The Historical Context

It is commonly assumed that the ethnic diversity of Eastern Europe is the consequence of the migrations of peoples over many centuries and that the region has been peculiarly destined by history to be the cockpit of nationalities conflict in Europe. In fact, ethnographic maps published in the middle of the nineteenth century indicate that Western Europe may have contained at that time almost as linguistically diverse a population as Eastern Europe itself. ¹ This conclusion may be supported by more recent research which suggests that at the time of the French Revolution only a half of French citizens spoke French as their first language and that, even as late as the 1950s, as many as two-thirds of Italian schoolchildren did not understand the language spoken by their teachers.²

Contrary to the popular assumption, the differences between Western and Eastern Europe in respect of language and identity only really emerged during the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The strong national states established in Western Europe in the wake of the French Revolution assimilated into the majority nations most of the smaller linguistic and cultural groups within their borders. Through compulsory education in the official language, through service in the army, bureaucracy
and professions, and through mass migration into the new industrial cities, the weak collective consciousness of Cornishmen in England and of Breton-speaking peasants in France was almost entirely obliterated and replaced by a larger consciousness of English or French identity. The understanding in Britain, France (and America) that nationhood rested on constitutional allegiance rather than on linguistic or confessional affiliation facilitated the construction of national identities which were capable of comprehending, accommodating and eventually absorbing minority groups.

In Western Europe it was in the first place states which defined nations and impressed identities upon them. In Eastern Europe, by contrast, nations acquired their self-consciousness before the arrival of modern states in the region. The romantic nationalism of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries created nations in Eastern Europe which crystallized not around stated jurisdictions and institutions but instead around mythologies of a common language, history and destiny. The new nations born of churchmen, librarians, folklorists and language reformers were defined by narrow criteria of language, liturgical affiliation and a conviction of shared historical suffering, while imperial domination meant that the more embracing notions of constitutional nationhood remained for the most part underdeveloped. The consequence of the region was a proliferation of small nations, each of which was convinced of its own unique identity and desirous of its own separate statehood. The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a succession of wars of liberation by the new nations against their imperial overlords which served to reinforce their newly acquired identities.

After the First World War, the peacemakers sought to make national states in Eastern Europe. Considerations of international security and economic