

A Russian Encounter with the Myth of Central Europe

Jessie Labov, *New York University*

As the concept of an exclusive, Central European identity gained prominence among writers from the region in the 1980s, one theme that was visible, polemical, and politically noteworthy was the distinction between “Central” and “Eastern Europe.” From a particular cultural perspective, which Milan Kundera defined in his essay “The Tragedy of Central Europe” (*NY Review of Books*, 4/26/84), Central Europe was understood as everything Eastern European that was not Russian. Out of many possible reasons for this exclusivity, I would like to focus on the postcolonial implications of rejecting Russian and/or Soviet culture. The goal is not to prove Central Europe postcolonial (a task which would call for a much broader reevaluation of the categories), but to compare the articulation of Central European identity in the West by certain writers and dissident intellectuals, with similar claims of regional identity by postcolonial writers and intellectuals. I will use the transcript of a conference that took place in Lisbon in 1988, and a particular encounter between Russian, Central European, and self-described postcolonial writers as an example of such a cross-examination.

The Lisbon Conference was the second in a series of international writers conferences sponsored by the Wheatland Foundation, a year before the more well-known meeting in Budapest in Central European circles the one in Budapest in 1989. The series began in 1987, in Vienna. In that same year, another Wheatland-sponsored event took place in Washington, where the foundation hosted a meeting of Russian writers from the Soviet Union with those living in emigration. It was portrayed as a kind of literary summit (in line with the political rhetoric of the Reagan years), but public spectacle aside, the meeting was described as a true milestone by those in attendance. As Lev Anninsky, Joseph Brodsky, Sergei Dovlatov, Anatoly Kim, Grant Matevosian, Tatiana Tolstaya, and Zinovy Zinik sat down together a year later at the Russian writers’ roundtable in Lisbon, the effect of internal and external Russian exiles speaking face-to-face was still somewhat novel. We often focus on 1989 as an *annus mirabilis*, and associate all of the shock waves of the East/West exposure with that year. In the interest of setting the stage for the cultural atmosphere in Lisbon in 1988, I would like to emphasize that there were small shocks of this kind, often the result of orchestrated cultural events, throughout the second half of the 80s. Zinovy Zinik,

a writer who had been living in emigration for 13 years, described the meeting in Lisbon as follows:

I've written six novels set in the West with flashbacks to Moscow, where I was born. Yet, I am absolutely unknown. I don't exist in Moscow but for a few people such as Tatiana [Tolstaya] and some other friends who have heard about me(...)I was touched by Anatoly Kim's personal story. When he was eight, his family was deported from the Far East to Central Asia. It is like being forced from Wales to the Sahara Desert, really. He grew up in a situation similar to that of an emigré. He spoke a different language when he came to Moscow. His situation was not that different from mine when I came to London, unable to speak a word of English. For us to meet here is a moving experience. Until a year ago it was much easier for a Soviet citizen to become a cosmonaut and fly to the moon than to come to London. The fact that I am able to talk to Anatoly Kim here and now is a kind of miracle.¹ (Lisbon Conference Transcript, 104-5)

For Zinik and Kim, this meeting represents one of the first steps in a nascent dialogue. The members of the *Central European* panel in Lisbon, however, were there to continue a discussion which had been ongoing for a decade already.

The stated goal of the Central European round table was “to determine the status of Central European literature – whether certain characteristics could be found in common in the work of writers from Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Albania, and whether that ‘literature’ could be distinguished from Russian, or Soviet literature” (75). Sitting on the panel were Jan Blonski, Czeslaw Milosz, Jan Józef Szczepanski, Krzysztof Michalski, and Adam Zagajewski (Poland), Péter Esterházy, György Konrád (Hungary), Josef Škvorecký (Czechoslovakia) [Ivan Klíma sent a paper, but didn't appear], Danilo Kiš, Ivan Lalic, Venko Taufer (Yugoslavia) and Ismael Kadare (Albania).² The Central European session was first, and the Russian session took place the following afternoon.

Although most of the presenters had prepared papers for this conference, moderator Michael Scammell decided to summarize the contents of the papers himself, and then open up the floor for a response from each writer, and a general discussion. As a result, the views of writers who throughout the 80s had argued

¹ All citations from transcript of Lisbon Conference, which can be found in *Cross Currents* 9 (1990): 75-124.

² The Russian session was supposed to demonstrate a similar diversity, and introduce some of the literatures of the non-Russian Soviet writers to a world audience. This objective was represented by the presence of Anatoly Kim and Armenian writer Grant Matevosian, who remained silent apart from a short paragraph thanking Western culture for its contribution to ending ‘a horrible dictatorship’ (103).

both for and against the idea of Central Europe, who often disagreed among themselves over where the borders might be, and what the historical conditions might consist of, were presented by Scammell in a coherent, synthesized form, as planks of a single, Central European platform. According to Scammell's narrative, with the failure of the Marxist utopia, the "holders of power...lost their monopoly of history" (77) in Central Europe, and hence control over the recording of that history. At the same time, there emerges a civic liability on the part of the writer/intellectual to reexamine the past, to recover his own history. Encapsulating this idea, Scammell quotes Michalski quoting the Czech philosopher Patočka – who said that "history is, among other things, a responsibility".

The implied intellectual heritage—the historicizing motive synthesized by Scammell from various papers submitted to the conference—certainly *was* one of the original tenets of the reinvention of Central Europe (speaking mostly about the articulation of this idea in the West in the early 1980s). The argument made by Kundera, Milosz, Skvorecky, Konrad, and Kis that the individual nations and potential nations of Central Europe share a common culture is based on meta-historical grounds: the countries share a history as subjects of larger empires, even if the specificities of which empire, and exactly when, are less clear. There were other components of the cultural argument for Central Europe, to be sure, but due to Scammell's introduction, and perhaps due to the geopolitical tectonic shifts underway in 1988, this is the one that was foregrounded in Lisbon.

As briefly as possible (eliminating much lyricism and quoting of Zbigniew Herbert), I'd like to summarize the discussion held first at the Central European roundtable, and then at the Russian roundtable, and show the effect of one group on the other. More important for my larger inquiry about the role of postcolonial discourse, is how the subject and object of "empire" comes to be the crux of the debate.

The Central European Roundtable

Milosz, hearing the call to engagement in Scammell's words, warns against the dangers of the noble cause, giving as an example a cause as noble to him as Solidarity, because "literature must free itself from a strictly moral obligation" (79).

Konrad refines this by suggesting that the role of the writer is simply to make the reader alert to potential dangers and catastrophes, "to give him some anxiety" (79); he also points out that even at this conference there is a logic of national culture at work, and suggests that it is a double bind – "either you have to praise your national culture or you have to criticize it. In either case you are somehow in the wrong" (80). Esterhazy, on the other hand, objects to the specificity at stake,

he claims he doesn't "feel this pathos, as an Eastern European or Central European (...) that his problems are the same as those of any writer" (81).

Zagajewski gives a pessimistic reading of European literary history, maintaining that 19th-century literature in Eastern Europe was much more dutifully historical, and therefore provincial than its Western counterpart, and that the strength of Western literature then lay in its freedom from this dutiful, historical dimension. In the twentieth century, now that "Western Europe has experienced a taste of defeat, a taste of history" (82), the situation is reversed, and the only hope for a reprieve from a pan-European provincialism would be a retreat from the historical dimension into a metaphysical one on the part of the Central Europeans. Zagajewski, in other words, also seems finished with playing the historian.

Skvorecky returns to a controversial comment made by Hans Christoph Buch during the session on German literature, also paraphrased by Scammell, that "literature coming from East Germany and East and Central Europe was better, because...dictatorships produce better stories and censorship sharpens the style", while writers concentrate more (77, Scammell's words).

Skvorecky's comment echoes Milosz's statement – that one is "tempted to discuss things that are historically restricted...most of the writing has this odd tendency of being too moralistic" (83).

Michalski introduces the trope of the Red Army, initially as a military entity which explains why we consider this group of nations together, and then as a philosophical concept, which subsumed the minds of novelists and poets in the late 40s and early 50s. In 1988, Michalski claims, the army has lost its meaning as "Red," it is now "Soviet" or sometimes even "Russian" and its presence in Central Europe "is simply a political problem, no longer an intellectual one." This he reads as a "clear sign of the decline of the Soviet Empire."

Kis begins with an epitaph: "Everything has been drunk/ Everything has been eaten/ There is nothing more to say" (*Tout est bu/ Tout est mangé/ Plus rien à dire*), then attributes Verlaine, and then apologizes to those for whom he has "spoiled the pleasure of recognition." He then admits that he is "a little exhausted by this kind of dialogue" on Central Europe. Kis agrees with Zagajewski, that the generalization about Central European writers that he is still willing to make, is that they are restricted by being read purely in a political dimension, and are "impoverished" by this. "We're asked to write books exclusively about the destiny of our countries, communist countries...we don't refuse to do this because we see it as our destiny, but we would like to show our savoir faire in other ways areas as well" (83). Yet when Blonski suggests that the writers from this region have been unduly influenced by the concept, the rubric of Central Europe – that it

has become a Gombrowiczian mask [face] imposed on the originality and specificity of the writer, Kis responds by defending the significance of this mask.

Our principle aim was to develop a strategy whereby we would be recognized as individuals from the point of view of Europe, in the eyes of other Europeans. We existed here and there before this word “Central Europe” came into vogue; writers like Czeslaw Milosz, Joseph Brodsky, and Josef Skvorecky established individual identities and became recognized. They helped give the rest of us an identity...But even when people knew our names, they really didn’t know where to place us, what country we were from, where we belonged. Now, with this strategy of belonging to *Mittleuropa* – which I subscribe to and I am certain that others from small countries do, as well – we have succeeded in differentiating ourselves. Little by little, our specificity emerges...even though we belong to this family of Central Europe. (89)

It’s important to register here how far along in the discourse about Central Europe this conference takes place. The above itemization of reactions shows how many of these original proponents of the Central European myth are ready to move beyond it. They have each in their own way sensed the limitations of the role of adjudicating historian, the default politician, all the while acknowledging the inescapability of the role, the strategic use they have made of it. (Milosz calls it “the fusion of the individual with the historic” and adds that Central Europeans share this in common with Russians, citing Brodsky as his example.) The composite is a more nuanced view, which reflects the burden of living in the midst of so much history—in the midst of so much defeat, following Zagajewski—and the need to retreat from the task. At this point, they have worked through the concept of Central Europe and come out on the other side.³

³ The conversation is clearly not over in 1988, however, because parallel to the discussion between Konrad, Milosz, Kis, Michalski, Zagajewski, Skvorecky, Blonski, and Esterhazy, are presentations by Ismael Kadare and Ivan Lalic, who take their allotted time to present short, literary histories of Albania and Yugoslavia, respectively. Then there is the objection of Veno Taufer, who points out that all of Lalic’s examples are writers of Serbian literature (very great writers, Taufer insists), but that it is just proves that Yugoslavia is an artificial, political construction and not a deep-rooted, cultural entity. Taufer’s argument is based on the words of Ivan Cankar, a Slovenian author writing in 1913, who said that “our southern brothers are brothers in politics, but, as far as culture is concerned, Slovenians are much closer to Italians and Austrians than to Serbs, for example. This tells us something about our “so-called Central Europe”, Taufer says, which implies that not to believe in Yugoslavia, is, metonymically, not to believe in Central Europe. From this secondary exchange we can see that there is still some history being re-written in this Southeast corner of Central Europe.

Towards the end of the panel on Central Europe, Russian writer Tatiana Tolstaya comments from the audience that she is taken by surprise, she says, by three major points made by the panelists:

1. She objects to what she understands as a self-effacing attitude towards Western culture, the desire to prove that Central Europe was ‘always-already’ Western before it became part of a different sphere of influence. “The stubbornness with which everybody talks about Central Europe – as if it were a special place which somehow unifies you, and I’ve even felt an apologetic sense as though it were bad to be an Eastern European.”
2. The idea of a world literature depending on a translation into a “bigger” European language (understood as English), that there must be a strategy in this translation from a “smaller” culture to a bigger one. Russians, Tolstaya says, would be insulted by this idea.
3. The presence of what she calls “external” or “temporal” factors in a discussion of literature – such as the Red Army, being a writer from a small country – these should be understood as climactic factors, that do not affect one’s internal freedom...the kind of a freedom a Russian writer in prison can achieve, even though his external liberty has been threatened.

Skvorecky responds directly to Tolstaya, by quoting the 19th-century Slovak poet Jan Kollár:

“Do not use the holy name of your country/ for the piece of land where we live [...] It surprises me that this concept seems nebulous to people,” he adds, *“My God, this is a historical entity which has its history, a cultural history!”* (95), and goes on with a few examples of links to Western cultures. Before Tolstaya’s intervention, Skvorecky seemed as ready to move past the Central European moment as anybody else, but faced with her recalcitrance, he defends the concept with certainty. He returns to the rhetoric of the early 1980s, when Central European writers first fell under a Western gaze as a coherent identity. Tolstaya’s objections, while extreme,⁴ are not cited here in order to demonize her. She is, after all, only one person, if a deliberately provocative one. What is more interesting is the effect that her protestations have on the group of Central European writers, who feel that they must return to their original position on the subject, and defend their historical reinvention. This debate continued in other venues later on that night, according to some asides in the next day’s transcript.

⁴ One of the more amusing responses was from Klaus Rifbjerg, who claimed that “if one must compare a Russian soldier and a tank with a climate, he would rather have ordinary rain in his back yard than a Russian tank” (96).

The Russian Roundtable

After Anninsky, Dovlatov, Kim, and Tolstaya present their papers, on the state of Russian literature, the effects of perestroika and glasnost, the meaning of “world literature”, Scammell asks Zinik to be a provocateur, and to lead Tolstaya and the panel back to the subject of Central Europe. Scammell also appeal to the audience, claiming that there is a “cultural problem here about the way that Russians perceive public dialogue as opposed to private conversation” [again referring to conversations that have taken place offstage]. At this point Brodsky steps in as a deputy moderator – someone who not just linguistically but also culturally bilingual, a peripheral but respected member of both the Central European circle and the panel of Russian writers. Here, the tenor of the debate changes, because it becomes explicit that there are acts of translation and mediation going on beyond the purely linguistic. Brodsky turns to Konrad to explain the Central European claim against Soviet imperialism, because he knows that Konrad has written about it extensively in the past.

Konrad rephrases the concept of Central Europe from the Russian point of view: that they have to understand that their tanks are more than “climactic disturbances”. What Konrad is stipulating is the Russian writers’ task as unofficial historians now that the historical record is open for reinterpretation. It is a direct attack on the ethics of being a writer from a not-so-small country. “The question is whether our Russian colleagues will have enough moral stance and civility to confront the role of their country in the world and start to review Russian imperial politics” (107). Tolstaya’s much-quoted rejoinder: “Now as I understand it, I’ve been asked when are we going to remove our tanks from Central Europe. Is that the question? When will I take my tanks out of Central Europe? Is that it? Is it?” She answers her own question: what we’re talking about here is history [...] We’re not historians. We’re not people who have authority over tanks, we’re writers” (108).

Without continuing the direct narrative of the conference, as it becomes a polemical free-for-all at this point, with only Scammell and Brodsky keeping any semblance of order, it should suffice to say that Skvorecky’s reaction to Tolstaya the day before was premonitory. In their efforts to convince Tolstaya, Anninsky, and even Brodsky, the Central European writers make some of the clearest formulations of their original idea, always stressing the anti-imperial dimension of it, the anti-Soviet side, even the anti-Russian side.⁵ From the audience as well,

⁵ Kis says, for example: “It isn’t simply a question of wanting to defend the concept of Central Europe, as such; rather, this idea is being promoted to counter the concept of the Soviet Union so that Central Europe won’t just be considered as a part of it and we have a

Roberto Calasso, Derek Walcott, Salman Rushdie, and Susan Sontag join the discussion, propping up the anti-imperialist position, and going so far as to argue it into a postcolonial one.

BRODSKY: Of course, it's not an imperial position. Well, it is simply the only realistic attitude that we Russians can adopt towards the situation. And to call it "imperialistic," to charge us with a sort of colonialist attitude – colonialist disregard of the cultural and political realities...well, I think it's terribly myopic. I would add one more thing. As an anti-Soviet concept, the concept of Central Europe is not effective. That is, if I were a Soviet citizen and now I would just simply try to conjure it, well, I wouldn't be moved. I wouldn't be impressed. It simply doesn't work. What's more, we here -- those who are sitting here – we are writers and we are defined not by our political system, although we presumably can't shed it....A Russian writer is not a representative of the Soviet state. I beg you to distinguish between those things. That is, if you ask any one of us, "Would you like to have that tank removed from eastern Europe?" – I take the liberty to speak for all of us – we would say yes, immediately. We feel terribly ashamed.

SONTAG: Nobody thinks you want the tanks. But what you call "realism" I call "imperial arrogance." It's exactly the same as if I were to say "I don't care about what happens in Mexico. It doesn't interest me because I have to be realistic. The future of Mexico depends on what happens in the United States." I should care what happens(...) I hear it in my own country and I recognize it in people who speak for other countries.

BRODSKY: What would be republican humility then? If this is an imperial arrogance, if this is the only possibility....

SONTAG: It's not to say "I'm not interested"(...) How can you not be interested?

BRODSKY: It's not that we're not interested. We simply think that, precisely because these countries are under our domination, under Soviet domination, the only way to liberate them is to liberate ourselves...

SONTAG: But now you're talking power. I'm not asking you to liberate these countries. I'm asking you to speak in the name of literature. No one will think...

BRODSKY: In the name of literature, there is no such thing as a "Central Europe," either. Well, we've been over this ground. There is Polish literature, Czech literature, Slovak literature, Serbo-Croatian literature, Hungarian literature, and so forth. Well, it's impossible to speak about this concept even in the name of literature. It's an oxymoron, if you will.

MILOSZ: *Divide et impera*. This is a colonial principle and you are for that.

BRODSKY: *Divide et impera*. In what way, Czeslaw? I don't understand you. Could you specify?

MILOSZ: The concept of Central Europe is not an invention of Kundera. You have an obsession that it is an invention of Kundera. Not at all. Central Europe, as Susan Sontag said, is an anti-Soviet concept provoked by the occupation of those countries. It's an

right to self-identity" (114). His problem with Tolstaya is with her tone, that "in her words you feel the presence of the Soviet Army" (115).

obviously anti-Soviet concept and how can you, as Soviet writers, accept that concept? It's a very hostile concept to the Soviet Union!

BRODSKY: No, no, I accept it fully, but...

MILOSZ: And I should add that the conscience of a writer, for instance of a Russian writer, should cope with such facts, as for instance the pact between Hitler and Stalin and the occupation of the Baltic countries of which I am a native. And I am afraid that there is certain taboo in Russian literature and this taboo is empire.

BRODSKY: All I'm trying to say is that I would be all for this anti-Soviet concept were that concept effective. It's simply not terribly effective. That's one thing. The second thing: the taboo of the Russian empire. Indeed, in the Soviet press, until this day, you don't encounter this concept. Well, it's never stated that the Soviet Union is an empire.

MILOSZ: I would like to add that my friend, Joseph Brodsky, was one of the first, if not the first, to introduce the term "empire" in his poetry.

BRODSKY: Yeah, I know that. (120-121)

In order to relate this conversation, between people who have known each other for a long time, and who are very familiar with each other's work, relate to the incendiary points brought up by Tolstaya the day before, as she confronts the idea of Central Europe for the very first time?

Like Tolstaya, Brodsky wants to separate a political positions (his projection as a Soviet citizen) from his identity as a Russian writer. Sontag won't allow for this distinction, as she wants him to "speak in the name of literature". Like Tolstaya, Brodsky identifies each of the literatures of Central European nations as separate, individual literatures, and doesn't see how they come together across linguistic lines. There *is* a shift in the exchange between Milosz and Brodsky, as Milosz recites the history of the region, insisting on the words *occupation* and *empire*, eliding between Soviet writers, Soviet occupiers, and finally the Russian empire. Here Milosz recognizes that the ethical position of a writer is going to be more complex than those of a politician, and acknowledges that Brodsky has already played the role of "taking back history", and experienced how this role is interpreted differently in the West. Yet in Milosz's strategic invocation of Brodsky's prescient use of the word 'empire', the word seems larger than either writer, as if it had written itself into Brodsky's poem, an historical force too large to ignore.

The meeting in Lisbon displays a rhetorical struggle, which, while based in historical arguments, seems to eclipse them. There is a clear connection to the *rhetoric* of postcolonial theory, which does not necessarily lead to a debate on the level of political science or economy. In 1988, when figures like Salman Rushdie, Derick Walcott, and even Susan Sontag were fully engaged in the postcolonial argument, it was only natural that at an international writers' conference, words

such as Tolstaya's and Brodsky's would be understood as not just imperialist but colonialist.⁶ According to Rushdie:

Konrad's question was: Will Russian intellectuals confront the role of the USSR in the world? That doesn't mean: should they solve the problems? It means: Would they confront the role? It is very interesting that the answer seems, to me, to be: not really. [...] Much of what was being said sounded very colonialist [...] one of the great powers of colonialism is to describe the colonized. "We don't believe in the existence of Central Europe" [...] The point is, if the Central Europeans believe in the existence of Central Europe, simply saying that because you don't believe in it, you don't need to talk about it, is exactly a colonial act.(118)

This is where I see a *metonymic* relationship between postcolonial theorists and the Central European writers and intellectuals circulating in the West in the 1980s. It is due to the proximity of these writers and artists, their friendships and collaborations, their installation in universities, think tanks and conferences, the postcolonial language became a shared one. It is a very different claim than to read Milosz's statement as aspiring to a postcolonial status for Central Europe.

A shared rhetoric does not translate into distinct political action. This rhetorical battle, and Milosz's claim that the word "empire" was writing itself from within Brodsky's poetry, *is* the action that took place at the Lisbon Conference in 1988. As Rushdie points out, the polemic is not about tanks, it's about introducing Russian intellectuals to the debates raging in Western academics and cultural marketplaces, and the fact that they must acknowledge the role of empire in Russian culture at the same time that they are personally liberating themselves from the same empire. The rhetorical goal is crucial enough that the participants of the Central European roundtable are willing to reenact the role of adjudicating historian, for a few hours, anyway, let's say for the sake of argument.

⁶ It would only be natural to note the hegemonic force of the postcolonial argument as well, when understood as a part of the cultural baggage necessary to rejoining the West, and in particular the Anglo-American and Francophone world.