



## The Tragic Politics of Envy and Resentment

In centuries past, the majority population of various cities in Eastern Europe consisted of people from Western Europe — Germans, Jews and others — while the vast majority of the population in the surrounding countrysides were Slavs or other indigenous peoples of the region.

Just as Western Europe was — and is — more prosperous than Eastern Europe, so Western Europeans living in Eastern European cities in centuries past were more prosperous than the Slavs and others living in the countrysides, or even in the same cities.



One of the historic advantages of Western Europe was that it was conquered by the Romans in ancient times — a traumatic experience in itself, but one which left Western European languages with written versions, using letters created by the Romans. Eastern European languages developed written versions centuries later.

Literate people obviously have many advantages over people who are illiterate. Even after Eastern European languages became literate, it was a long time before they had such accumulations of valuable written knowledge as Western European languages had, due to Western European languages' centuries earlier head start.

Even the educated elites of Eastern Europe were often educated in Western European languages. None of this was due to the faults of one or the merits of the other. It is just the way that history went down.

But such mundane explanations of gross disparities are seldom emotionally satisfying — least of all to those on the short end of these disparities. With the rise over time of an indigenous intelligentsia in Eastern Europe and the growing influence of mass politics, more emotionally satisfying explanations emerged, such as oppression, exploitation and the like.

Since human beings have seldom been saints, whether in Eastern Europe or elsewhere, there were no doubt many individual flaws and shortcomings among the non-indigenous elites to complain of. But those shortcomings were not the fundamental reason for the economic disparities between Eastern Europeans and Western Europeans. More important, seeing those Western European elites in Eastern Europe as the cause of the economic disparities led many Eastern Europeans into the blind alley of ethnic identity politics, including hostility to Germans, Jews and others — and a romanticizing of their own cultural patterns that were holding them back.

What happened in Eastern Europe, including many tragedies that grew out of the polarization of groups in the region, has implications that reach far beyond Europe, and in fact reach all around the world, where similar events have produced similar polarizations and similar historic tragedies.

Today, in America, many denounce the black-white gap in economic and other achievements, which they attribute to the same kinds of causes as those to which the lags of Eastern Europeans have been



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attributed. Moreover, the persistence of these gaps, years after the civil rights laws were expected to close them, is regarded as something strange and even sinister.

Yet the economic disparities between Eastern Europeans and Western Europeans remains to this day greater than the economic disparities between blacks and whites in America — and the gap in Europe has lasted for centuries.

Focusing attention and attacks on people who have greater wealth-generating capacity — whether races, classes or whatever — has had counterproductive consequences, including tragedies written in the blood of millions. Whole totalitarian governments have risen to dictatorial power on the wings of envy and resentment ideologies.

Intellectuals have all too often promoted these envy and resentment ideologies. There are both psychic and material rewards for the intelligentsia in doing so, even when the supposed beneficiaries of these ideologies end up worse off. When you want to help people, you tell them the truth. When you want to help yourself, you tell them what they want to hear.

Both politicians and intellectuals have made their choice.

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