The Tragedy of Central Europe

Milan Kundera

1. In November 1956, the director of the Hungarian National Agency, before his office was flattened by artillery fire, sent a telex to the entire world with a desperate message announcing that the Russian attack against Budapest had begun. The dispatch ended with these words: "We are going to die for Hungary and for Europe."

What did this sentence mean? It certainly meant that the Russian tanks were endangering Hungary and with it Europe itself. But in what sense was Europe in danger? Was it being threatened or invaded? The answer to these questions is that the temptation was there to push past the Hungarian borders and into the West! No. The director of the Hungarian News Agency was not about to push past the Hungarian borders and into the West. He was ready to die so that Hungary might remain Hungary and European. Even if the sense of the sentence seems clear, it continues to intrigue us. Actually, in France, in America, one is accustomed to thinking that what was at stake during the invasion was neither Hungarian nor European but a political regime. One would never have said that Hungary as such had been threatened; but this would not have been enough to understand why a Hungarian, faced with his own death, addressed Europe. When Scholzhammer dominates communist oppression, does he invoke Europe as a fundamental value worth dying for?

No. To die for one's country and for Europe—that is a phrase that could not be thought in Moscow or Leningrad; it is precisely the phrase that should be thought in Budapest or Warsaw.

2. In fact, what does Europe mean to a Hungarian, a Czech, a Pole? For thousands of years their nations have belonged to the part of Europe rooted in Roman Christianity. They have participated in every period of its history. For them, the word "Europe" does not represent a phenomenon of geography but a spiritual entity whose history is connected to the word "West." The modern Hungary is no longer European—that is, no longer Western—it is driven from its own destiny, beyond its own history and the essence of its identity.

"Geographic Europe" (extending from the Atlantic to the Ural Mountains) was always divided into two halves which, separated by an expanse of water, were equals: one tied to ancient Rome and the Catholic Church, the other, rooted in Byzantium and the Orthodox Church. After 1453, the border between the two Europe shifted several hundred kilometers to the west, and several nations that had always considered themselves to be Western woke up to discover that they were now Central.

As a result, three fundamental situations developed in Europe after the war:

- that of Western Europe, that of Eastern Europe, and, most complicated, that of the part of Europe situated geographically in the center—culturally in the West and politically in the East.

The contradictions of the Europe I call Central help us to understand why during the last thirty-five years the drama of Europe has been concentrated there: the great Hungarian revolt in 1956 and the bloody massacres that followed; the Prague Spring and the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968; the Polish revolts of 1956, 1968, 1970, and of recent years. In dramas developed in Europe after the war: that of Western Europe, that of Eastern Europe, and, most complicated, that of the part of Europe situated geographically in the center—culturally in the West and politically in the East.

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It was Hungarian writers, in a group named after the Romantic poet Sándor Petőfi, who undertook the powerful critique that led the way to the explosion of 1956. It was the theater, the films, the literature and philosophy that, in the years before 1968, led ultimately to the emancipation of the Prague Spring. And it was the banning of a play by Adam Mickiewicz, the greatest Polish Romantic poet, that triggered the famous revolt of Polish students in 1968. This happy marriage of culture and life, of creative achievement and popular participation, has marked the revolts of Central Europe with an immaterial beauty that will always cast a spell over those who lived through those times.

3. One could say: We'll admit that Central European countries are defending their threatened identity, but their situation is not unique. Russia is in a similar situation. It, too, is about to lose its identity. In fact, it's not Russia but communism that gives nations the sense of identity, and, which, moreover, made the Russian people its first victim. True, the Russian language suffices to the languages of the other nations in the Soviet empire, but it's not because the Russians themselves want to "Russify" its other; it's because the Soviet bureaucracy deeply anti-national, anti-constitutional wants a tool to unify its state.

I understand the logic. I also understand the predicament of the Russians and Europe and also one of the greatest in its cultural history. Whether written in exile (Gogolovicki, Milos), or taking the form of clandestine creative activity (in Czechoslovakia after 1960), or tolerated by the authorities under the pressure of public opinion—no matter under which circumstances—the films, the novels, the plays and works of philosophy born in Central Europe during this period often reach the summit of European culture.

who fear that their beloved homeland will be confused with detested communism. But it is also necessary to understand the Pole, whose homeland, except for a brief period between the two world wars, has been subjugated by Russia for two centuries and has been continually subject to a "Russianization"—the pressure to conform to being Russian—as patient as it has been implementable. In Central Europe, the eastern border of the West, everyone has always been punished by the dangers of Russian might. And it's not just the Poles. Franziskus Palecky, the great historian of Bohemia, a native of Bohemia, one of the Czechs in the nineteenth century, wrote in 1848 a famous letter to the revolutionary movements in Prague, in which he justified the continued existence of the Habsburg Empire as the only possible outlet for any Western country. Palecky warned of Russia's imperial ambitions; it aspired to become a "universal monarchy," which meant it sought world domination. A "universal Russian monarchy," Palecky wrote, "would be a dazzling, raging, indescribable disaster, an incomparable and limitless covariance!"

Central Europe, according to Palecky, ought to be a family of equal nations, each of which—treat the others with mutual respect and secure in the protection of a strong, unified state—would also cultivate its own individuality. And this dream, although never fully realized, would remain powerful and influential. Central Europe longed to be a confined version of Europe itself in all of its cultural variety, a small, archetypical Europe, a reduced model of Europe made up of nations conceived according to one rule: the greatest variety within the smallest space. How could Central Europe not be horrified facing a Russia founded on the opposite principle: the smallest variety within the greatest space?

Indeed, nothing could be more foreign to Central Europe: its passion for variety than Russia: uniform, standardizing, centralizing, determined to transform every nation into its empire (the Ukrainians, the Belorussians, the Armenians, the Latvians, the Lithuanians, and others) into a single national type (or, as is more commonly expressed in this age of generally generalized mystification, into a "single Soviet people").

And so, again: is communism the negation of Russian history or its fulfillment? Certainly it is both its negation (the negation, for example, of its religiosity) and its fulfillment (the fulfillment of its central tendency and its imperial dreams).

Seen from within Russia, this first aspect—the aspect of its identity—is the more striking. From the point of view of the outlying countries, the second aspect—that of its continuity—is felt more powerfully.

One of the great European nations there are nearly none (the Romanians, the Ukrainians) is slowly disappearing. An enormous, almost unbelievable event is occurring without the world's awareness: the François Koskowsky (Koskowsky Kiezerze, no. 2, Paris, 1983): "Although I
4.

But am I being too absolute in contrast Russia and Western Civilization? Isn’t Europe, though divided into east and west, still a single entity anchored in ancient Greece and Judeo-Christian thought? Of course. Moreover, during the entire nineteenth century, Russia, attracted to Europe, drew closer to it. And the fascination with Russia’s “Eastern” values and “Romantic” path of development even became a part of the common European cultural legacy.

Yes, all this is true; the cultural brotherhood of all Europe remains a great and unforgettable memory. But it is no less true that Russian communism vigorously tried to turn Russia’s old anti-Western obsessions and turn it brutally against Europe. But Russia isn’t my subject and I don’t want to wander into its immense complexities, about which I’m not especially knowledgeable. I want simply to make this point once more: on the eastern border of the West—more than anywhere else—Russia is seen not just as one more European power but also as a singular civilization, an other civilization.

In his book Native Realm, Czeslaw Milosz speaks of the common: in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Poles waged war against the Russians “along distant borders. No one was especially interested in the Russians... I was this experience, when the Poles found an only a big void to the east, that engendered the Polish concept of a Russia situated ‘out there’—outside the world.”

Kazimierz Brandys’s in his Warsaw Diary, recalls the interesting story of a Polish writer’s meeting with the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. The Pole was correspondingly working—of all of them—had been banned. She interrupted: “Have you been im-

believe, as does Solzhenitsyn, that the Sovietklärization of the Karaites is an offensive character... I will not go so far to as to idealize the system against which my ancestors fought terrible conditions and under which they died or were tortured or suffered humiliations... I believe that Solzhenitsyn has a tendency to idealize Czarism, a tendency that neither I nor, I’m sure, any other Pole can accept.”

1The most beautiful union between Russia and the West is the work of Stravinsky, which summarizes the whole thousand-year history of Western music and at the same time remains in its musical imagination deeply Russian. Another excellent marriage was celebrated in Central Europe in two magnificent operas of that great Russian, Leo Janacek: one of them based on Gogol’s Artya Kabanova, 1921), and the other, which I admire immensely, based on Dostoevsky (The House of the Dead, 1925). Janacek’s work is symptomatic that not only have these operas never been staged in Russia, but their very existence is unknown there. Communists Russia repudiates misalliances with the West.

2Czeslaw Milosz’s books The Captive Mind and Native Realm (1939) are basic: the first close analyses that are not Manichean toward Russian communism and its Drang nach West.

5.

There are no longer any illusions about the regimes of Russia’s satellite countries. But what we forget is their essential tragedy: these countries have vanished from the map of the West.

Why has this disappearance remained invisible? We can locate the cause in Central Europe itself.

The history of the Poles, the Czechs, the Slovaks, the Hungarians has been turbulent and fragmented. Their traditions of statehood have been weaker and less continuous than those of the larger European nations. Boxed in by the Germans on one side and the Russians on the other, the nations of Central Europe have used up their strength in the struggle to survive and to preserve their languages. Since they have never been entirely integrated into the consciousness of Europe, they have remained the least known and the most fragile part of the West—hidden, even further, by the curtain of their strange and scarcely accessible languages.

The Austrian empire had the great opportunity of making Central Europe into a strong, unified state. But the Austrians, alas, were divided between an arrogant

was ignorant because the Czechs, for a thousand years, have never had any direct contact with Russia. In spite of their linguistic kinship, the Czechs and the Russians have never been on the same world; neither a common history nor a common culture. The relationship between the Poles and the Russians, though, has never been anything less than a struggle of life and death.

Joseph Conrad was always irritated by the label of Russian writer, wishing to slap on him and his books because of his Polish origins, and, about sixty years ago, the writer Stefan Suchodiac was more keen to what is called in the literary world the ‘Slavic spirit’ than the Polish one, which with its chivalric devotion to moral correctness is its exaggerated respect for individual rights.” (How well I understand him! I, too, know of nothing better why bother with trifles?)—has therefore seemed almost like a natural solution.

6.

So is it the fault of Central Europe that the West hasn’t even noticed its disappearance?

Not entirely. At the beginning of our century, Central Europe was, despite its political weakness, a great cultural center, perhaps the greatest. And, admittedly, while the influence of Vienna, for example, the city of Freud and Mahler, is readily acknowledged today, its importance and originality make little sense unless they are seen against the backdrop of the other countries and cities that together participated in, and contributed creatively to, the culture of Central Europe. If the school of Schönberg founded the twelve-tone system, the Hungarian Béla Bartók, one of the greatest musicians of the twentieth century, has discovered the last original possibility in music based on the tonal principle. With the work of Kafka, the literature of Vienna has created the great counterpart in the novel to the work of the Viennese Musil and Broch. The cultural dynamism of the non-German-speaking countries was intensified even more after 1918, when Prague offered the world the innovations of structuralism and the Prague Linguistic Circle. And in Poland the great trinity

There is an amusing little book named How to be an Alien in which the author, in a chapter titled Soul of the Environment,” speaks of the Slavic soul: “The worst kind of soul is the great Slav soul. People who suffer from it are usually very deep thinkers. They may say things like this: ‘Sometimes I am so merry and sometimes I am so sad and why?’ (You cannot, do not try.) Or they may say: ‘I am so mysterious... I sometimes feel so infectious or feel that there is more to me than what I am. ’ Or when I am alone in a forest, I whisper to myself, why this... why that...’ Who would dare to make fun of the great Slav soul? Nobody. The author is George Miks, of Hungarian origin. Only in Central Europe does the Slavic soul come to life.

‘Structuralist thinking started toward the end of the 1920s in the Prague Linguistic Circle. It was made up of Czech, Russian,
of Witold Gombrowicz, Bruno Schulz, and Stanislaw Wickiewicz anticipated the European modernism of the 1950s, notably the so-called theater of the absurd.

A question arises: was this entire creative explosion just a coincidence of geography? Or was it rooted in a long tradition, a shared past? Or, to put it another way: does Central Europe constitute a true cultural configuration with its own history? And if such a configuration exists, can it be defined geographically? What are its borders?

It would be senseless to try to draw its borders exactly. Central Europe is not a state: it is a culture or a fate. Its borders are imaginary and must be drawn and redrawn with each new historical situation.

For example, by the middle of the fourteenth century, Charles University in Prague had already become home to some of the leading intellectuals (professors and students) who were Czech, Austrian, Bavarian, Saxon, Polish, Lithuanian, Hungarian, and Romanian with the germ of the idea of a multinational community in which each nation would have the right of its own language; indeed, it was under the indirect influence of this university (at which the religious reformer Jan Hus was once rector) that the modern Hungarian and Romanian translations of the Bible were undertaken.

Other situations followed: the Hussite revolution; the Hungarian Renaissance during the time of Mathias Korvin with its international influence; the advent of the Hapsburg Empire; the union of three independent states—Bohemia, Hungary, and Austria; the wars against the Turks, the Counter-Reformation of the seventeenth century. At this time the specific nature of Central European culture appeared suddenly in an extraordinary explosion of baroque art, a phenomenon that unified this vast region, from Salzburg to Wilno. On the map of Europe, baroque Central Europe is to be understood by the predominance of the irrational and the dominant position of the visual arts and especially of music. It became the opposite pole of classical France characterized by the predominance of the rational and the dominant position of literature.

Sigmund Freud's parents came from Poland, but young Sigmund spent his childhood in Moravia, in present-day Czechoslovakia. Edmund Halley, the great Czech poet Julius Zeyer was born in Prague to a German-speaking family; it was his own choice to become Czech. The mother tongue of Herman Kafka, on the other hand, was Czech, while his son Franz took German. The key figure in the Hungarian revolts of 1556, the writer and statesman Tibor Dery, came from a German-Hungarian family, and my dear friend Danillo Kix, the excellent novelist, is Hungarian-Yugoslav. What a range of nationalities among even the most representative figures of each country!

And all of the names I've just mentioned are those of Jews. Indeed, no other part of the world has been so deeply marked by the influence of Jewish genius. Aliens everywhere and everywhere at home, lifted above national quarrels, the Jews in the twentieth century were the principal cosmopolitan, integrating element in Central Europe: they were its intellectual elite, a condensed version of its spirit, creators of its spiritual unity. That's why I love the Jewish heritage and cling to it with as much passion and nostalgia as though it were my own.

Another thing that makes the Jewish people so precious to me: in their destiny the fate of Central Europe seems to be concentrated, reflected, and to have found its symbolic image. What is Central Europe? An uncertain zone of small nations between Russia and Germany. I underscore the words: small nations. Indeed, what are the Jews if not a small nation, the small nation par excellence? The only one of all the small nations be the time which has survived empires and the devastating march of History.

But what is a small nation? I offer you my definition: the small nation is one whose very existence may be put in question at any moment; a small nation can disappear and it knows it. A Frenchman, an English man or an Indian man is not used to asking questions about the very survival of his nation. His anthem speak only of

April 26, 1964

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Maurice Friedman
grandeur and eternity. The Polish an-
other, like the Russian with the verse: "Poland has not yet perished..."

Central Europe as a family of small na-
tions has its own vision of the world, a vi-
sion based on a deep distrust of history. History, that goddess of Hegel and Marx, they think, is an inaudible whisper that judges us and arbitrates our fate—that is the his-
tory of conquerors. The people of Cen-
tral Europe are not conquerors. They can-
not be separated from European his-
tory; they cannot exist outside it; but they
represent the wrong side of this history; they are its victims and outsiders. It's this dis-
based view of history that is the source of their culture, of their wisdom, of the "monstrous spirit" that mocks
grandeur and glory. "Never forget that only
in opposing History as such can we re-
sist the history of our own day," I would
love to engrave this sentence by Witold Gombrowicz above the entry gate to
Central Europe.

Thus it was in this region of small na-
tions who have "not yet perished" that
Europe's vulnerability, all of Europe's vul-
nerability, was most clearly visible before anywhere else. Actually, in our
modern world where power has a tend-
ancy to become more and more concen-
trated in the hands of a few big countries, all European nations run the risk of be-
coming small nations and of sharing their fate. In this sense the destiny of Central Europe anticipates the destiny of Europe in general, and its culture assumes an enorm-
ous relevance.  

It's enough to read the greatest Central
European novels: in Hermann Broch's The Sleepwalkers, History appears as a proces-
s of gradual degradation of values; Robert Musil's The Man without Quali-
ties paints a euthropic society which doesn't realize that tomorrow it will dis-
appear; in Jaroslav Havék's The Good Sol-
dier Schweik, pretending to be an
idiot becomes the last possible method for preserving one's freedom; the novis-
tic visions of Kafka speak to us of a world without memory, of a world that comes after historic time. All of this
century's great Central European works of
art, even up to our own day, can be understood as long meditations on the possible end of European humanity.

8.

Today, all of Central Europe has been
subjugated by Russia with the exception of little Austria, which, more by chance than by design, escaped its sub-
potence, but ripped out of its Central European setting, it has lost most of its
individual character and all of its impor-
tance. The disappearance of the cultural
home of Central Europe was certainly
t once one of the greatest events of the century for all of Western civilization. So, I
repeat my question: how could it possibly have gone unnoticed and unannounced?

The answer is: Europe hasn't noticed the disappearance of its cultural

"The problem of Central European

culture is examined in a very important
periodical published by the University of
Mirowski, Crociani Carre, in Krakow: A
Yearbook of Central European Culture.

"With this constellation of Central Euro-
pean writers, with Kafka, Hasek, Broch,
and Musil, a new dawn of a new, post-
Joycean aesthetic of the novel, it seems to
to me, arises in Europe. Broch is the one I
personally care for most. It's high time
this Viennese novelist, one of the
greatest of the twentieth century, was redis-
covered.

But to what and to whom? What realm
of supreme values will be capable of unit-
ing Europe? Technical future? The market-
place? The mass media? (Will the great poet
be replaced by the great jour-
nalist?) Or by politics? But by which
politics? The right or the left? Is there
a discernible shared ideal that still
exists above this Manicheanism of the left and
the right that is as stupid as it is in-
conceivable? Will it be the principle
of tolerance, respect for the beliefs
and ideas of other people? But won't this tol-
erance become empty and useless if it no
longer protects a rich creativity or a strong set of ideas? Or should we un-
derstand the abdication of culture as a sort

"If journalism at one time seemed to be
an appendix to culture, today, in con-
trast, culture finds itself at the mercy of
journalism; it is part of a world domi-
 nated by journalism. The moral audi-
cide who will be known and to what de-
ge, according to which interpreting
writer no longer addresses the public
directly; he must communicate with
it through the semi-transparent bar-
er of the mass media.

home because Europe no longer perceives
its unity as a cultural unity.

In fact, what is European unity based
on?

In the Middle Ages, it was based on a
shared religion. In the modern era, in
which the medieval God has been changed
into a Deus absconditus, religion bowed out,
giving way to culture, which became
the expression of the supreme values by
which European humanity understood
itself, defined itself, identified itself as
European.

Now it seems that another change is

9.

Franz Werfel spent the first third of his
life in Prague, the second third in Vienna,
and the last third as an emigrant, first in
France, then in America—there you have
a typically Central European biography.
In 1937 he was in Paris with his wife, the
famous Alma, Mahler's widow; he had been
invited there by the Organization for
Intellectual Cooperation within the League
of Nations to a conference on "The Pu-
sibly be created? Wouldn't it have the
culturistic aspect of an arcanum of
social scale?"

However, this naive proposal strikes me
as moving, because it reveals the des-
perate need for a moral authority in a world stripped of values. It
reveals the anguished desire to hear the
inexorable voice of the voice of
the Dichter and Denker.

This story is mixed up in my mind with
the memories of the 1920's and 1930's, of the
lice, after making a mess of the apart-
ment of one of my friends, a famous
Czech philosopher, he burned all his thou-
sand pages of his philosophical manuscript.
Shortly after we were walking through
the streets of Prague. We went down from
the Castle hill, where he lived, toward
the peninsula of Kampa; we crossed the
Mannes Bridge. He was trying to
make a joke of it all: how were the
police going to decipher his philosophical
lingo, which was rather hermetic? But no
joke could soothe his anguish, could make
up for the loss of ten years' work
that this manuscript represented—for he
had not another copy.

We talked about the possibility of
sending an open letter abroad in order to
turn this confiscation into an interna-
tional scandal. "Let him allow it to us
that he shouldn't address the letter to an
institution or a statesman but only to
some figure above politics, someone who
stood for an unquestionable moral value;
someone universally acknowledged in Eu-
rope. In other words, a great cultural
figure. But who was this person?"

Suddenly we understood that this fig-
ure did not exist. To be sure, there were
great painters, playwrights, and musi-
cians, but there was no longer a respected
place in society as moral authorities that
Europe would acknowledge as its spirit-
ual representatives. It no longer ex-
isted as a realm in which supreme values
were enacted.

We walked toward the square in the
old city near which I was then living, and
we felt an immense loneliness, a void, the
void in the European space from which
culture was slowly withdrawing.  

"Werfel's speech was not at all naive and
it has not been lost. It was one of another speech, one that Robert Musil
read in 1935 to the Congress for the
Defense of Culture. Like Werfel, Musil saw a danger not only in fascism
but also in communism. The defense of
culture for him was the defensa-
mament of culture to a political struggle (as everyone else thought at the
time) but on the contrary it meant the protection of culture from the mindlessness of politici-
ization. Both writers realized that in
the modern world of technology and mass
media, the prospects for culture were not
bright. Both among Werfel's opinions were very closely related to Paris. How-
ever, in all the political and cultural dis-
cussions I heard, he would have almost nothing to add to what they
have said, and I feel, in such moments,
very close to these friends, these
time moments, irrevocably Central Eu-
ropean.

"At last, after hesitating, he sent the
letter after all to Jean-Paul Sartre. Yes,
he was the last great world cultural
figure: on the other hand, he is the very person who, with his theory of "existentialism,"
provided, in my opinion, the theoretical
basis for the abolition of culture as an
artistic expression. It is indefinable.

Despite what he might have
been, he did respond promptly to my
friend's letter, and it appeared in
Le Monde. Without this intervention, I
would have to say, whether the police would have finally returned (nearly a year later) the

The New York Review
10.

The last direct personal experience of the West that Central European countries remember is the period from 1918 to 1938. Their picture of the West, then, is of the West in the past, of a West in which culture had not yet entirely bowed out.

With this in mind, I want to stress a significant circumstance: the Central European revolts were not nourished by the newspapers, radio, or television—that is, by the "media." They were prepared, shaped, realized by novels, poetry, theater, cinema, historiography, literary reviews, popular comedy and cabaret, philosophical discussions—that is, by culture. The mass media—which, for the French and the Americans, are indistinguishable from whatever the West today means to be—played no part in these revolts (since the press and television were completely under state control).

That's why, when the Russians occupied Czechoslovakia, they did everything possible to destroy Czech culture. This destruction had three meanings: first, it destroyed the center of the opposition; second, it undermined the identity of the nation, enabling it to be more easily swallowed up by Russian civilization; third, it put a violent end to the modern era, the era in which culture still represented the realization of supreme values.

This third consequence seems to me the most important. In effect, totalitarian Russian civilization is the radical negation of the modern West, the West created four centuries ago at the dawn of the modern era: the era on which the modern man is a product of the scientific, philosophical, artistic, and political achievements of the West in the past two or three centuries.

The development of the science of literature, the development of the science of the stage, the development of the science of music, the development of the science of the cinema, the development of the science of the press, radio, and television, of all the arts, of all the sciences, of all the humanities, of all the social sciences, are all developments without which, it seems to me, the destruction of the West could not have been effectively carried through.

On the contrary, in the course of the last twelve years, I have been forced to find that I have no longer a sense of the reality of the world I live in, a sense of the world I am a part of, a sense of the world I am. I feel like a foreigner in my own country, I feel like a stranger in my own home, I feel like a alien in my own skin.

11.

After the destruction of the Austrian empire, Central Europe lost its ramparts. Didn't it lose its soul after Auschwitz, which swept the Jewish nation off its map? And after the Germans have been torn away from Europe in 1945, does Central Europe still exist? Yes, its creativity and its revolts suggest that it has "not yet perished." But if to live means to exist in the eyes of those we love, then Central Europe no longer exists.

More precisely: in the eyes of its beloved Europe, Central Europe is just a part of the Soviet empire and nothing more, nothing more.

And why should this surprise us? By virtue of its political system, Central Europe is the East; by virtue of its cultural history, it is the West. But since Europe itself is in the process of losing its own cultural identity, it perceives in Central Europe nothing but a political regime; put another way, it sees in Central Europe only Eastern Europe.

Central Europe, therefore, should fight not only against its big oppressive neighbor but also against the stubborn, relentless

"The weekly publication Literary news (Literary Journal) which had a circulation of 300,000 copies (in a land of three million people), was produced by the Czech Writers' Union. It was this publication that over the years led the way to the Prague Spring and was afterward a platform for it. It did not resemble such weekly chronicles as Time which have spread throughout Europe and America. No, it was truly literary: in it could be found long art chronicles, analyses of books, the articles devoted to history, sociology, and politics were not written by journalists but by writers, historians, and philosophers. I don't know of a single European weekly in our century that has played as important a historical role or played it as well. The circulation for Czech literary monthly varied between ten thousand and twenty thousand copies, and their level was remarkably high, in spite of censorship. In Poland reviews have a comparable importance; today there are hundreds of underground journals there.

April 26, 1984
The Rites of Martha Graham

Martha Graham Dance Company at the New State Theater, Lincoln Center, February 28-March 18, 1984

Howard Moss

To produce a version of Stravinsky's The Rite of Spring at the age of ninety is an unlikely prospect that Martha Graham's life has taken on an aspect of her work—triumph wrested against odds, whether of time or fate. Graham seems more and more like her chosen heroine, more like Emily Dickinson and Emily Bronte, of course, than like Clyten

estra, Medea, Joan of Arc, or Jocasta, yet they are all women transfigured by extraordinary experience. Graham's drama consists of turning despair into psychological release, the worst blows life can muster into mystery, whether over the self or in art. The Rite of Spring pro

vides no opportunity for the dramatiza

tion of triumph, a human sacrifice and a primitive ordeal of renewal, it is a commu

nal, not heroic, and though it has a central figure, the Chosen One, her choice is random and she is not of the slightest psychological interest. The only questions are: how is she going to be killed, and how quickly.

I have seen three productions of the Stravinsky work in the last year: Paul Taylor's (on TV), Jean-Pierre Batten's, and my own, a trio of Stravinsky works at the Met, and now the Graham. The Bonne

fous was all effort and no impact; it had the urgency of a tea dance at the Paris Ritz. Taylor's version, the most eccentric, exploits the score for unexpected pur

poses, making use of the profiles seen on Greek vases—one foot lifted, the other fixed, the face positioned at right angles to the feet—the flicker of silent movies, and what appeared to be subway crowds, to dance out its detective-story format. There is a certain method in Tay

lor's madness. The Rite of Spring may propitiate the gods, but its first business is finding a body to be killed, and so the mystic of original sin is not as far-fetched as it first seems. Taking the word "mysti

ery" literally, it junks the Russian folklore (how does Graham?) and the primitive and the ritualistic as well. Taylor is too good a choreographer to trivialize the nature of the music itself. Instead, he minimizes it, wanting to suggest, perhaps, how much habit and routine may have replaced ritual in modern life. Taylor's Rite is raffish and elegant and cleverly updates the original purpose of the score.

Graham meets it head-on; her two main characters are the Shaman and the Chosen One, a role Graham danced to Massine choreography in 1930 when Stokowski introduced the music to America, and her version proves once more that the three great early Stravinsky scores—The Firebird, Petrouchka, and The Rite of Spring—are only danceable in part. Even Balanchine's Firebird stops dead in the wedding scene, and ends, to glorious music, in pageant and tableau. I have never seen a successful Petrouchka or even heard of one beyond the original Diaghilev-Nijinsky staging. The scores are too much of a good thing. In The Rite of Spring there is no possible way of relating the intensity of the music itself; the violence and dynamics of the great climaxes are beyond the power of the human body to express. No one has ever heard chords

at the inter-—large, high-oriented swag

gers that eat up stage space in record time. The women shuffle in menacingly close to each other, rigid, fearful. The dance is essentially one of random catastrophe suddenly striking, of men against women, of nature against hu

man. Entangled, it is too often halting at a clasp, off balance, the men often look as if they are beginning a somersault—the Shaman's two helpers actually complete a cart

wheel. Bending from the waist, arms ex

tended, the men make wide, ramble

ous gestures; sometimes they stop com

pletely and sit on the floor—a watchdog chorus—dramatically appropriate since they are waiting, just as we are, for the woman's big solo. The movements seem to be meant for large-bodied men, yet they remind me of the entrances Graham and Erick Hawkins made years ago in American Document—the same pushing impatience with the air in front of them. The men are primal strength, the women wound-up springs, equally threatening. There are a hundred Graham trade

marks, we have come to know: the con

tractions, their hands plucked to the forehead, the one knee bent with the other leg ex