

## Johan Huizinga and Central/East-Central Europe

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In the second half of the 20th century, the influence of the renowned Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1872–1945) exceeded the borders of the Netherlands and of the scholarly discipline that he himself primarily represented and struck across several disciplines to affect the development of international humanities. If we were to name just two of the most famous cases of this influence, then they would certainly include the inspiration engendered by his medievalist studies – especially *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919) – among the first and the second generation of the French Annales School (especially Jacques Le Goff), and consequently his influence on the development of the modern history of mentalities, the history of the quotidian and social history; and secondly, the critical reception, among the circle of the former Collège de sociologie (Georges Battaile, Roger Caillois and others), of Huizinga's cultural-anthropological concept of play as the basis of culture, which the author best formulated in his work *Homo Ludens* (1938).

Considering the thematic focus of several of his key works, but also their “second life” (*Nachleben*), many sometimes regard Huizinga as primarily a historian of Western Europe. This is not true at all, since Huizinga in his thinking about the past, and in his later life in his reflections on the present and the future of Europe (which he often confronted with his deep knowledge of non-European cultures, especially India and the USA), included the historical experience of that part of the Old Continent called Central or East-Central Europe. This trace is not always evident in Huizinga, but its presence has from time to time made itself felt in the author's view of Europe as a living and dynamic organism, since one of the cornerstones of the European perspective was the idea of mediation and cultural exchange between the East and the West. As a modern and progressive scholar, educated also at the University of Leipzig, and throughout his life intensively interested in impulses from other humanities, Huizinga was open to methodological approaches emanating from all over Europe. His wide horizon was shaped by his philological-comparative university studies, from which he later turned to history. Although his personal contacts with Central and Eastern European scholars, or those from countries to the east of the Netherlands, were not very developed<sup>1</sup> – maybe with the great exception of Germany<sup>2</sup> – his knowledge of several Eastern European languages (Lithuanian and Russian) enabled him to have a better understanding of the diversity of European cultures. Huizinga's

conviction about the importance of small states for the wholeness of Europe has to do not only with his Dutch patriotism, but is deeply rooted in his personal experience as a polyglot and an expert on many cultures. These connections are still relatively little explored, as well as Huizinga's view of Russia – he lectured on the history of 19th-century Russia first at the University of Groningen in 1914–1915 and in 1935–1936 at the University of Leiden.<sup>3</sup>

Huizinga's idea of the geographic location of Central or East-Central Europe looks at first sight a bit vague. On the one hand, he understood Central Europe as a geographic area, on the other as an entity created by the economic-political interpretations of the time. This conceptual hybridity, which makes it impossible to reach a precise spatial definition of Central Europe, is however not a weakness in Huizinga's perception of the region. On the contrary, it offers an unexpectedly productive explanation. In one of his studies (*Die Mittlerstellung der Niederlande zwischen West- und Mitteleuropa*, 1933) Huizinga attempted to define Central Europe in reference to the work of German national economists Friedrich List (1789–1846) and Friedrich Naumann (1860–1919; his book *Mitteleuropa*, 1915) – and according to them included Germany in the region. Simultaneously, on the basis of the cultural and political discussions of the inter-war period, in which France and Czechoslovakia both participated, he considered an alternative, tentative understanding of the region, tending at the time towards the promotion of the Danube Basin Federation. At the same time, he shared the opinion that “[t]here is no sense at all in stretching the concept to include South-Eastern countries beyond the rivers Leitha and Sava” (Huizinga 1968, 141). Seemingly ironically, the handiest description of Central Europe became for him the railway term “Mitropa”, which “reminds us that nowadays communications set the pace everywhere” (142). Spatial fluidity, which hides behind this image of Central Europe, has its chronological counterpart in Huizinga's fluid understand of European cultural history. It could be said that just as he sees wide and fluid transitions between individual cultural periods, he sees similar transitions between regions, enabled by cultural exchange, and these transitions are sped up by civilizational progress. Similarly, just as already in 1917 Huizinga realized that “American participation in the Great War will essentially change international relations” and in Europe we must “in any case expect a massive influence” of the USA (Krul 1990, 177), after 1918 the cultural gap between the East and the West was suggestively depicted by Oswald Spengler in the first volume of *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918), about which Huizinga was – like many of his contemporaries – first enthusiastic, but later doubtful.

As a European scholar, Huizinga shared the spiritual horizon of his time. This on the one hand means certain limitations, but on the other does not disqualify us from thinking about him in the wider European spiritual context of the period. This issue of **WORLD LITERATURE STUDIES**, dedicated to Huizinga and Central/East-Central Europe, brings studies focalized around two primary topics.

The first thematic stream are the implications of the questions asked by Huizinga, but also the implications of his methods, problematizations and intuitions towards intellectual initiatives of the first half of the 20th century in Central and East-Central

Europe. It can either be a direct dialogue with these, or hidden correspondences, which sometimes can even resemble a sort of *liaisons dangereuses*, because they testify to a surprising affinity between completely different ideological and political worldviews.

The second point of focus is the presence of Huizinga and his significance for the development of the humanities in Central Europe (Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia), i.e. his reception and *Nachleben*, which have been little explored in the context of this region.<sup>4</sup> In addition, we include a study on Huizinga in Russia.

The introductory study by Anton van der Lem<sup>5</sup> explores how Huizinga's idea of Central Europe fits into his general idea of Europe. Not only Huizinga's studies on Europe but also his personal experiences with other European countries, languages and European politics (especially in the 1930s) formed his cultural and strongly ethical understanding of the European identity. As a liberal and later a cultural conservative, Huizinga is a typical representative of one possible vision of a common European identity.

The experience of the First World War and the apprehension of a cultural crisis, felt by many European intellectuals in the first half of the 20th century, the proverbial *Endzeitstimmung*, evidently has its counterpart in the positive term *Stimmung*. Huizinga's understanding of this term is the focus of the study by Willem Otterspeer.<sup>6</sup> As he shows, a version of this term can be traced also in the thinking of the Austrian-American literary scholar and Romanist Leo Spitzer (1887–1960), who like Huizinga originally studied linguistics. The significance of *Stimmung* for the humanities is confirmed by the return of this term as an aesthetic category in a number of contemporary authors (H. U. Gumbrecht, A. K. Gisbertz, F. Reents, B. Meyer-Sickendiek, P. Zajac).

In 1975, Jacques Le Goff said in an interview with Claude Mettra<sup>7</sup> that one of the central terms of Huizinga's classic work *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, besides the terms "life" and "dream", is the concept of the "image". Thinking about the image, which in French historiography led to the development of the "history of imagination" and today defines the development of the international "visual studies" ("Bildwissenschaften"), is heavily indebted to its precursors such as the Austrian art historian Max Dvořák (1874–1921) and Huizinga. A comparison of Dvořák's and Huizinga's thinking on medieval imagery from 1919, outlined by Ivan Gerát, opens the discussion on the philosophical basis of contemporary "Bildwissenschaften".

The meaning of Huizinga's second best-known book internationally, *Homo Ludens*, lies in a specific ontology of culture (even though Huizinga himself denied this interpretation), and also in cultural critique. The idea of play as the ultimate goal of human creativity had already in the 18th century the potential of an aesthetic and social utopia (Friedrich Schiller). As shown by Léon Hanssen, a comparison of Huizinga's idea of play with that of the Hungarian Marxist philosopher and aesthetician Georg Lukács (1885–1971) expands the horizon of the understanding of play as an argument in favour of human freedom, not only in the context of inter-war and post-war discussions, but also with implications for the present.<sup>8</sup>

On the contrary, the political explosiveness of *Homo Ludens* makes itself evi-

dent where Huizinga's concept of play as the basis of human culture meets its limits. The study by Geertjan de Vugt reconstructs the polemics between Huizinga and the German law theorist and "conservative revolutionary" Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) to reveal a hidden face of play (understood by Huizinga as a peaceful agon) – the "state of emergency", i.e., war. The question whether it is possible to interpret war as a ludic activity, or whether Huizinga's theory of play is resistant towards misappropriation to defend martial activities, disturbs the utopia of peaceful playfulness as human nature and has implications for political philosophy.

In Central and Eastern Europe, Huizinga's works and ideas met a diverse response. Translations of his works (often second-hand) mainly after the Second World War encountered innovative initiatives in the humanities and often came into tension with local scholarly traditions and the dominant Marxist doctrine in the theory of history of art, culture, history etc. A series of reader-response historical studies in this issue testifies to an appropriation of Huizinga in the Hungarian, Czech, Slovak and Russian context. It is the very first attempt to describe this phenomenon in a more complex way, which besides a philosophical-historical perspective offers a narrative of intellectual history. The mediators and interpreters of Huizinga in the region were specific people – scholars, literary people, translators, artists – whose engagement with Huizinga opened new themes, approaches and questions in the areas of cultural history and cultural anthropology, which enriched Central and Eastern European humanities.

In Hungary, one of these figures was László Cs. Szabó (1905–1984), whose post-war lectures on Erasmus of Rotterdam in reference to his role model or even imago Huizinga are discussed by Tamás Balogh.

The Czech reception of Huizinga, which started in the inter-war period, is mapped by Wilken Engelbrecht on the basis of intellectual inspirations among historians in protestant and Marxist circles, and on the basis of book translations and their critical reception in the present. The author shows how the interest in Huizinga in the Czech Republic always increased when the political regime allowed more freedom of expression.

In the Slovak intellectual environment, where Huizinga was discovered only after the Second World War, his work brought innovative elements into the humanities in the post-war period, and in some cases was the source of utopian fantasies, as discussed by Adam Bžoch.

The contribution by Olga Sidorova analyses the history of Russian translations of Huizinga and their reception in the Russian (Soviet) context. However, as shown by the case of Yuri Lotman (1922–1993), the presence of several Huizingian motives in the Russian humanities was not only the result of translation. Lotman's cultural semiotics in a number of places meets Huizinga's cultural history and anthropology and both are the expression of their common interest in the symbolic dimension of culture in history.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The contacts with Hungarian intellectuals are discussed by Tamás Balogh, see the bibliography in his article in this issue of *World Literature Studies*.
- <sup>2</sup> Comp. *J. Huizinga, Briefwisseling I, II, III* (1989; 1990; 1991); further comp. *Johan Huizinga, Deutschland und die Deutschen* (Krumm 2011), esp. the chapter *Wechselbeziehungen II: persönliche Kontakte* (156–197).
- <sup>3</sup> The archives of Huizinga, including his notes to academic lectures and bibliography, were described in *Inventaris van het archief van Johan Huizinga. Bibliografie 1897–1997* (Van der Lem 1998).
- <sup>4</sup> Again with the exception of Hungary. Comp. the bibliography of Tamás Balogh. About the reception of Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* in Poland, comp. *Homo ludens Johana Huizingy w Polsce* (Lipoński 2014); further comp. bibliography of post-war translations of Huizinga's works to Polish, *Bibliografia prac Johana Huizingy w Polsce po 1945 roku* (Biesiada 2014). On Huizinga in Slovakia comp. *Impulzy kultúrnej histórie Johana Huizingu na Slovensku* (Bžoch 2013).
- <sup>5</sup> In addition comp. *Johan Huizinga. Leven en werk in beelden & documenten* (Van der Lem 1993).
- <sup>6</sup> Comp. *Orde en trouw. Over Johan Huizinga* (2006). English translation *Reading Huizinga* (2010).
- <sup>7</sup> Comp. in *L'automne du Moyen Age* (Huizinga 1975, II–XI).
- <sup>8</sup> On the European contexts of Huizinga's ideas in his other works comp. also *Huizinga en de troost van de geschiedenis. Verbeelding en rede* (Hanssen 1996).

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