



„RECALL: A Study of Central European Places of Memory for Collective Remembrance”

2023-1-HU01-KA220-HED-000154286

Module Title: *Creation of the modern states (1918–1920) - Three New States, Three Paths*
(Topic 4)

Target Duration: 28 minutes (video) + 15-20 minutes (e-learning tasks)

Target Audience: University students, researchers, and history enthusiasts

This 28-minute module examines the rebirth of Central Europe after the Great War, focusing on the emergence of three new states—Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary—between 1918 and 1921. It explores how these nations, formed under vastly different circumstances, navigated collapse, reconstruction, and the creation of new political orders. Presented by Piotr Cichoracki, Lukáš Lexa, and Árpád Hornyák, the session follows the divergent yet interconnected paths of nation-building, leadership, and myth-making that shaped the political and social landscape of the interwar period.

It opens with a conceptual introduction (Cichoracki) outlining the radical transformation of Central Europe at the end of World War I: the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the disappearance of imperial frameworks, and the sudden rise of new political entities. While Czechoslovakia emerged as an entirely new construct uniting Czech and Slovak lands, Poland reappeared on the map after 123 years of partition, and Hungary—though formally independent—experienced territorial collapse and the trauma of dismemberment. At the center of these processes stood three leaders who personified the rebirth of their nations: Tomáš G. Masaryk, Józef Piłsudski, and Miklós Horthy. Though differing in ideology, background, and political experience, all three became symbols of leadership amid instability and transition.

The Czech perspective (Lukáš Lexa) focuses on the Czechoslovak legionnaires, soldiers of a still-nonexistent state who, during World War I, transformed the struggle for national independence into a myth of moral legitimacy. Drawing on the legacy of Hussitism and national revival, the legionnaires were celebrated as modern heroes of freedom and order, and after 1918, their symbolic capital deeply shaped the identity of interwar Czechoslovakia. Their military role—from the Rota Nazdar in France to the control of the Trans-Siberian Railway in Russia—became the cornerstone of the Czechoslovak founding myth. Yet the legend of the legionnaires was not without controversy: questions over their political privileges, ideological divisions, and subsequent politicization remain debated to this day.

The Hungarian perspective (Árpád Hornyák) interprets the dissolution of Austria-Hungary as a national catastrophe—the end of a thousand-year continuity of Hungarian supremacy in the Carpathian Basin. The 1918–1920 years, marked by the loss of two-thirds of historical Hungary’s territory and population, gave rise to a politics of grievance and revisionism that dominated Hungarian thought throughout the interwar period. Hornyák traces how the newly formed successor states—Czechoslovakia, Romania, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes—redefined regional power, forming the Little Entente under French patronage to maintain the postwar status quo. For Hungary, this new European order represented not



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liberation but isolation—a reversal of historical roles that shaped national identity and diplomacy for decades to come.

The Polish perspective (Piotr Cichoracki) centers on the dramatic return of Józef Piłsudski to Warsaw on 10 November 1918 and the rapid consolidation of power in the reborn Polish state. Emerging from imprisonment in Magdeburg, Piłsudski’s symbolic authority allowed him to unite fragmented centers of power and assume control as Interim Head of State within weeks. The narrative traces his balancing act between social turmoil and foreign uncertainty: from left-wing governments and democratic reforms—such as universal suffrage for men and women—to the early Polish-Ukrainian and Polish-Soviet conflicts. By early 1919, Piłsudski’s leadership had laid the foundations of a republican and democratic state, though his later political evolution would complicate this legacy.

The module concludes (Cichoracki) by comparing the early trajectories of Masaryk, Horthy, and Piłsudski—the founders of new statehoods in a disintegrating imperial landscape. Masaryk’s internationally recognized leadership made Czechoslovakia a model of democratic idealism; Horthy’s authority, forged in civil war and foreign occupation, marked the conservative reassertion of order; and Piłsudski’s pragmatic approach created the political and military framework for Poland’s rebirth. Together, these case studies illustrate three distinct but intertwined paths to modern statehood—liberal-republican, authoritarian-conservative, and revolutionary-national—revealing the diversity and fragility of Central Europe’s interwar political experiments.

Primary Goals of the Module:

- **Contextualize** the political and social transformations that led to the creation of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary after World War I.
- **Compare** the founding narratives and leadership models of Masaryk, Piłsudski, and Horthy as representatives of divergent nation-building strategies.
- **Demonstrate** how war, occupation, and ideology shaped the creation of new state institutions and collective identities.
- **Link** the early interwar state-building experience to later developments in European diplomacy, nationalism, and memory politics.

EU Key Competences Addressed in This Module:

- **Cultural awareness and expression** – Understanding how national myths and political symbols contributed to modern European statehood.
- **Critical thinking and digital literacy** – Evaluating sources (memoirs, photographs, propaganda, press materials, monuments) and their evolving interpretations.
- **Social and civic competence** – Examining how democratic ideals, national aspirations, and social reforms intersected in shaping postwar societies.





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Learning Outcomes:

By the end of the session, learners will be able to:

- Identify the historical conditions that led to the emergence of new states after the collapse of Austria-Hungary.
- Describe the political, military, and ideological foundations of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary between 1918 and 1921.
- Analyze the leadership strategies of Masaryk, Piłsudski, and Horthy, and their influence on early interwar politics.
- Explain the role of the Czechoslovak legionnaires in the myth-making and legitimization of the new Czechoslovak Republic.
- Evaluate the Hungarian experience of territorial disintegration, isolation, and revisionism within the postwar European order.
- Assess the challenges of building a unified Polish state amid internal division, social upheaval, and external threats.
- Compare the institutional and ideological paths of the three new states, identifying both common regional patterns and national distinctiveness.
- Reflect critically on the relationship between historical leadership, political myth, and collective memory in the construction of modern identities.
- Discuss how the legacy of 1918–1920 continues to shape Central European historical consciousness and European integration debates.
- Apply historical reasoning to interpret how state formation processes after major conflicts can produce both cohesion and new fractures.

The creation of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary after 1918 encapsulated the triumph and tragedy of Central Europe’s rebirth: liberation intertwined with loss, democratic promise shadowed by instability. By comparing these three paths, learners grasp how the collapse of empire gave rise to competing visions of modern statehood and how their legacies still inform the region’s political and cultural imagination today.
