Expanding Realism Readers: 
George Liska’s Geohistorical System of Thought in IR

by

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Abstract

The paper looks into George Liska’s writings, searching for some common themes in his work and pointing out where Liska was influential and/or original in the IR community. The authors focus on three major themes recurring in Liska’s work throughout the decades. The first part of the paper examines the CEE thinker’s treatment of realism and his proposition for a new, systemic method – a ‘geohistorical’ approach advocating the cyclical nature of world history and a theory allowing for the theorization of expansion and evolution. The second section is an investigation of George Liska’s work on Central and Eastern Europe playing a crucial role in Liska’s conception of the Heartland and change of international order.

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INTRODUCTION

Who is George Liska? And why if at all is he relevant for the students of International Relations (IR) today? This paper will seek to introduce this Czech-born scholar to the IR audience in Europe by focussing on his major publications and the key themes recurring in his writings: a geohistorical account of world policy offered as a development and expansion of realism and an alternative to standard social science approaches in IR; the U.S foreign policy and its status of an empire and a recently installed hegemony; the place and role of Central and Eastern Europe in this system of thought; and the Slavic and Russian foreign policy in the context of the Cold War and the post-Cold War international order.

Jiří Liška was born in Czechoslovakia where he studied law at Charles University, Prague. In 1948, Liška was an officer at the Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry. Following the Communist coup-d’état in 1948, he left the Czech lands and started working in the exiled Council of Free Czechoslovakia, becoming George Liska. In 1955, he earned a doctorate in philosophy from Harvard University. Later on, Liska joined the Center for the Study of American Foreign and Military Policy, University of Chicago as assistant professor of political science and research associate. The Center was directed at that time by Hans J. Morgenthau who invited Liska to work there and who had extensive influence over George Liska’s later professional career and theoretical background. Liska has lectured at several U.S. universities and is currently a professor emeritus of political science at The Johns Hopkins University and its School of Advanced International Studies. As a political exile from a small country, Liska refused the obvious option of becoming a regional expert and embarked upon the imaginative analysis of world politics from the realist perspective.

Liska called himself a ‘romantic realist’ (Liska 1998a: 2). His personal experience from Czechoslovakia made him suspicious of any kind of legalism and life-preserving humanitarianism. Soon after his arrival in America, Liska was caught in the debate – or controversy, as he remembers – between ‘realists’ and ‘idealists’ in the discipline of International Relations (IR). But that was not the only split in the academe at that time: the other ran between earlier-exiled Europeans and native-born Americans. ‘Whereas the realism of also the more conservative than liberal but uniformly would-be Americanized Europeans was toned down from the Treitschkean glorification of Bismarckian power politics, the Americans’ idealism was filtered through the prism of a domestic kind of Realpolitik.’ (Liska 1998a: 3). It was at that time that realism became synonymous with rationalism as the
‘doctrinally correct management and representation of political reality in action’ (Liska 1998a: 4).

Liska chose to follow the objective of representing political reality as ‘power-normative’ (Liska 1998a: 5). Over time, Liska’s realism gained a distinctively ‘progressivist’ nature, reinforcing the history-evolutionary dimension. The following sections of this paper, split into two parts, draw upon the most influential and concise of Liska’s publications, first and foremost on his trilogy from the late 1990s or, as he puts it, a ‘guide to an imaginary anthology’ of earlier works: *Expanding Realism* (Liska 1998b), *In Search of Poetry in the Politics of Power* (Liska 1998a) and *Resurrecting a Discipline* (Liska 1999). These three volumes sum up, develop and further explain the key aspects of Liska’s ‘system of thought’ (see below) as it evolved from his *The New Statecraft* (Liska 1960) and *Nations in Alliance* (Liska 1962) to the widely read and studied (in the USA) *Career of Empire* (Liska 1978) to *Twilight of a Hegemony* (Liska 2003).

Just as his approach is aiming to cover the complexity of world politics in its actual shape and flow, his prose is full of complex, intertwined and all-embracing sentences with many excursions in all directions, which make it sometimes very hard to follow the stream of thoughts. As the author himself notes, his understanding and rendition of world politics is not ‘one that can be stated in brief sentences composed of short words, the desideratum of undergraduate textbooks and widely accessible popular best-sellers’ (Liska 2003: 57). And, indeed, his books combine ‘stream-of-consciousness type of meditation (drawing on a compound of policy, history, and speculative theory) with not always readily visible but persistently followed, and in that sense rigorous, method’ (ibid). It is, however, worth the effort for a contemporary student of International Relations and International Politics to read Liska’s writings since it brings out some interesting aspects of (classical) realism while offering a unique blend of Morgenthauesque power-affirming approach with the best of historical realist tradition as presented and practiced by Henry Kissinger or George Kennan. Given the resurgence of interest in geopolitics in the post-Cold War Europe, the timing for introducing George Liska to the wider IR audience seems just right.
1 REALISM EXPANDED... OR REDUCED?

1.1 Space and Time Matter

George Liska has brought an original approach to the inquiry after the nature and causes of International Relations. His *geohistoricism* is a projection of realism into (actual) world politics combining space/geography with time/history (Liska 1998b: vii). His ambition has been to build on the foundations laid by conventional (!) realism (ibid: viii) to present a ‘speculative view of world politics intimately tied up with world history’ (ibid). His analysis of spatio-temporal aspects of international relations started off the interest in the power-normative essence of world politics. Later on, however, Liska came to realise that his geohistoricism as a variety of realism had to extend realism’s traditional preoccupation with ‘power-balancing interactions to encompass (…) associate problems of expansion and evolution’ (ibid). His ‘speculative’ approach relying on progressive historicization of world politics – which he prefers over ‘international’ politics – has become Liska’s commended way to ‘understanding’ which he aims at and favours against ‘theory’ as an overly detached concept for grasping the nature and dynamics of world politics (cf. Liska 1998a, 1999 and 2003).

The following section will provide an overview of the key aspects of George Liska’s bid to expand realism in order to capture both the evolutionary and cyclical nature of international relations by interrelating world history with world politics.

1.2 Theorising instead of theory

George Liska is a believer in a ‘system of thought’ rather than a ‘theory’. Such a system of thought or a ‘speculative approach’, as he puts it, must be not only intellectually but also operationally manageable (Liska 1998b). ‘Since, even were it possible, a formally perfect theory is not necessary for meeting the two irreducible requisites of academically legitimate discipline, an appropriate method of inquiry into a substantively valid subject, the methodological issue is scaled down to considering the kind of theorization that is sufficient.’ (Liska 1999: v).

In his speculative theorizing, as opposed to theory-making, Liska seeks to deepen the operational focus restricted to geographical space by systematically researching the formative effects of evolving history/time (cf. Liska 1998b: 3). The scholar distinguishes between *scientific* and *speculative* approaches, the former aiming at theory, the supreme achievement
of the professional, while the latter seeking ‘mere understanding’ which Liska sees as the domain of the philosopher (ibid).

The speculative approach, favoured by Liska, is therefore presented as a viable alternative to scientifically rigorous theory. It is a system of thought ‘devoted to eliciting a vision rather than producing a description passing for analysis or pretending to the status of theory.’ (Liska 1998b: 289) Its ultimate objective is to provide ‘intuitive understanding’ which is to amplify the substantial scope of traditional realism. (Liska 1998b: 10) Liska’s is a dialectical view of social reality (see Section 1.4 below) and his approach is different from scientific theory in both method and objective. The basic premise of this speculative approach is the recurrence of ‘comparable configurations subject to identifiable mutations’ (Liska 1998b: 289) – mainly the overall environment and type of order.

Liska’s ambition is to fill a void between what he calls the ‘two most ambitious approaches of recent years’ (Liska 1998b: viii): neo-realism and post-structuralism. He accuses the former of a neglect of the domestic in restrictive view of the structure (cf. Liska 1998a: 16-17) while criticising the latter, namely in the guise of critical theories, for the ‘resignation of either will of ability to address real-world politics’ (Liska 1998b: 8). Liska is in general disagreement with all ‘constructing’ which he sees as a shift from scientific theories and speculative theorizing in the process of investigating reality to ‘esoteric’ investigation of the problem of knowledge and reality as such (ibid) which radically problematizes ‘conventional’ understanding¹. Most critical of all, however, is Liska of behaviorism, which he blames of falling victim to marginal professional accomplishments, obsession with quasi-rigorous method and little connection and relevance to actual world politics (cf. Liska 1998a: 16-17; Liska 1998b: 7-9 and 151-152; and Liska 1999: 2-3).

Given the above, it comes as no surprise that Liska is convinced that the discipline of IR has been ‘derailed into scholastic in-house controversies’ (Liska 1999:4) and imparts his view on the ‘great’ debates (inverted commas by George Liska) as ‘tragi-comedic’. Liska’s books are, in fact, a return to pre-behaviouralism and, in effect, a rejection of Morgenthau’s social scientific turn (for a debate of Morgenthau’s turn see Guzzini 1998). This is quite unexpected, given Morgenthau’s mentoring, guidance and role in Liska’s academic existence, including a preface to George Liska’s New Statecraft (Liska 1960: vii-ix). Instead of the endless series of ‘ever more unreal theory with ever less speculative writing on policy’ (Liska 1989b: ix) and the fruitless competition of ‘would-be comprehensive theories’ (Liska 1999:

¹ For a rather unfortunately formulated critique of feminist approaches in IR see Liska 1999: 5.
Liska wants to offer an approach which would be ‘close to a theory of evolution as a continuous process susceptible of both generalization and particularization in degrees of rationalization and institutional elaboration or differentiation of basic functions, constitutive of progression either within individual or between only successive or also operationally interlocking state systems’ (Liska 1998b: 287).

Liska’s is an activist, involved approach aiming at an ‘informed understanding to replace scientific rigor with ‘intuitive sympathy’ (Liska 1998b: 277), seeking to investigate the unity of politics around a finite number of issues and related processes (ibid). Drawing upon ‘traditional’ or ‘classic’ realism with its unifying concept of balance of power and equilibrium, this general conception and, in Liska’s eyes, perhaps even a philosophy of politics which, as he claims, never was nor was it represented as being a theory of International Politics ‘in the social-scientific meaning of theory’ (sic!) (Liska 1998b: 5). How Morgenthau’s later writing fits within this perception of realism presented by Liska is quite puzzling, once again.

Both ‘conventional’ realism and Liska’s geohistoricism are primarily focussed on power ascribing it the principal role in politics and perceiving it not only as a means but also as a ‘proximate end’ (Liska 1998b: 6). Both of these systems of thought are, according to Liska, practically and intellectually valid approaches to world politics since even the classic realism is/was more of a ‘conceptual instrument of socially useful activity than a branch of social science strictly speaking’ (ibid). And both are drawing upon traditions of European diplomacy (cf Guzzini 1998). Neither of them, however, should be involved in predicting the future but rather in useful projections.

1.3 Projection vs. prediction

George Liska bases his geohistoricism on historical analogies. Given the evolutionary aspect in his system of thought and the cyclical nature of world politics (see Section 1.4), Liska is not aiming at ‘science –validating prediction’ (Liska 1998b: 151) but at ‘empirically-analytically and normatively disciplined policy prescriptions’ (ibid) which rest on the ‘right kind of projections while admitting openly to a prophetic bias’. Liska is not very detailed on the prophetic aspect, as he is not on more of his unconventional extensions of realism, but goes on to profess that a projection ‘is of the right kind when it corrects for the misleading limitations of a linear mode. It does so when, incorporating both the countervailing

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2 Although Liska admits that there is some diffuseness in this tradition of IR thinking without there being a single, uniquely authentic realism.
interactional and cyclically evolutionary dynamics into trends suggested by its linear variety, projection itself becomes cyclical.’ (ibid) Such correction, according to Liska, is desirable and necessary for strategically rational policies responding to an actual environment.

Past and present developments can thus be projected into alternative futures and can serve as the basis for the promotion or prevention of a certain behaviour or acting (cf. Liska 1998b: 161-166). Given the cyclical patterns in world politics and the prevalence of continuity over change, in the evolutionary progression of world affairs, projections are ‘dialectically sophisticated’, i.e. reflecting the temporal-evolutionary dimension, too.

1.4 Progression not progress
The above has been conductive enough to making an obvious conclusion that Liska’s has been a Hegelian inspiration. George Liska advocates a teleologically neutral process in world politics, one that is qualitatively and normatively neutral (cf. Liska 1998a and 1998b). His geohistoricism is presented as being able to reveal the various and typically complex manifestations of evolutionary progression whose overarching theme is that of a changing composite environment of world politics.

This sequentially patterned evolution, however, does not rule out (socio-political and functionally instrumental) revolutions ‘propelled by the balance-of-power dynamics’ (Liska 1998b 282-3). Yet, the chief focus is on the chain of causation and on structurally or functionally comparable events that can be identified over time in order to establish continuity and differences (convincingly illustrated in Liska 1998b: 93-150). This process-illuminating depiction of the ‘historical dialectic of thesis, antithesis and provisional synthesis’ (Liska 1998b: 276) reveals, as Liska believes, a moderate institutionalisation of power balancing throughout which both actors and the arena crystallize and go through a series of escalating crises where the final or terminal crisis ends up in the demolition of the system. It is in this evolutionary progression that scholars and practitioners may perceive, according to George Liska, the overall presence of power-balancing moves and appreciate the benefits and indispensability, indeed, of alliances (e.g. Liska 1962, 1968a, 1998a, 1998b and 1999). ‘Placing the balance of power and alliances at the center of a usable theory, and costs and benefits at the center of the latter, reflects the correct representation of real politics as a branch of political economy, provided the latter is conceived sufficiently broadly to uphold the primacy of politics relative to economics.’ (Liska 1999: 7). And it is in time and space, at the same time, that Liska wants to present the three ‘grand objects of conceptual clarification and actual practice of world politics’ (Liska 2003: 56): competition and conflict (i.e. alliances and
balance of power), single-power supremacy (i.e. empire and hegemony) and institutionalised constraint and cooperation (i.e. world organization and concert of power).

What renders Liska’s geohistoricist writing quite tricky, however, is the fact that he believes in progression and conservatism, even though he sees states as obsolescent in the post-Cold War context (see also the discussion about Czech-Polish confederation in Section 2.1 below). He concentrates on power and interests in community while perceiving the state as nothing more than just one of the historical forms of such a community. His writing reveals that state systems are approximating ideal-typical features and his evolutionary progressive analysis can show even some anomalously pathological systems (such as the interwar Europe or the post-Cold War quasi-state system – cf. Liska 1998b: 284).

The cyclical course of world affairs shall set, according to Liska, a state system on the road towards confederative associations or a community-type institutionalisation: a regional community or empire (Liska 1998b: 281), the focus being on prosperity rather than on power in the former and on stability rather on security in the latter. The two forms or systems differ in that institutionalised community ‘retains at its best the residues of the ethnically normative features that distinguish statism, whereas an empire (…) introduces that latter’s operationally disciplinary features into pluralism.’ (ibid). He blames progressivists of favouring the community over empire and the community-type ‘post-norm’ against the structural norm represented by the territorial state. Although being otherwise critical of constructivism as an approach placing crudely defined structure at the centre of analysis (Liska 1998b: 275-8), Liska highlights norms (in the normative-theoretical sense) as crucial in the evolution and progression of world politics. Norms as value-institutional and cultural factors (ibid) in their ideal-typical form represent, as Liska believes, the ‘fully rational strategic implementation of the balance-of-power dynamic (Liska 1998b: 280). Values and institutions are thus the crucial modifiers of the structure, function and process.

The changing nature of the composite environment of world politics encompasses war and peace as well as stability and prosperity. The dynamics is kept by a constant tension – between opposing forces and trends. This brings us to another Hegelian trait in Liska’s publications: his reliance on ‘schisms’. There are all kinds of schisms present in Liska’s system of thought: sacral-secular, East-West, maritime-continental, normative-existential, statist-societal etc. These schisms act as ‘organic-operational modifiers’ of elementary theory of balance of power (Liska 1999: 29-40). Liska does an admirable job illustrating these schisms and showing how they actually modified the balance-of-power dynamics in various settings and throughout centuries. And it is in these historical frescos that Liska’s claim of
hegemony being disruptive of the power politics of balance of power appears to hold true and appear only logical.

In his work on the U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War era and his ‘speculation’ over the empire and hegemony (e.g. Liska 1960, 1962, 1967, 1968a, 1978, 1982, 1990b and 2003), George Liska has presented the benefits of the former and the downside of the latter dominating world politics. Especially in his last publication, *The Twilight of a Hegemony: The Late Career of Imperial America*, a rather personal and (admittedly) slightly more emotional than ‘objective’ collection of thoughts on the post 9/11 turmoil on the international scene and a third one in a series on books on the empire/hegemony phenomenon, he points out the post-statist aspects of the post-Cold War era which has brought an ‘order-resistant situation’ which typically invites empire-type consolidation, as previously shown in Liska 1998b. He warns against hegemonism as ‘social pathology’, as a ‘degenerate variety of the universally manifest system- or society-wide tone-setting influence or pre-eminent power and polity. Liska’s vision of a post-Cold War hegemonism, where power has been, once again, conceptually reduced to its hardest-core force (Liska 2003: 48), with the USA unbridled in its global acting is a gloomy and alarming one and he calls for careful rebalancing and appeals to America’s ethical values in its ‘spreading of democracy’. This rebalancing may come, perhaps quite paradoxically for some, from East Central Europe as the key to the Heartland which has always played a crucial role in Liska’s geohistoricism.

2 THE HEART OF EUROPE IN THE HEART OF THE FIGHT FOR THE HEARTLAND

Besides American foreign policy in the Cold War era, the two other key areas of Liska’s life-long focus have been East Central Europe (ECE) and Russia. We are even tempted to say, with all due respect to the importance of author’s writings on the United States, that it is East Central Europe (in particular Czechoslovakia) and Russia (be it in the old tsarist or the newer communist guise) that constitutes the cornerstone of Liska’s thinking both for personal reasons and because of his conviction that the Central European settlement would have a deep impact on Europe, and indeed on global international relations.

2.1 Zwischeneuropa or Mitteleuropa?
In the following section on East Central Europe, we will proceed in three steps: First, we will explore Liska’s efforts to define the concept of East Central Europe, including his understanding of the constituent parts of East Central Europe; second, we will analyse Liska’s broader regional view that comprises the key outside players – Germany and Russia, and, finally, we will sum up Liska’s application of his geohistorical approach to the region.

The definition of (East) Central Europe reveals the sources from which Liska has drawn inspiration for his writing about the region: The first repository is classical geopolitics, and, particularly, of the type professed by Anglo-Saxon geopolitical scholars such as Mahan (1890/2004) or McKinder (1904). Following McKinder’s famous dictum about Eastern Europe, the domination of which will be the decisive factor in the fight for Heartland and the rule of the world, Liska postulates that East Central Europe can be called ‘Zwischeneuropa’, i.e. the territory between Germany and Russia comprising Poland, the Czech and Slovak Republics, Belarus and Ukraine (Liska 1994: 85).

Another trait of the Anglo-Saxon geopolitics imported to the geohistorical approach and echoed in Liska’s treatises on East Central Europe is the dichotomous conception of sea and land powers. While almost all of East Central Europe would fit nicely in the land-based category, its misfortune lays, according to Liska, in the fact that (1) it was surrounded by far stronger great powers (a land power in the East and an amphibian one in the West) and (2) although it almost at all times sided with the finally always victorious sea powers, it invariably fell prey to its non-maritime neighbours (cf. Liska 1990a: 5). Thus East Central Europe is seen as the crucial juncture in both spatial and temporal sense: Geographically, it is on the border between the maritime and continental areas, and historically, it constitutes the key battlefield over the character of the European system (Liska 1990b: 462).

Here, Liska clearly does not speak about the wider conception of East Central Europe, as neither Ukraine nor Belarus have ever been proponents of coalitions with maritime powers. Instead, the author limits East Central Europe to the core territory of the three Western Slavic nations – Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Narrowing East Central Europe down in such a radical way is Liska’s first major cut at the classical Heartland theory but by no means the last one.

In fact, this move is a typical example of how history supersedes the geopolitical dimension of Liska’s geohistoricism: Starting with a clear-cut geopolitical approach, Liska often modifies his stance under the weight of temporal deviations from the apparently law-like rule of classical geopolitics. Yet while this strategy allows Liska an unrivalled measure of
flexibility, it shifts, at the same time, his conception further away from the late Morgenthau’s stress on social scientific rigour of political realism (see Part 1).

One of the advantages of East Central Europe defined in these terms is to allow Liska to construe the entire world as a ‘concentric geopolitical structure’ (Liska 1994: 20): ‘Czechoslovakia forms with Poland the center of the smallest circle ‘bounded by Germany and Russia, Germany is at the center of the next larger one comprising European West and East, and classic Europe is poised to become again the focus of the largest sphere encompassing the Western and Eastern Hemispheres.’ (Liska 1990a: 55)

In this context, it is interesting to note that in none of the definitions of East Central Europe offered by Liska we find any room for the Danubian countries, in particular Hungary and Austria. But Liska’s concentration primarily on Czechs and, by derivation, on Poles and Slovaks is important for one more reason than justifying the region’s key position in geohistorical terms. It also allows us to see the Western Slavs as emissaries of the also Slavic (though not Catholic) East whose duty it is to finally reconcile Europe’s East and West. This is, in Liska’s eyes, the final task to be carried out by East Central Europeans in order to prepare the reunited Europe for the ascendancy of the Orient.

Though not explicitly stated, the role of Germany and Russia in the wider Central-to-East European context is already beginning to unfold. Although Germany has been since long part of the technologically advanced European Community, the European West is, according to Liska, (other than economically) exhausted and incapable of further containment of its biggest and economically most powerful member that is strongly attracted by the power vacuum in Central Europe: ‘Neither in the shape of an only economic, including monetary, union nor as a repoliticized super-state could the western complex durably deflect the Germans from the East.’ (Liska 1990b: 458) Although Liska is far from predicting a renewed competition in the region in military terms, he does speak about economic ‘colonization’ of East Central Europe using the term ‘Middle Europe’, hence hinting at the infamous concept of German-dominated ‘Mitteleuropa’ (ibid.)

Thus, in Liska’s view, 1990s are witness to the (at least partial) failure of the Western European project which, originally propelled by political figures like Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer, had aimed at replacing the old all-European heartland with a new one, positioned geographically more westwards. But while this ‘neo-Carolingian’ strategy, in Liska’s eyes building on the empire of Charlemagne, was sustainable during the Cold War
years, it is no more the case after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the German unification. (Liska 1994: 35; cf. Liska 2003: 52)

The European Community is thus conceived of as a utopian project, through which the French made the last attempt to reverse the ages-old European history of bids for military hegemony and, as a consequence, are able to make real the equally old dream about a renewed European unity à la Pax Romana. The French urge to limit American influence in Europe has only ripened at the break-down of the Communist Bloc but the fruits of this strategy were not to France’s taste – it was not so much the withdrawal of American influence from Europe that has been the main result, but rather the renewed German ascendancy (Liska 1998a: 42ff). Hence Germany’s role in the current (West) European order and in the relation to East Central Europe is seen as partially contradictory, and the rise of German influence in East Central Europe is interpreted as a landmark of the existing system’s demise.

The role of Russia in Liska’s analyses of East Central Europe also bears Janus-like features: On the one hand, its retreat from Central Europe marks the dawn of a new era in the region’s relations to the Eastern giant. On the other hand, Liska believes that Russian presence in East Central Europe is a necessary prerequisite of a renewed Europe. Yet on this point, Liska’s views underwent a partial change during the 1990s – from radical proposals about a Czechoslovak-Polish confederation with quasi-constitutional ties to both Germany and Russia/Soviet Union to a more moderate expression essentially thereof (cf. Liska 1990a, 1994 and the somewhat changed rhetoric in Liska 1998a: 41).

In addition, Liska’s newer writings acknowledge openly what had been implicit in his works published at the beginning of the 1990s: That his analysis of Poland, not to speak about other countries in the region such as Hungary, heavily depends on Liska’s stress on the importance of the Czech Lands, indeed is directly derived from the latter, and that Poland’s inclusion in East Central Europe is more of a tribute to McKinder’s Heartland Theory than a sincere conviction about Poland’s role in the Russo-German settlement. This is particularly pertinent in Liska’s framing of Bohemia and not East Central Europe as ‘an eastern heartland’ (Liska 1998a: 41).

The Russo-German reconciliation, however, presupposes the acknowledgement of Russia’s substantial role in Europe, and indeed its very belonging to Europe. But the conception of Russia as a European power has been challenged in recent years, according to Liska, by both West Europeans and newly independent Central Europeans. And yet, the thinker is convinced that Russia is more indispensable for Europe than ever. Already in 1990
Liska was surprisingly correct in predicting a Russian rise and warned against any attempts at the exclusion of Russia from European affairs (Liska 1990a) and he feared, using a historical analogy, that a politically and economically reborn Russia may become for Western Europe what Macedonia once became for Greeks (ibid.).

Having just described the role of Russia and Germany in East Central Europe, we can turn to the question of future interactions of the two key flanking powers in ‘Zwischeneuropa’. If we combine the wisdom of classical geopolitics (no matter whether of Anglo-Saxon or German provenience) with the lessons of history mentioned by Liska, we cannot possibly be surprised that we arrive at a very murky picture of the region’s future: The German economic inroad coupled with the rising assertiveness of German foreign policy on the one (Western) side and ‘Russia alienated from Europe’ defined strictly in neo-Carolingian, i.e. French-German terms (Liska 1990a: 8), on the other (Eastern) side.

Traditionally, Germany and Russia could choose one of two basic options: Either a collision or a condominium, neither of them being an attractive pathway for any of the two countries today. And here comes a surprise: Even though Liska has always been sceptical of radical change in international relations (hence his mistrust towards the alleged communitarian illusion on which Western European integration is based), he proposed a very untraditional way out of the dilemma between collision and condominium – a way purportedly more acceptable not only to Russia and Germany, but also to smaller East Central European nations.

His recipe for a peaceful and durable solution of the ‘eastern heartland’ problematique was to first create a confederative polity comprising Czechoslovakia and Poland. While the new confederative structure would be based on a voluntary decision of both parties, their choice would be propelled by fears of the birth of another cordon sanitaire in East Central Europe and the region’s final partition between the neighbouring powers. The second, even bolder step would be to politically tie up the confederation to both Germany and Russia.

According to Liska, not only would this German-Russo-Czechoslovak-Polish square ‘consist of a precisely defined competence of interparliamentary commissions, linking the smaller with the greater powers, to suspend the implementation of controversial decisions on defense, foreign-political, and international-economic issues pending their re-examination and ratification by compelling national majorities’ (Liska 1990a: 32-33) but it would be possible to limit the two great power policies in order to respect those of the two smaller partners (ibid.). Liska labelled his conception as ‘Ottonian renovation’ in reminder of the ‘Ostpolitik’
of the Saxon emperor Otto III who linked his political success to cooperation with Bohemia and Poland.

This unexpected proposal reflects one of Liska’s interesting theoretical postulates which differentiates him from his neorealist colleagues, i.e. his rejection of the eternal character of nation states (see Section 1.4). Liska has since long advocated the idea of the decline and eventual demise of the nation state (cf. chapter 3 in Liska 1994 with the title Passing of the State System and Renascence of Pluralism and Liska 1998b). And, truly, with such depth of historical knowledge, Liska’s rejection of durability of the nation state as ahistorical is only logical.

What is, however, not so logical and consistent with other thoughts of the scholar, is the revolutionary character of the aforementioned proposal. For instance, when challenging the long-term success of Western European integration, Liska impugns the possibility of overcoming the conflict-proneness typical for the traditional European system, while commending Charles de Gaulle as the heroic figure that balanced out the supranational feature of the European Communities with his concept of L’Europe des patries (cf. Liska 1998a: 30-31). This seems to be in direct contradiction to his suggestions for the two East Central European countries which should give up their sovereignty in exchange for even less tangible benefits and rely to a large extent on the two countries to which Czechoslovakia and Poland had been traditionally most mistrustful.

However, three qualifications in defence of Liska’s position can be made here. First, for all his insistence on the absolute essentiality of Czech-Polish rapprochement and, by extension, these two countries’ cooperation with Germany and Russia, Liska gradually ceased to insist on the creation of political structures that would establish a firm institutional framework for the quadrilateral relationship. Instrumental in this shift might have been the split of Czechoslovakia which demonstrated how underestimated nationalist tendencies in the region were and how overemphasized the cultural-political affinity was among Slavic nations.

In addition, the stress laid originally on the confederative structure constitutionally linking the four countries gave place to a looser (and consequently more vague) conception of a ‘neo-medieval’ union of the Western Slavs with Germany, balanced by the persisting unspecified ‘procedural and substantive links to Russia, culturally in keeping with the Czech Slavophile tradition’. Notwithstanding the absence of any comparable inclination of Poland to Russia and the non-existence of any substantial Slavophile movement in the Czech Lands, the idea of integration into the West while keeping ties with the East, though rather general in form, has indeed been resurgent recently.
Finally, Liska himself questioned the feasibility of such a Central European confederation project since he was well aware of historical animosities between Czechs and Germans, and Poles and Russians. In Liska’s view, the rising nationalist sentiments in the region have been contingent upon the lack of ‘middle, enlightened conservatism’ (Liska 1990b: 455) that would prevent the Czechs and Poles from fruitless accusations of (older or newer) enemies, allowing instead for an historical reconciliation of the region’s constituent nations and the flanking powers. Thus only a return to conservative, i.e. sentiment-free, restrained policies would guarantee the proposal’s success.

2.2 Russia: Enemy or Part of West?

The analysis of East Central Europe makes it possible for us to move to Liska’s interpretation of Russia since he usually considers the country from two angles: The first is the above mentioned facet of Russia as part of the European system to which the country is connected via Central Europe, even though Russia’s role is not, as Liska claims, confined only to a peaceful settlement of East Central European affairs and to the creation of a counterbalance to a potential German bid for hegemony in the region: In extension of the previous argument, the second view of Russia is that of as so far the last land power attempting to overthrow the leading sea-dominating country. Liska, however, widens the scope of his analysis and draws a grandiose picture of Russia’s future incorporation into the Occident to which Russia has always rightfully belonged. It was, among others, these ideas about Russia and Liska’s accusations of putatively excessive anti-Sovietism of some American politicians that has earned him the reputation of a highly controversial thinker.

Liska’s approach to Russia again reveals his commitment to Hegelian philosophy of history: He depicts the country as both the archenemy of the United States and the West in general but at the same time he admonishes the American foreign policy elite of excessive anti-Sovietism and insists on Russia being part of the wider West. This contradiction is solved in the typically Hegelian way of creating a synthesis which transcends and unites both originally contradictory statements: Liska puts forward a synthesis on two planes, different both temporally and in scope. While the first version was being developed from late 1970s through 1980s and advocated a U.S.-Soviet co-regency, the second, more forcefully espoused in the post-Cold War era, has seen the unification of the Teuton, Latin and Slavic Europe(s) as
the condition sine qua non of a successful defence of the Western world vis-à-vis other civilizations.

Analysing Liska’s view of Russia, we will follow in his footsteps in these three moves: First, we will analyse his treating of Russia as both the enemy and an integral part of the West; second, we will point to his Cold War ‘condominium’ proposition and, finally, we shall turn to Liska’s all-encompassing view of clash of civilizations not unlike Huntington’s, in which Russia’s allegiance or enmity to the West will be decisive for Western success during the final civilisational showdown.

Seeing Russia as the main competitor of the United States is only natural if we consider the author’s inclination to traditional geopolitics and his insistence on the distinction of sea and land powers. Liska believes that all of Europe’s, and, for that matter, the whole world’s, history can be interpreted as a continuous battle of land and sea, marked by the unremitting efforts of the land power to encroach on the insular enemy (for an historical overview see Liska 1978: 7-30, for defining characteristic of insular/sea and continental/land powers see Liska 1990b: 75-96).

Such a schism between sea and land, along with the sacral-secular schism and the East-West schism, constitutes Liska’s three key determinants of international relations deriving from ‘elementary givens of physical nature’ (Liska 1990b: 43-44) and is thus essentially unavoidable (for a limitation see the last paragraph of Part 2, p. 19). In addition, in cases like that of the US-Soviet competition, the presence of a rear continental power (China) may precipitate the efforts of the leading continental power to challenge the sea hegemon by striving to become an amphibian power before an alliance is forged between the other two members of the great power triangle (United States and China) (Liska 1982: 141).

However strongly Liska accentuated the Russian enmity towards the United States, he somewhat paradoxically saw Russia as an indispensable part of the wider West. This prima facie antimonic belief was based on a twist Liska gave to his geohistorical writings every time the purely conceived geopolitical laws deflect ed from his views of history. Oscillating between the advice given by the geopolitical and historico-cultural aspects of his approach, Liska envisioned the rise of Islam as another challenger to Western dominance already in 1980.

The conviction that another (and maybe more ominous) danger lurks further south and east of Russia is thus intimately connected with Liska’s defence of the Eurasian empire’s traditional ties with the West. Moreover, grounding his opinion in Russian and European
history, he has attacked two commonly held beliefs which posit Russia as ultimately alien to the Western civilization and its values.

First, he defended the thesis that Moscow was not a stranger to the European system of the 18\textsuperscript{th}-19\textsuperscript{th} centuries and not even a latecomer, but only a ‘delayed participant’ (Liska 1990b: 293). Secondly, moving to more up-to-date events, he severely criticized the anti-Sovietism implicitly present in much of American political thinking during the Cold War. Liska believed that it was again the missing conservatism (or ‘only a bastard conservatism’ as he bluntly put it) that did not allow the United States to acknowledge that the Cold War was just another round in the centuries-old fight for power (Liska 1982: 2-3). And - as Liska so often reminds the reader - it is the neglect of history’s lessons that prevents true conservatism from blooming today. In a flurry of what would come close to constructivism today, he adds that consequent upon the lack of conservative moderation, America’s self-perception becomes excessively idealized and the Soviet other correspondingly exorbitantly demonised (ibid.).

Thus, Liska’s analysis aims at showing that while Russia bears both eastern and western traits, the Russian empire could not and cannot be denied a place in the fold of – if not the narrowly defined ‘conventional West assembled in the Atlantic Alliance’ then at a minimum – of the wider Occident (Liska 1990b: 437-438). Reflecting the paradox of Russia (or the Soviet Union) being both the archenemy of the more narrowly defined West and a constituent unit of the wider one, Liska has proposed two ways of how to overcome the dilemma.

The first one is the idea of US-Russian co-regency spanning the entire globe and based on the mutual acknowledgement of their respective interests and zones of influence. Although Liska qualified this proposal by prior opening of the Soviet system to ‘the humane instincts of an older and happier Russia’ (and as a true conservative thus forged a connection between ‘old’ and ‘happy’), he insisted that US-Soviet cooperation was necessary not in some distant future when Russia is open wide enough, but already in short term (Liska 1982: 5). What is more, he believed that Soviet interventions abroad (such as that in Afghanistan) were expressions of Soviet confusion and a logical consequence of the American failure to elevate Russia to the status of a global co-stabilizer (op. cit.: 6-7).

Needless to say, Liska propounded this solution mainly during the days of the Cold War, and also right in the demise of the communist block, in the early 1990s (Liska 1990a: 11). Still, this proposal is striking in at least two respects: First, Liska defended ‘the enlightened conservatism’, i.e. moderation in the relation between great powers to such an extent that he did not hesitate to advocate appeasement, a policy so compromised by its
connection with the submissive stance of Western powers vis-à-vis a dictatorial regime. Yet, no matter how much enlightened it was, Liska’s was still conservatism with a capital C, an approach deeply sceptical of progress and betterment of men. Thus the author posited himself between the hawks who advocated a tough stance towards the ‘Empire of Evil’ and the doves who believed in a final merger of the two systems on the basis of a humanistic progressivism.

Secondly, one would rather expect such insistence on the necessity of a pragmatic, yet at the same time appeasing – some would say too friendly – policy towards the Soviet Union from a person entirely detached the communist system and certainly not from an émigré from Czechoslovakia. Apparently, however, Liska sought balance in his writings which would reflect not so much his origin as his conviction that the best option for the United States (and for that matter also for Czechoslovakia and other Soviet satellites) was that of culturally and ideologically unprejudiced conservatism: ‘The expatriate’s musings can be a menace to the public good only if a one-sided doctrine conceals the origins of sentimental bias behind the reasoning.’ (Liska 1982: xi)

In the course of the 1990s another version of the all-encompassing Occidental reconciliation (which has, nevertheless, always been present in Liska’s works) gained strength and in the end surpassed the narrower view of US-Russian condominium. Here, Liska added new features to his idea of co-regency, both widening it geographically to the whole Occident and deepening it from a superficial political cooperation to a more profound spiritual and cultural unity. Yet, regarding Russia as part of the Occident relies undoubtedly much more on historical and cultural reasons than on classical geopolitics which would see Russia as the very incarnation of Easternness, with its huge landmass stretching to the easternmost part of Asia. Still, Liska believes that it is ultimately culture and civilization, and not geography, which define where a country belongs. More to that, he is convinced that Russian presence as a respected partner both in Europe and in the West in general is the only way how to reinvigorate the faltering Western unity.

Thus Liska’s writings on Russia culminate in the call for the renaissance of the West which will expose the real ‘cleavage between Occident and Orient after it had ceased being overlaid with and buried under acute East-West polarity of the latest vintage’ (Liska 1990a: 27). By this move, the geohistorical approach, that had originally relied heavily on geopolitics, finally got rid of its geopolitical disguise and has become almost undistinguishable from Huntington’s clash of civilisations (for details on Liska’s discussion of the West ‘in the interplay of civilizations’ see Liska 1998a: 256f).
3 SOCIAL SCIENCE OR ACCUMULATED WISDOM?

Although Liska’s vision of the future is somewhat sketchy, we cannot deny that in his latest publications (Liska 1998a, 1998b, 1999, 2003) he succeeded in uniting all the three main topics discussed in his previous books (mainly US foreign policy, Russia’s position in the world as a great power, and Central Europe’s role) in one overarching theoretical framework. Starting with the Czech Lands as the nucleus of the East Central European heartland, he goes on to advocate stronger ties among the three Western Slavic nations who then by means of their historical connections both to Russia and to Germany function as a glue between the maritime, neo-Carolingian Western Europe and the continental, spiritually fresh Slavic East. Thus conceived renaissance of Europe will balance Western Europe’s excessively maritime leaning and return the Old Continent into the limelight of world politics. Yet just as Europe needs Russia to become whole, so does the West/Occident need the transatlantic unity. Hence the role of the United States remains that of the only power in the West capable of encouraging the tendency towards Occident’s unification.

Liska’s apotheosis of the Occidental union reaches its climax in suppressing the three schisms omnipresent in international relations: First, by incorporating Russia in the wider framework of Western maritime powers, the land-sea schism ceases to play its central role in the intra-occidental relations. The second schism – that between the East and the West is obviously removed by the same token. But, perhaps most importantly, Liska believes that Russian and generally Slavic spirituality, not being exhausted by rationalizing materialism of the more narrowly defined West, can contribute significantly to transcending of the last, sacral – secular schism.

Liska’s theoretical framework sometimes suffers from geopolitical laws being subject to historical modifications (see the definition of East Central Europe in Section 2.1). Liska’s readers cannot overlook his occasional normative slips towards idealism (once again, namely in the case of Central Europe). His ambition to present individualist approaches (as against general historicism) takes him sometimes further into a ‘unique case’ landscape populated by a bit too many exceptions and aberrations. It almost seems as if George Liska was trying to develop both a ‘grand theory’ (though not in his words) and a middle-range-theoretical framework of analysis at the same time. Like Kissinger or Kennan, Liska communicates to his readers more diplomacy than social science as his approach and hypotheses are not testable as Moravcsik would like to have them. In this respect, his realism is of the traditional/classic kind, a sum of accumulated wisdom of European statecraft. His writings are interlaced by a
distinct trait of Hegelianism but the basic tenets of realism are left untouched: power and interests still remain the defining features of world politics.

Liska’s prose might be a big challenge for most students of International Relations and International Politics but it is worth trying to go through (especially the latest) the original thinker’s publications to see a different facet of realism and get to understand some of the thinking that stood behind American academic production between 1950s and 1970s and U.S. foreign policy in the post-War period. His attempt to marry geopolitics with historicism does not make the couple a perfect match at all times but can help to understand the relationship on fairly many occasions, proving the best plea for interdisciplinary research and the awareness of complex interrelatedness.

References


