's text (from 1879) reflecting the emergence of a non-religious Albanian identity, which can be viewed as a variation on the Ottomanist version of citizenship that was introduced by the Tanzimat.

Vujić's "Characteristics of the Serbian People" (from 1828) represent a complex mixture of culture geography (a typical Enlightenment genre) and Romantic 'ethno-psychology.' In contrast, von Sonnenfeld's "On the Love of the Fatherland" (from 1771, i.e. written half a century earlier), the first relevant Austrian contribution to the debate on patriotism, while propagating unification, centralization and the spread of education, conspicuously lacks any reference to a common past or to ethno-cultural markers. Râmniceanu's "Important Treatise" is included alongside Petru Maior's "The History of Romanian Beginning in Dacia," presenting various versions on the origins of Romanians, the question of which was connected to the emerging discourse on national identity. Similarly, the "Połaniec Manifesto" is included right after "The Targowica Confederation," enabling contrast and comparison.

Moreover, there is the text "On the Statistics of Poland" by Staszic (from 1807), who became one of the most important early adherents of state-administered modernization, belonging to the first group of people who contrasted the territorial, economical and military potential of Poland with its political and social underdevelopment and speculated about a well-governed, Western country that would replace the current one. Dobrovsky's text on the Slavs of the Monarchy (from 1791) is meant to illustrate the geographical, institutional, and social imagination of 'scholarly' patriotism, as well as the clear limits such patriotism had with respect to the broad strata of the nascent national community, while Thám's "Apology of the Czech Language" (from 1783) is characteristic as one of the texts that laid the foundations of the 'philological bent' or 'linguocentrism' of early Czech national culture.

There are many other interesting cases, let me refer to no more than four of the remaining ones here: an excerpt from Jezierski's dictionary (from 1791) is included, which opened the way to the romantic reformulation of the idea of the nation, making the conceptual separation of state and nation possible, as well as Wybicki's formulation of Polish independence and political existence in terms of the 'will of the nation,' presenting it as something to fight for, to create (or restore) from the entire ethno-cultural community (first published in 1799). There is also Bessenyei's elaboration (from 1802) on the broader problem of the relationship of nationality, culture and the vernacular language. His propagation of the creation of vernacular science can be seen as his symbolic testament. Last but not least, there is Bassegli's text (from 1798), in which he adapts the language of civic humanism to the enlightened paradigm of manners.

*Discourses of Collective Identity in Central and Southeast Europe (1770-1945), Texts and Commentaries, Volume I: Late Enlightenment – Emergence of the Modern 'National Idea'* is ultimately meant for didactic use and could serve as teaching material in various academic programs even on the graduate level. At the same time, it is also a significant step towards enabling intercultural dialogue in a regional framework and an important, collective contribution to rethinking national identity, and conceiving of this topic from a proper historical perspective.

There is a website dedicated to the project: <http://www.idreader.cas.bg/>

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