

**“SETTING THE BACKGROUND: AN ASSESSMENT
FROM NORTH OF THE BORDER”**

James R. Payton, Jr.

Dr. James R. Payton, Jr., is Professor of History and Chair of the Department of History at Redeemer University College, in Ancaster, Ontario, Canada. He also served as executive secretary of CAREE (Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe) 1998-2006, and is currently CAREE’s president. He presented this paper to open the CAREE conference on November 17, 2006 as part of the theme (addressed by 14 speakers) **Inter-church and Inter-religious Tensions in Post Communist Eastern Europe: Can Americans Serve as Reconcilers?** Several other papers follow in this issue, the remaining series of papers will appear as Part II in the November 2007 issue.

In this presentation, I want to set the background for our discussions today on our conference theme, “Inter-church and Inter-religious Tensions in Post-Communist Eastern Europe: Can Americans Serve as Reconcilers?” To do that, I intend to draw on my experience of studying and teaching the history of Eastern Europe “north of the border.” My comments offer a Canadian assessment on the question we are considering.¹

For the past twenty-two years, I have served as a history professor at Redeemer University College (in Ancaster, Ontario), where I teach a first-year introduction to Eastern European history and upper-level history courses on the Byzantine World, Ukraine, the Balkans, Orthodoxy (a course cross-listed in the Religion & Theology department), and an honors-level seminar on Kosovo. Over the years, students’ initial awareness of and familiarity with Eastern Europe has gone through some significant changes, reflecting what was happening in the world and being disseminated in the mass media: in the early 1990s they knew enough about the former Communist Bloc to be keenly interested, by the mid-1990s their focus had shifted to the warfare in the former Yugoslavia, and at the turn of the millennium they knew about NATO’s bombing campaign on behalf of Kosovo. However, with the shift of media attention to the “war on terror” in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attack on the twin towers in New York, most students over the last few years come into their first class on Eastern Europe without any particular familiarity with the region or its history—a far cry from what their parents and grandparents’ experienced, through the Cold

¹The coordinator of the conference, Paul Mojzes, assured me that the theme was not meant to overlook Canadians in the reconciliation endeavor. Even so, I thought that a presentation of a Canadian view on “American” (in the narrower sense most commonly used, to refer to the USA and its citizens) involvements might prove helpful in opening up perspectives on the question.

War years and the heady and challenging days of the early Post-Communist period in the region. It has certainly been an interesting experience to continue teaching these courses in this brief period in which student awareness of the region has so dramatically changed.

Teaching about Eastern Europe makes eminently good sense in Canada, and specifically in the larger Hamilton region in southern Ontario, where Redeemer University College is located. The Canadian approach to multi-cultural society encourages immigrants to remain loyal to and proud of their homeland, while assimilating into Canadian society. With that approach, Canada has and celebrates numerous immigrant communities from around the world—including several from Eastern Europe. The province of Alberta boasts several large Ukrainian communities; the city of Toronto has the world's largest concentration of Macedonians outside the country of Macedonia (in excess of 200,000); in the Georgetown region of Ontario is a large Croatian community; and the greater Hamilton region, where our university is located, has several well-established Eastern European communities—from Romania, Slovenia, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Macedonia; a stand-offish one from Russia; and large communities from Serbia and from Ukraine. Both I and my students have abundant opportunity to interact, directly and personally, with fellow citizens and neighbors on the streets where we live, people whose roots we study in our courses on Eastern Europe.

I am a dual citizen: I was born in the USA and spent a good portion of my life there, but the last twenty-five years I have lived in Canada. A few years ago, I also became a Canadian citizen. My wife is a Dutch Canadian, and I have increasingly found myself genuinely at home in Canadian society. I have found Canadian perspectives, emphases, and approaches compelling and have embraced them as my own, for the most part. I appreciate my American citizenship, but I must admit that I identify more closely with Canada. I will draw from that sense of personal distance to offer a view from north of the border.

We are dealing especially with “inter-church and inter-religious” tensions in our conference theme, so I should probably indicate some of my qualifications for entering into that area. While my Ph.D. is in history and that is the discipline in which I teach, I have been trained in religion and theology and have been actively involved in inter-church and inter-religious meetings, both in North America and in Eastern Europe, over the last several years. I approach such meetings, and the question with which we deal today, though, as a historian. That means that I am concerned with geopolitical and historical backgrounds, with what has

gone on and is happening “on the ground.” Awareness of that background is a prerequisite to dealing effectively and responsibly with peoples and religious groups anywhere—and certainly in Eastern Europe.

In the presentation which follows, I will set forth a historical overview of the American government’s involvement with Eastern Europe. While that involvement has not touched on specifically inter-church or inter-religious issues and is thus outside our particular concerns in this conference, the pattern of American governmental involvement has been reflected in the efforts of some Americans who have been involved in ecclesiastical and religious endeavors in Eastern Europe. I will consider that pattern and contrast it with other American initiatives which have manifested a different and more promising approach.

American Governmental Involvement in Eastern Europe

As the nineteenth century began, there were no free, independent nations in Eastern Europe. There had not been any since 1795, when Poland suffered the last of the three dismemberments which brought the formerly large and powerful nation to an ignominious end.² Poland had been the only self-governing Eastern European nation ever since 1526.³ So, for a long period of time, the various peoples of Eastern Europe were subordinated under one of the imperial governments—Ottoman, Russian, Prussian, or Habsburg—which dominated the region. During the nineteenth century, two of the peoples in the region managed a modicum of independence: in 1816, the Serbs received the status of an autonomous principality within the Ottoman Empire, with further agitation resulting in 1878 in full independence; Romanian struggles led to independence in 1878; and in the early twentieth century, the Bulgars declared independence from Ottoman rule in 1908.⁴ All three of these achieved the independence of only a portion of the territory to which each thought it

²In 1772, the Habsburg Empire, Prussia, and Russia (Poland’s neighbors) had aggrandized chunks of formerly Polish territory to themselves; in 1793, Prussia and Russia had helped themselves to some more; and in 1795, all three neighboring powers completed the dismemberment. The Polish state had become so weak that it could offer nothing more than verbal resistance.

³In the August 29, 1526, Battle of Mohacs, Louis II, who served as king of both Hungary and of Bohemia, was killed. According to the Treaty of Vienna, a family compact signed between the Habsburg and Bohemian ruling families in 1515, if either ruler or his descendants should die without an heir, the empty throne would fall to the ruler of the other country. Since Louis died childless, the Hungarian and Bohemian thrones became the possession of the Habsburg ruler. With this, Poland was left as the only self-governing Eastern European nation after 1526. (All the nations of the Balkans had been swallowed up by the Ottoman Empire by the late fifteenth century.)

⁴The Greeks achieved independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1830. While Greece is often included as one of the Balkan nations and is considered part of Eastern Europe (for obvious geographical reasons), in much historiography of the past half-century it has not been considered Eastern European, since it did not fall into the Communist Bloc. Since this conference is focused on the question of Post-Communist Eastern Europe, I will leave it to the side for this presentation.

was entitled.

During the nineteenth century and for the first seventeen years of the twentieth, the USA followed a policy of isolationism, so there was no involvement on the part of the American government with any of the Eastern European peoples. Among Americans themselves, though, the case was different. Several Protestant missions reached into various areas of Eastern Europe.

Eastern Europe was hardly lacking in outside intervention, though. Aside from the four empires which dominated the region were the “Great Powers”—Great Britain, France, and Russia. Indeed, their interaction shaped most of what ultimately happened to the peoples and nations of Eastern Europe.

In all this, the Great Powers did not exactly drape themselves in empathetic glory. Their heavy-handed involvement showed scant regard for the aspirations, hopes, and desires of the various subject peoples of Eastern Europe. Their chief concern was to assure their own best interests and privileges, in large part by assuring that none of the other Great Powers managed any significant advantage and so upset a delicate balance of power in Europe as a whole. The Congress of Berlin of 1878 was the most obvious example of Great Power indifference toward the peoples of Eastern Europe. Although it affirmed the independence of Serbia and Romania, it disregarded what the Bulgarians (with Russian help) had recently accomplished in liberating a substantial amount of land from Ottoman dominance. The Congress of Berlin reversed almost all this, returning most of the territory to the Ottomans; further, it reduced Bulgarian holdings to a small fraction of what it had just come to possess. Even that pittance (called “Eastern Rumelia”) was only allowed to be an autonomous principality within the Ottoman Empire, so Bulgaria was thus put under the general oversight of the Ottomans again. Beyond this, the startling decision to shift the governance of Bosnia from the Ottoman Empire to the Habsburg Empire, as a form of compensation for perceived Habsburg losses, showed cavalier indifference to the assertions and hopes of the recently established Serbian state, which laid claim to significant portions of Bosnia. None of this met the hopes of Eastern European peoples recently imbued with the nationalistic aspirations originally spawned in Western Europe in the aftermath of the French Revolution and subsequently disseminated in the eastern portion of the continent.

In due course, the outbreak of World War I and the eventual engagement of the American government in it resulted in the first American governmental involvement with

Eastern Europe. President Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points" set forth self-determination for the nations of Eastern Europe as a main goal in America's participation in the war; this would entail the dismantling of the imperial powers, in favor of entities established according to the romantic nationalist model. This version of nationalism avers that people who share a common territory, heritage, and language are, and have the legitimate claim to govern themselves as, a nation. The Allies endorsed this goal and welcomed the American involvement that seemed to turn the war. However, as the Allied leaders established national borders in Eastern Europe after the war ended, the idealism of the Fourteen Points had to give way to the European allies' determination to punish those on the losing side. So, Hungary was established as a separate nation in the Treaty of Trianon, but since Hungary had been a nearly equal partner in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (after the *Ausgleich* of 1867), and that Dual Monarchy had been one of the losing powers, Hungary was punished: as against romantic nationalist expectations, Hungary was stripped of nearly 70% of its land and about 50% of its Magyar-speaking population.

The promises of the first American governmental involvement in Eastern Europe were not kept. To be sure, given the intermingling of the various peoples of Eastern Europe, the romantic nationalist notions were idealistic, but that had not kept the peoples of the region from hoping them or from believing American promises that they would be granted. Instead, each of the nations of Eastern Europe established in the aftermath of World War I had large minorities within their designated borders and usually considerable numbers of their "people" outside those borders, in neighboring states. Some of the leaders and intelligentsia among the various Eastern European nations recognized and remembered the default on this American promise.

After the war had come to an end and the borders were established, the American government returned to its isolationist policy (at least, as regarded Eastern Europe) and had no further direct involvement with the region. Even World War II did not change this: while the American government and its military forces played an important role in that war, the initiatives it took were not in Eastern Europe.

The first actual involvement of the USA in Eastern Europe came in March of 1947, when the British gave up on the Greeks in their civil war and handed the problem over to President Harry Truman and the American government to resolve. (Significantly, this involvement was in the Balkans.) Beyond the limited role played by the USA in helping that

conflict come to a resolution, the USA's relationship to Eastern Europe was largely confined to being the "other" for Communism—apart from one significant exception, recently commemorated. In late October and early November of 2006, the world marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. The American government (and the United Nations) all but promised wholehearted support for the Hungarian freedom fighters but failed to deliver on their promise. Understandably, this proved profoundly disheartening for the Hungarians and others in Eastern Europe who hoped for deliverance from Russian Communist domination.

The next time the American government got involved in Eastern Europe was in the Bosnian conflict in the early 1990s. This involvement, however, was in part stimulated by the perceived benefit for presidential campaigning and was subsequently limited by the necessity of the elected president appearing to do something while risking little. The eventual initiatives pushed by the American government in the Bosnian conflict, however well they played "back home" in the USA, manifested scant understanding of the respective participant groups in the conflict, their views of their opponents, or their histories with each other. Thus, however well-meant these initiatives may have been, they often served to aggravate or worsen the situation.

The same needs to be said of the role played by the American government and its NATO allies in the 1999 conflict over Kosovo. The Rambouillet Treaty sprung on the Yugoslav leadership demanded, in its closing sections, concessions for virtual NATO occupation of the country.⁵ None of the leaders of any of the democratic parties of Yugoslavia could possibly have signed that document. That Slobodan Milosevic did not sign it was no surprise; nor was it surprising that the peoples of Yugoslavia rallied around their flag and nation. That NATO and USA leaders expected the bombing campaign to bring Serbia quickly to sue for peace showed scant understanding of the people, their history, or what they expected of their leaders.

Further, the subsequent histories of Bosnia in the post-Dayton Accords era and of Kosovo in the period since the establishment of UN oversight have hardly struck Eastern Europeans as dramatic success stories. While these failures cannot simply be blamed on the USA, both of the resolutions of the conflicts came through extensive American pressure, and both of the arrangements for governance and oversight owed most to American direction and

⁵These are found in Chapter 7, Appendix B, of "Interim Agreement for Peace and Self-Government in Kosovo" (the official designation for what was commonly referred to as the Rambouillet Treaty).

promises. Neither has been, even by a generous assessment, successful.⁶

American governmental involvement in Eastern Europe has been limited and flawed in some significant ways. For the purposes of our considerations in this conference, the most significant of those is that the USA's involvements have been regularly marked by ignorance of the histories of the peoples of Eastern Europe. These histories have shaped the ways the various peoples understand themselves, their neighbors, and their interrelationships. These histories have also shaped the ways Eastern European peoples have learned to perceive "outside" nations which want to have their way in the region. What the USA (with the UN and NATO, to be sure) has done has not resulted in reconciliation, even if it has resulted in cessation of hostilities (at least, for the time being). No one should be surprised if Eastern Europeans are something less than keen on further American governmental involvements in reconciliation initiatives in the region. To be sure, they can hardly afford to turn down financial support or trade possibilities with the significant American economy, and Eastern European government leaders inevitably seek good relationships with American political leaders. But the USA's initiatives toward reconciliation in the region have been "weighed in the balances and found wanting" (Daniel 5:27 [KJV]) by many Eastern Europeans.

Americans' Involvement in Eastern Europe

What this indicates to me, and what I try to communicate to my students, is that familiarity with the history, culture, and heritage of the nations of Eastern Europe is necessary if we want to serve them in any way. If we North Americans are not just going to do something that makes us feel good, but are going to try to help them effectively, then we need to know their history, culture and heritage. Only when that is the case can and do North Americans contribute beneficially.

We can see this through both good and bad examples in the Post-Communist period. Scores of organizations and churches from North America sent evangelists, missionaries, and other sorts of religious workers into the region. Many of these erstwhile helpers were ignorant of the people whom they hoped to serve and the history (especially the religious history) of those to whom they sought to minister; thankfully, that was not the sole story, though.

⁶This is cogently shown in two works published by the United States Institute of Peace: see Elizabeth M. Cousens & Charles K. Cater, *Toward Peace in Bosnia: Implementing the Dayton Accords* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), and William G. O'Neill, *Kosovo: An Unfinished Peace* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002).

*East-West Church & Ministry Report*⁷ [hereafter, EWC&MR], edited by Mark W. Elliott (a long-time member of CAREE) has reported on various initiatives of evangelical (and some other) North American groups which have offered a wide array of ministries and initiatives in Eastern Europe. From *EWC&MR* and other sources, one can readily find that, too often, ignorance of the history, heritage, and culture of the peoples ostensibly being served have marred these endeavors. In the early 1990s, a Hungarian columnist expostulated against the hordes of erstwhile American evangelizers who thought they were bringing Christ to Hungary, declaring that Christ had already been there for almost 1000 years.⁸ In the same vein, a few years ago, a respected leader in my own denomination started a would-be mission endeavor which he called, “Bringing Christ to Russia”—and this only a few years after Russia celebrated the millennium of Russian Christianity.

Not long ago, I read a report of an American evangelist who engaged in “street preaching” on subway platforms in Moscow—preaching in English. Further, I recently learned that there is now somewhere in Ukraine a “Southern Baptist” church. What is the point of trying to transplant American denominations into Eastern European soil? Would it not be much better (and humbler) to work with parallel organizations and churches which are already indigenous in the various countries, organizations and churches which already understand and have some sense of how to relate to their own culture? Is it not arrogance to attempt to evangelize or have religious influence without even bothering to learn about the history, heritage, and culture of those to whom ministry is supposedly to be offered?

Such would-be helpers will be no help in dealing with inter-church and inter-religious tensions. In fact, these are the kinds of people who have exacerbated them. Anyone with a modicum of understanding of the history of Eastern Europe’s various churches and other religious organizations, of their struggles and suffering under Communism, and of their hopes for help from American Christians in the wake of the collapse of Communist hegemony in the region, but who also knows how all too many American Christian enterprises conducted themselves, will hardly be surprised that such indigenous Eastern European churches and religious organizations have welcomed governmental restrictions on “foreign” religious initiatives in their countries in the last few years.

Thankfully, though, there have also been other Christian initiatives from North

⁷This journal began in 1993 and has published four issues annually since then.

⁸The column was entitled, “Misguided mission impossible,” written by László Limbó, in the column “Natio Hungarica” in *Budapest Week*. (Regrettably, in the copy passed on to me by a scholar also interested in Eastern Europe, the date of publication does not appear.)

America which have operated from a humbler and more informed approach to Eastern Europe, one shaped by an understanding of the history, heritage, and culture of those with whom it has interacted in the region. *EWC&MR* and other journals have carried reports of such endeavors. One of these organizations is CAREE (Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe), which organized this conference. For nearly fifty years, CAREE has brought together North American Christians who have an interest in, knowledge of, and a desire to help out in Eastern Europe with people of Christian, other, or no faith from Eastern Europe, in the pursuit of peace, justice, and reconciliation. CAREE has sponsored conferences and meetings and has long produced *Religion in Eastern Europe*, an English-language journal which offers the best of religious and scholarly information available, from sources in both Eastern Europe and North America. CAREE has brought together in North America people who are well-versed in the history, heritage, and culture of Eastern Europe and helped them find ways of serving effectively and beneficially in and for the region. For that, CAREE (and other such organizations) could also rely on some specialized academic institutes which focused especially on promoting understanding of Eastern Europe.

Regrettably, though, with the end of the Cold War and the tensions with Islamists over the last several years, just at the point where we have a particular need for people well-educated in the history, heritage, and culture of Eastern European to contribute helpfully to the pursuit of reconciliation in the region, funding for those training institutions has declined precipitously. In the decades since World War II, such institutes were founded to deal with the perceived threat offered by the Communist Bloc. Prior to the Cold War, there had been no place in the western world where one could do graduate work and obtain advanced degrees in Eastern European studies, but when the Communist Bloc arose as a danger, programs were established in Russian and Eastern European studies. However, now that Eastern Europe is no longer a threat, the funding for these programs has dried up. A friend who is a professor in Britain advised me that two such programs have been shut down in his country. Here in North America, the University of Colorado at Boulder offered excellent training and published scores of valuable studies on Eastern Europe, but early in this twenty-first century that program was closed. Funding now is, predictably, suddenly available in the post-9/11 period for study programs in Middle Eastern studies or Islamic studies. Someone might well cynically say, “same song, second verse.”

This is why organizations like CAREE are so important. We may not be large in

numbers, but we gather people who have interest in and are well informed about the history, heritage, and culture of Eastern Europe. That is the sort of background and capabilities needed if North Americans are to serve as reconcilers in the inter-church and inter-religious tensions in Post-Communist Eastern Europe.

So, if Americans are to serve as reconcilers, it needs to be people like those in CAREE. My students and I have found that, once Eastern European people (whether living in Canada or in Eastern Europe) find out that we know about and respect their history, heritage, and culture, they are abundantly willing to interact with us. Such open interaction is foundational to any viable endeavors for reconciliation—here in North America or in Eastern Europe.