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Articulating Europe During the Great War: Friedrich Naumann's Idea of *Mitteleuropa* and Its Public Reception in Germany, England and the USA

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ABSTRACT

The article briefly outlines the major aspects of Friedrich Naumann's concept of *Mitteleuropa* and shows how his idea derived from the experience of the First World War. Although the plan is often viewed as an expression of annexionist war goals, Naumann actually argued for a rather informal German economic hegemony in Central Europe. The public reception of *Mitteleuropa* in Germany as well as in Allied countries is traced in detail by conducting a discourse analysis of newspaper coverage. Especially in Great Britain the Central European scheme was seen as a great menace and triggered discussions about alternative pan-European concepts. Although *Mitteleuropa* can be considered well-researched, this aspect has been surprisingly neglected by previous studies. The aim of the article is to link intellectual and cultural history by carving out the strong transnational interweavements that existed within the public debates on Europe during World War I: at a crucial moment in history Naumann's idea promoted the articulation of European thinking in wider circles.

Keywords: Central Europe, European idea, First World War, Friedrich Naumann, *Mitteleuropa*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Friedrich Naumann's *Mitteleuropa* is arguably the most (in)famous contribution to the European idea during World War I. After October 1915, this concept quickly took center stage in public debates, not only in Germany but amongst wartime enemies as well. As recent research has shown, *Mitteleuropa* remained a contentious point of discussion long after the war had ended and served as a point of reference for different nuances of European thinking well beyond the year 1918 and, in part, well into the second half of the century (cf. Stirk 1994b; Plaschka 1995; Elvert 1999). This is surprising for two reasons: on the one hand, the Great War certainly did not represent a heyday in terms of articulating plans of European unification, and from a historical research perspective was for a long time even regarded as an epoch characterized by excessive nationalism and an almost complete absence of any sense of European belonging within its politics, economy and culture. Hence, French historian Jean-Baptiste Duroselle plainly asserted: "De 1914 à 1918, il n'y a plus d'Europe" (Duroselle 1965, 261). On the other hand, it is important to note that if one considers the actual importance of *Mitteleuropa* in terms of *Realpolitik* it had no greater relevance than any of the other notions of Europe articulated prior to 1945: it was no more than a concept on paper that was never put into practice.

This prompts the question: why was *Mitteleuropa* so well-known and still is? The argument presented in this article is that the importance and longevity of the *Mitteleuropa* idea results from the fact that in reality the concept was not merely part of the German discourse on war aims, but on the contrary passed through an extreme form of transnationalisation during World War I. While the extensive historical research on *Mitteleuropa* existing nowadays focuses primarily on the concept itself and its chief protagonist Friedrich Naumann, this article outlines the public reception of the idea both in Germany and in the Allied countries by conducting a content analysis of German, British and American quality newspapers¹. Two newspapers will be evaluated per country. *The Times* and *The Manchester Guardian* for Great Britain, *The New York Times* and *The Chicago Tribune* for USA, and *Vossische Zeitung* and *Kölnische Zeitung* for Germany.

¹ Regarding the French debate see Horel 2009. The author would like to thank Kornelia Rung and the two anonymous peer reviewers for their valuable comments and help with the manuscript.

Firstly the article will briefly outline the history of the term *Mitteleuropa*, which by far transcends Friedrich Naumann's book of the same title, published in 1915. Secondly, it will provide insight into Naumann's conception of *Mitteleuropa*, and its public reception. How was the idea of *Mitteleuropa* presented and where did contemporaries see its significance? One of the hypotheses to be considered here is that the German public's reaction to *Mitteleuropa* was rather reticent, whereas British and American newspapers used the term as a powerful bugaboo, forcing their readers to negotiate fears of a Europe dominated by Germany, as well as their own ideas of European politics. Finally, the article remarks on the relevance of *Mitteleuropa* post-1918.

2. MITTELEUROPA: THE LONG HISTORY OF A COMPLEX CONCEPT

Conceptions of a Central European confederation – that is, attempts to organize a self-constructed European core mainly in terms of economic policy – had a long tradition in Germany, dating back to the early 19th century². The ideas first flourished during the Revolutions of 1848, when their attractions resonated especially within national-liberal circles. Politicians and intellectuals like Constantin Frantz, Friedrich List and Julius Fröbel were prominent proponents of *Mitteleuropa* in the public debate³. In many cases they conflated *Mitteleuropa* with other facets of German European thinking, e.g. the concept of the *Reich* (cf. Gollwitzer 1964). It is not least because of this that, having been interpreted in various ways over the course of history, the term remains somewhat vague (cf. Malecki 1996). However, the core motive of Central European thinking was to achieve economic autarchy via a (Central European) customs union whose primary purpose was to counterbalance the ascendant economic dominance of the United States. This idea eventually institutionalized in 1904, when German political economist Julius Wolf founded the *Mitteleuropäischer Wirtschaftsverein* (Central European Economic Union) (Fujise 1996, 149-161; Kieseewetter 2005, 415-421). Although there is no historical proof of

² Although ideas of *Mitteleuropa* also existed in other states, particularly the Habsburg monarchy, with regard to the period before 1945 Jacques Le Rider therefore emphasizes the German nationalist nature of *Mitteleuropa*; see Le Rider 1994, esp. 34-41.

³ For the development of the idea of *Mitteleuropa* up to the First World War: Stirk 1994a, 1-12. See also Meyer 1955, 8-115.

a concerted Central European strategy in German foreign policy prior to World War I, in 1915 *Mitteleuropa* was already present as a reference point in public debate (Theiner 1984, 135-136; Fujise 1996, 149).

3. FRIEDRICH NAUMANN AND MITTELEUROPA

At a crucial stage of the First World War, German left-liberal politician and Protestant theologian Friedrich Naumann seized upon the Central European idea within the context of the war aims debate. After its publication in October of 1915, his book bearing the plain title *Mitteleuropa* (Naumann 1915) became a bestseller that sold more than 100,000 copies within a short period of time⁴. Naumann advocated an economically and politically integrated confederation of the Central Powers in consequence of both their geopolitical position and also Italy's entry into the war on the side of the Entente at the beginning of 1915. This alliance, however, was to be enlarged on more or less federal principles after the end of the war and eventually should encompass large parts of Central and Southeastern Europe (Hecker 1994, 148-149). Naumann looked at the war as prerequisite for realizing his concept, since in his opinion only such dramatic discords could offer the chance to reorganize and reform political circumstances to such a large degree. Compared with the heavily annexationist war goal plans of the Pan-German League or the *Septemberprogramm* of Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, the *Mitteleuropa* plan must be assessed as moderate – although it did have a somewhat imperialistic bent which foresaw that Germany, by right of its position as an economic great power and cultural leader, should naturally exercise at least informal hegemony within the planned union⁵. Nonetheless, Naumann deterministically called for Germany to acknowledge the various identities and customs that shaped Central Europe, drawing harsh criticism from the political Right (Stirk 1994a, 14).

Naumann was certainly not the only one to take up the idea of *Mitteleuropa* in Germany during the First World War. Hence, different interpretations of the concept exist (Mommensen 2004, 94-117), ranging from considerations of how to increase the production of raw materials for wartime economy by intensifying cooperation to expansive-imperialistic

⁴ On the success of the book see Elvert 2003, 124.

⁵ For the discussion on war aims during the First World War see Chickering 1999, 61-63 and 169-171.

variants, as advocated for example by Ernst Jäckh. Their common goal was to achieve a closer connection between Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany; it was thus no coincidence that plans for a German-Austrian Customs Union were promoted. Not least for this reason, *Mitteleuropa* was met with heavy resistance within the Danube monarchy, where, moreover, independent ideas of *Mitteleuropa* were conceived with recourse to the Habsburg myth. In contrast to the official political line, Naumann in turn not only considered the concept in view of strategic aspects, but also took into consideration cultural-historical issues.

German newspapers addressed the *Mitteleuropa* debate astonishingly late and in quite elementary fashion. The publication of Naumann's book and its rapid popularization were at first largely ignored by both Berlin's left-liberal quality paper *Vossische Zeitung* as well as by the national-conservative *Kölnische Zeitung*. The main reason for this can be found in the close connection existing between the *Mitteleuropa* concept and the issue of war aims. The German Reich had already prohibited public discussions of the latter at the war's inception, instigated by Bethmann Hollweg's information leaflet "Merkblatt für die Presse", which was later supplemented by order of the Cabinet because, in the face of the soon crumbling political party truce, it was necessary to prevent the development of an emotional debate between proponents of the defensive war argument and confirmed advocates of annexation (Mommsen 1969, 131-132; Altenhöner 2008, 73-74)⁶. While the implementation of these specifications proved just as problematic as adhering to rules of press censorship in general, it is reasonable to assume that the *Kölnische Zeitung* and the *Vossische Zeitung* were willing, at least in the beginning, to abide by these directives⁷. In fact, both papers took up an officious stance during the First World War and collaborated with the government in terms of information policy.

Beginning in 1916, at least the *Vossische Zeitung* frequently addressed the *Mitteleuropa* theme, but generally limited its coverage to economic issues while largely disregarding its broader implications for (foreign) policy. Under the *Mitteleuropa* heading, reports by Austrian correspondents time and again stressed the purported interest of the Austro-Hungarian government in intensifying economic ties to Germany⁸. The Berlin news-

⁶ The prohibition of publicly discussing war aims was only officially lifted at the end of 1916 at the instigation of the Third Supreme Army Command. For background and consequences see Koszyk 1968, 194-197.

⁷ For an overview of the two newspapers' position in war time see Mommsen 1969, 129.

⁸ See "Der mitteleuropäische Wirtschaftsband", *Vossische Zeitung*, Nr. 112, 1. März 1916, p. 2; "Mitteleuropäische Wirtschaftsfragen", *Vossische Zeitung*, Nr. 128, 10. März 1916, p. 8.

paper was endeavoring to emphasize the – supposedly – positive way the Central European idea was being received in Austria. A leading article by Viennese political economist Rudolf Kobatsch in early 1917 concordantly underscored that *Mitteleuropa* had found “full understanding and a joyful response amongst the myriad friends of the Central European economic and customs union in Austria” and subsequently made an effort to find arguments to refute any objections put forward by both countries against the concept⁹. In a semantic sense, the term *Mitteleuropa* rapidly took on a life of its own and sometimes appeared in headlines as a mere catchphrase to make the readers believe that developments were truly moving towards an economically better integrated Dual Alliance¹⁰.

German coverage of the *Mitteleuropa* question veered between descriptions of factual integration processes – such as praise for the close cooperation between major banks in Berlin, Vienna and Budapest, that “demonstrate the vital functioning of the Central European idea in economic life” – and voicing hopes for the future. Accordingly, two articles that appeared in the summer of 1917 took care to state that although historically, the *Mitteleuropa* concept could be traced back to the 19th century, it was only through the war that appreciable segments of the German public began to understand its importance. This was to be regarded as a most welcome development, since a “well-understood Mitteleuropa” could be “the beginning of a greater union” able to contribute to freeing “Continental Europe” from English bondage¹¹.

Aside from the area of economic policy, references to Central European ideas, whether already realized or to be aspired to in future, occasionally served as a metaphor for describing cooperative moments within the Dual Alliance. This was the case in articles written about a potential union of the German and Austro-Hungarian teachers’ associations and the alleged cultural commonality existing between Germany and the Danube monarchy¹². In this respect the *Mitteleuropa* discourse tended to have few

⁹ “Für Mitteleuropa”, *Vossische Zeitung*, Nr. 44, 25. Januar 1917, pp. 1-2.

¹⁰ “Mitteleuropäische Wirtschaftsfragen”, *Vossische Zeitung*, Nr. 132, 12. März 1916, p. 16; “Das wirtschaftliche Mitteleuropa”, *Vossische Zeitung*, Nr. 313, 22. Juni 1917, p. 2; “Beginn der Verhandlungen über Mitteleuropa”, *Vossische Zeitung*, Nr. 402, 9. August 1917, p. 1.

¹¹ “Berlin - Wien - Budapest”, *Vossische Zeitung*, Nr. 313, 22. Juni 1917, pp. 1-2, and “Mitteleuropa und die Festlandspolitik”, *Vossische Zeitung*, Nr. 404, 10. August 1917, pp. 1-2.

¹² “Zur Gründung eines mitteleuropäischen Lehrerbundes”, *Vossische Zeitung*, Nr. 91, 19. Februar 1916, Erste Beilage, p. 1 bzw.; “Mitteleuropäisches aus Ost-Oesterreich”, *Vossische Zeitung*, Nr. 203, 19. April 1916, pp. 1-2.

points of contact with Naumann's conception, which was seldom expressly referred to, and if so, only in connection with the politician's extensive speaking engagements, that did not remain hidden from journalists. Thus an article covering a speech Naumann had given at a left-liberal voter's union in Teltow depicted him as a stubborn agitator, "who tirelessly asserts and relentlessly augments his vision of 'Central Europe,' carting it from Berlin to Vienna, from Vienna to Sofia and Constantinople and back again to Berlin [...]"¹³. Eventually, after the Austrian economist Gustav Stolper had published a financial commentary on the *Mitteleuropa* issue in early 1917, Naumann was given the opportunity to personally set forth his position in the *Vossische Zeitung*. In so doing, he praised Stolper to the skies for having grasped the fact that, under the changed conditions of a war economy, *Mitteleuropa* was no longer that vision of the future which he himself had called it two years before, but had in the meantime actually become reality¹⁴.

4. EUROPEAN UNITY AS A MENACE:

MITTELEUROPA ACCORDING TO THE ALLIED NATIONS

Naumann's almost wholesale exclusion from the *Mitteleuropa* debate is the more surprising if one considers how British and American newspapers reacted to it. Almost no research has been done on how the *Mitteleuropa* idea was received outside of Germany and Austria during the First World War, although the fact that Naumann's book was translated into English and French shortly after its release is no accident (Naumann, Meredith, and Ashley 1916; Naumann et Grumbach 1917). Indeed, other countries quickly picked up the *Mitteleuropa* phrase that was gaining popularity in Germany and rapidly developed into a dominant bugaboo in British and

¹³ "Naumann über England", *Vossische Zeitung*, Nr. 643, 16. Dezember 1916, Erste Beilage, p. 1. See "Der Weg nach Mittel-Europa", *Vossische Zeitung*, Nr. 92, 19. Februar 1916, Beilage, p. 1; "Mitteleuropa und Groß-Berlin", *Vossische Zeitung*, Nr. 216, 28. April 1916, pp. 1-2.

¹⁴ "Was macht Mitteleuropa?", *Vossische Zeitung*, Nr. 319, 25. Juni 1917, p. 3. The American press took note of Naumann's publishing activities in the *Vossische Zeitung* with great interest and scepticism. *The New York Times* for instance even accused the Berlin-based paper of being a mouthpiece for advocates of *Mitteleuropa*, see "Advocates One Power in Central Europe", *The New York Times*, April 11, 1918, p. 3; "Bernhard on Peace", *The New York Times*, June 22, 1918, p. 8.

American press. In spite of the fact that the concept was very multifaceted, during the First World War English-language journalists saw *Mitteleuropa* as essentially identical to Naumann's version.

Crucial to the rapid and far-reaching reception of the Central European idea in the English-language dailies were the dense communication networks of the mass media. Quality papers engaged in mutual scrutiny across national borders – a practice that even the outbreak of the First World War could not stop. Thus *The Manchester Guardian* was able to instruct its readers on the central points of Naumann's book only a few days after its publication by referring to an article in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*¹⁵. In early December of 1915 the former Berlin correspondent of *The Times* wrote an in-depth article about *Mitteleuropa*¹⁶, which in turn prompted *The New York Times* across the Atlantic to print an article of its own announcing the imminent implementation of the plan¹⁷. Several weeks later an editorial in *The Manchester Guardian* began by stating that there could hardly be any doubt about "the seriousness of the movement towards a 'Central Europe', which was started by Herr Naumann's book of the same title"¹⁸. In point of fact *Mitteleuropa* soon became a well-known dictum in England and the USA and was often not even translated, as the following graph illustrates (see *Fig. 1*), since the German term apparently sparked off the desired associations among readers¹⁹.

Although initially *Mitteleuropa* was presented to English and American newspaper readers as a project whose realization was bound up with the victory of the Central Powers, this soon changed. By the end of 1916 *Mitteleuropa* as seen by the print media seemed less a vision for the future than an actual political fact²⁰.

¹⁵ "Austro-German Union after the War", *The Manchester Guardian*, October 14, 1915, p. 8.

¹⁶ "The Future of Austria. Prussian Plans. A New 'Central Europe'", *The Times*, December 6, 1915, pp. 9-10.

¹⁷ "Two Kaisers Agree on a Tariff League. Plan a Zollverein of Central Europe Which Weaker States Must Join", *The New York Times*, December 6, 1915, p. 5.

¹⁸ "'Central Europe'. Scheme for a Teutonic Union", *The Manchester Guardian*, January 7, 1916, p. 14.

¹⁹ For a selection of the many examples of articles that use *Mitteleuropa* in their titles: "Aim at Mitteleuropa in Teuton Agreement", *The New York Times*, May 16, 1918, p. 8; "New Swiss Rhine Port. Aid to 'Mittel-Europa' Scheme", *The Times*, June 21, 1918, p. 6; "Mittel-Europa Dream of Kaiser Vanishes", *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 1, 1918, p. 4.

²⁰ See "Central Europe", *The Manchester Guardian*, October 25, 1916, p. 4; "Central Europe. Austrian Policy of Closer Union with Germany", *The Times*, December 23, 1916, p. 5; "'Middle Europe' Conference Today", *The New York Times*, August 10, 1917, p. 4; "Look at the Map", *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 2, 1917, p. D5.

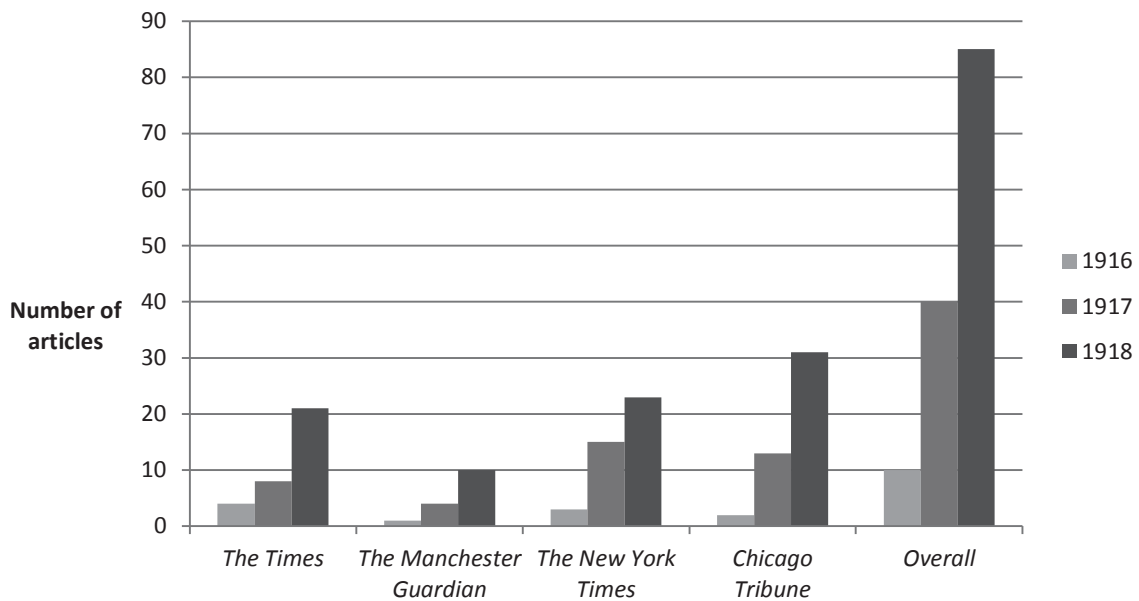


Figure 1. – Articles containing the German term “Mitteleuropa”.

This is all the more surprising because Naumann’s ideas continued to be extremely controversial in Germany and especially Austria-Hungary, and in fact had never been part of the Central Powers’ official war policy (cf. Verosta 1977; Stirk 1994a, 12-13; Elvert 2009, 85-86) – a circumstance that was almost never taken into account in the English and American view of things²¹. In June of 1917 *The New York Times* for example spoke of an “Empire of Mitteleuropa” created by German troops, whose realization – as another article in the same paper added a few months later – they had been striving to achieve for many decades²². Shortly afterwards an article in the *Chicago Tribune* contrasted the poverty and starvation rampant in the Danube Monarchy with the latent hope still existing in people’s daily lives that they would one day stand with Germany at the pinnacle of a vast economic and political system reaching from the North Sea to the Persian Gulf: “Friedrich Naumann’s book, ‘Mittel-Europa’, is the gospel

²¹ The Allied newspapers on the other hand reported only scarcely on opposition to *Mitteleuropa*; see “Aim at Mitteleuropa in Teuton Agreement”, *The New York Times*, May 16, 1918, p. 8. One can establish that during the war, particularly the German public, German politicians as well as the Supreme Army Command gave some consideration to, and in part made intensive efforts at, strengthening the Dual Alliance in the shape of a more tight-knit connection between Austria-Hungary and the German Reich, which however must be viewed as separate from the *Mitteleuropa* debate in terms of content; see Kapp 1983-1984.

²² “America and Mitteleuropa”, *The New York Times*, June 13, 1917, p. 12; “Lichnowsky Proves Mitteleuropa Plan. Prince’s Memorandum Removes Whatever Doubts Remained as to Germany’s Long Plotting for Domination”, *The New York Times*, April 28, 1918, p. 64.

that has brought people to [that] opinion [...]"²³. And almost a year later in the context of a long interview, *The New York Times* again quoted the Czech freedom fighter Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, who gave warning that a German *Mitteleuropa* was in fact in existence at the time, counting Austria-Hungary as its most important link²⁴.

In terms of content, English quality papers saw *Mitteleuropa* as a huge threat that would take the form of an imperialistic incursion of Germany into the rest of Europe that questioned, for example – as Masaryk, too, concluded – the desire for freedom amongst the peoples of the Danube Monarchy²⁵. It therefore represented not only a danger “to all Europe outside that centre”²⁶, but also – as especially proclaimed by US papers after America’s entry into the war – to the non-European world²⁷. Ultimately *Mitteleuropa* threatened democracy and liberalism worldwide, according to a *The New York Times* article written early in 1918²⁸. Agreeing to a peace with Germany that entailed compromises which would cement for all time the “vast design of a Mitteleuropa, a German belt extended over nearly a quarter of Earth’s circumference from the Baltic to the Indian Ocean”, was not a viable option, and for this reason a total military victory was absolutely necessary²⁹. Thus there was a clear discrepancy between the way the *Mitteleuropa* idea was perceived and its reality, at least as far as the Naumann version was concerned, which – as already mentioned – must be considered moderate in comparison with the other positions represented in the discourse surrounding German war aims. *Mitteleuropa* thus served as a synonym for Germany’s imperial ambitions that were blamed for the war.

²³ “Pitiful Scenes Crowd Austria as Toll of War”, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 22, 1917, p. 14.

²⁴ “Embers of Revolt in Austria-Hungary”, *The New York Times*, Mai 26, 1918, p. SM6.

²⁵ Ibidem. See “A German Europe”, *The Manchester Guardian*, August 5, 1916, p. 6; “The Kaiser’s Reply”, *The Manchester Guardian*, January 15, 1917, p. 4; “Mittel Europa and German Moderates”, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 21, 1918, p. 4; “Cracks in Mittel-Europa”, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Mai 24, 1918, p. 8; “German Absorption of Austria-Hungary. Way Paved for ‘Central Europe’”, *The Times*, June 5, 1918, p. 5; “Hungarian Complaints of ‘Central Europe’. Ruin of Independence”, *The Times*, June 21, 1918, p. 5.

²⁶ “New Books. The German Terms”, *The Manchester Guardian*, March 28, 1917, p. 3.

²⁷ Cf. “Greece and Brazil”, *The New York Times*, July 1, 1917, p. 22; “Mitteleuropa as a Menace to Us”, *The New York Times*, January 17, 1918, p. 12; “Japan’s Problem”, *The New York Times*, February 13, 1918, p. 12.

²⁸ “Mid-Europe Plans Menace Democracy”, *The New York Times*, February 3, 1918, p. 8. See “America’s Interest in Middle Europe”, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 15, 1918, p. 6.

²⁹ “Peace Only after Victory”, *The New York Times*, November 12, 1917, p. 12.

One reason why English and American journalists had an exaggerated sense of being under threat is the lack of own alternatives in regard to a unification of Europe. In fact, discussions about European unity in British and American press were in very short supply. Merely *The New York Times* showed a brief interest in questions concerning a European confederacy after the outbreak of hostilities in the Continent. In the first month of war, the paper printed two letters to the editor which in the face of European mass extinction demanded a “brotherhood of the warring nations” in the American sense; the two authors were merely at variance when it came to the issue of denomination, namely whether said confederation should be called “United States of Europe” or whether the Europeans should create their own unique name³⁰. Some weeks later a long article, which saw the lifetime dream of both the late journalist William Thomas Stead and the English philanthropist Sir Max Waechter in a united Europe, prognosticated that due to the war their vision could soon become reality, making wars amongst European states a thing of the past. European women therefore – as Waechter had already suggested – played a particularly important role in creating a United States of Europe, since one had to assume that they had the most to lose through militant conflicts in Europe: “None are more interested in the preservation of European peace and civilization than are the women of Europe, who in a war may lose their husbands, brothers, and children”³¹.

While during the first two years of war, such articles remained but mere snippets within the media landscape, the unification discourse downright flourished in the English-language press after 1916 and in consequence of the reception of *Mitteleuropa*. Thus in March of 1916 *The Times* already viewed a trade deal between several of the Allied nations as a deliberately conceived expansion of the military alliance and “a crushing reply to ‘Central Europe’ [...]”³². It was no coincidence that a few months

³⁰ “The United States of Europe”, *The New York Times*, August 11, 1914, p. 8; “United States of Europe”, *The New York Times*, August 20, 1914, p. 10. For an example of a rare, similar statement in an English newspaper see “A United States of Europe”, *The Times*, February 20, 1915, p. 5.

³¹ “The ‘United States of Europe’ May Be a Fact after the War. If So, It Will Fulfill the Dream of the Late W.T. Stead and the Aims of Sir Max Waechter’s European Unity League”, *The New York Times*, October 11, 1914, p. SM8. In a long interview that was published by *The New York Times* just a few days later, Nicholas Murray Butler, conveyed a similar notion: “Dr. Butler Prophesies ‘The United States of Europe’. Certain to Come, Says the Head of Columbia University”, *The New York Times*, October 18, 1914, p. SM3.

³² “Trade Pact of the Allies. A New Pledge. Reply to ‘Central Europe’”, *The Times*, March 3, 1916, p. 9.

later the London paper viewed Romania's entry into the war on the side of the Entente as a manifestation of "Latin Europe"³³. At the beginning of 1918, in the "Letters to the Editor" section, *The Times* published a readers' debate under the heading "Mittel-Europa", which stressed the strain Germany's unification plan placed on Britain's European policy. If the majority of Britons had so far shown no interest in "European politics", this situation might be remedied by hanging up maps of German *Mitteuropa* in public places³⁴. And indeed British and American newspapers repeatedly occupied themselves with thinking up measures for an Entente against *Mitteuropa*, either in the shape of stronger cooperation between the European Allies or independent efforts towards continental integration³⁵.

Against this background English and American journalists also debated the struggle for freedom being waged by the Slavic peoples of Central Eastern Europe, who had become the focus of growing hope in the face of the German-Russian peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March of 1918. The treaty was perceived as a massive threat as well as the final step towards the *Mitteuropa* nightmare. Only a few days after it was signed, the *Chicago Tribune*, commenting on a congress of 35,000 Poles, Serbs and Czechs, stated that in spite of the "growing reality of a German Mittel-Europa, with a Germanized Russia as its unexpected and formidable annex" the dream of a pan-Slavic federation was obviously still alive³⁶. And several weeks before war's end *The New York Times* welcomed the establishment of a federalized democratic "Mideuropean Union" at an iconic venue, namely Independence Hall in Philadelphia, under the chairmanship of the designated Czechoslovakian president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk as "[t]he absolute crushing of the dream of Mitteleuropa and [...] barrier to any scheme of Berlin to Bagdad [...]"³⁷. The fact that the discourse was

³³ "The Rally against Germanism. Latin Europe Now United", *The Times*, August 29, 1916, p. 8.

³⁴ "Mittel-Europa", *The Times*, February 4, 1918, p. 11. Additional letters to the editor on this subject had already been published under the same title on the 10 (p. 10), 11 (p. 5), 14 (p. 7) and 16 of January (p. 5).

³⁵ See "The Allies in Conference", *The Manchester Guardian*, March 25, 1916, p. 6; "Tightens German Grip on Austria. London Thinks Paris Resolutions May Be Applied to Meet Mitteleuropa Danger", *The New York Times*, May 15, 1918, p. 1; "Opening of the Rhone. A Counter to 'Mittel-Europa'", *The Times*, June 22, 1918, p. 5.

³⁶ "A Pan-Slavic Barrier", *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 5, 1918, p. 6.

³⁷ "Oppressed Peoples to Have Liberty Bells. Delegates of Eighteen Nationalities of Central Europe Meet in Philadelphia", *The New York Times*, October 24, 1918, p. 10. See "To Proclaim Freedom in Independence Hall. New Declaration for 65,000,000 People of Middle Europe to Be Drafted There", *The New York Times*, October 23, 1918, p. 8; "Independence Hall Sees Nations Born. New Declaration Signed There for Oppressed Peoples of

strongly fixated on the person of Masaryk was no coincidence, but rather the consequence of his extensive and widely heeded activities in publishing and agitating. In this context he placed himself in the vanguard of the discursive resistance against *Mitteleuropa*, both in a journal that he and the British historian Robert William Seton-Watson published under the title *The New Europe* as well as in an homonymous essay written during the final months of the war in 1918, which must be considered as a direct rejoinder to Naumann³⁸. The essay did not appear in print until several years later (Masaryk 1922).

5. MITTELEUROPA AFTER 1918

In view of the above it is hardly surprising that the intense sense of threat perceived by the British and American press in relation to *Mitteleuropa* did not abruptly cease with Germany's capitulation in November of 1918. Even several months after war's end *The New York Times* viewed a railway line that was to run from Bordeaux via Belgrade to Odessa as a deliberately conceived alternative to the Berlin-Baghdad railway, the supposed nucleus of Germany's *Mitteleuropa* scheme. The latter was seen as the expression of a Wilhelmine campaign of conquest in Europe, which, in spite of the Germans' defeat, supposedly offered them another opportunity to gain the upper hand in continental trade and politics. To counter this, the Allies were now promoting a project to further the economic integration of European regions south of Germany that, as the article stated, ultimately could help prevent a resurgence of that nation's supposedly authoritarian and hegemonic ideas of unification³⁹. Indeed, even in the early post-war period *The New York Times* repeatedly warned against a revival of the *Mitteleuropa* concept and thus underscored how powerful this threatening image continued to be. Paris correspondent Charles Selden for instance communicated fears expressed by French journalist André Chéradame that shying away from Bolshevism could lead to a restoration of the old German regime, and lastly a *Mitteleuropa* covering the area between the

Middle Europe", *The New York Times*, October 27, 1918, p. 6; "The First Essential", *The New York Times*, October 28, 1918, p. 10.

³⁸ On the connection between Naumann's "Mitteleuropa" and Masaryk's "Neuem Europa" see Stirk 1994a, 14.

³⁹ "Berlin-to-Bagdad Substitute Ready. Only Two Links Remain to Be Built in Bordeaux-to-Odessa Line – Means Economic Liberation", *The New York Times*, December 1, 1918, p. 39.

Rhein and the Ural⁴⁰. Shortly after, the American paper even feared a German alliance with Italy and the Russian Bolsheviks, with whose help a confederacy would encompass both the Mediterranean and the Volga, forming a “new edition of Mitteleuropa, an alluring German-Bolshevist plan which has existed for some time [...]”⁴¹. As late as 1922 American journalist Thomas Ybarra commented on Germany’s deliberations about improving the infrastructure of its inland waterways through extensive canal-building projects by linking it to the dream of *Mitteleuropa*: “In fact, the great canalization project [...] is the ‘Mitteleuropa’ dream in another form – the dream of a Central Europe, self-contained and self-supporting, with Germany as its supreme controlling factor”⁴².

If after 1918 *Mitteleuropa* thus was still occasionally associated semantically with actual, but mainly with imaginary, imperialistic ambitions on the side of Germany, by and large the concept lost its appeal for the mass media in the following years, ultimately disappearing almost entirely from the German, English and American quality press. In the world of ideas, on the other hand, *Mitteleuropa* outlasted the interwar period continuing to function as a thought pattern for European policy up to the National Socialist era (McElligott 1994, 129-159; Elvert 1999, 35-393; Vermeiren 2013, 135-160). The later adaptation of the plan by the Nazis is one explanation why even today some historians wrongly consider Naumann’s concept an expression of German hegemonic ambition (Kořalka 2003). However, during the interwar period the variety and flexibility of the Central European idea manifested itself. For example, during the 1930s the Hungarian jurist and economic expert Elemér Hantos, a protagonist of the *Mitteleuropäischen Wirtschaftstagung* (MEWT), which had been founded in Vienna in 1925, promoted the plan of a Danube federation without Germany under the same name, since he was strongly critical of how the national economies in Central Eastern Europe had been fragmented (Hantos 1933; Kühl 1958, 54-64)⁴³. Then in the 1980s *Mitteleuropa* reappeared on the political scene under changed geopolitical auspices and in

⁴⁰ “Tells of Danger in Delaying Peace”, *The New York Times*, March 7, 1919, p. 1.

⁴¹ “Scheidemann Offer to Italy Reported”, *The New York Times*, August 7, 1919, p. 6. A similar argument is presented in: “Russia as an American Problem”, *The New York Times*, March 21, 1920, p. X1.

⁴² “Germany’s Colossal Canalization Scheme”, *The New York Times*, December 24, 1922, p. 56.

⁴³ The MEWT, later renamed *Mitteleuropäischer Wirtschaftstag* (MWT) and taken over by industrialists who keenly advocated Pan-German concepts, serves as an example for advancing Central European plans in the private economy during those years, see Sachse 2010 and Freytag 2012.

connection with completely new interests as Eastern Bloc dissidents such as Milan Kundera, Václav Havel and Adam Michnik endowed the concept with positive associations and, having freed it from its German nationalistic past, used it to dissociate their countries from the negative image of “Eastern Europe” (Jaworski 1988; Garton Ash 1989; Stirk 1994a, 21-28).

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

When Friedrich Naumann died in August 1919 not even a year after the war had ended, an obituary in the *Kölnischen Zeitung* tellingly remarked that while his sensational book *Mitteleuropa* was certainly illustrative, it also showed that he had allowed military victories to blind him to the fact that his book was “inadvertently and severely damaging Germany’s foreign policy” by revealing various possibilities for Germany to handle European politics⁴⁴. As a matter of fact, the German press had recognized very early on that fears of *Mitteleuropa* were growing in both England and the USA⁴⁵. Near the end of the war and immediately after, the negative implications of the nightmare scenarios *Mitteleuropa* had evoked in Allied minds became prevalent. In May 1918 for example, the Protestant theologian Hans Ehrenberg stated that, with a possible peace agreement in mind, it was necessary to demonstrate that Germany had no interest in pursuing expansive goals on the European Continent but would rather concentrate on foreign affairs with overseas countries in future, making clear to the Allies that they no longer had to fear the emergence of a German *Mitteleuropa*⁴⁶.

The connection many contemporaries drew between the idea of *Mitteleuropa*, Prussian militarism and German nationalism was therefore less a consequence of the actual contents of Naumann’s book than a result of a discourse that had unwittingly consolidated the Allies’ misperception of the concept. Insofar, “articulating Europe” initially carried negative connotations in English and American newspapers. However, it is important to recognize that it was primarily this circumstance which turned “Europe” into a principal issue for the mass press. From a historical perspective, the two crucial factors that made Germany’s plan for Europe speak to the

⁴⁴ “D. Friedrich Naumann”, *Kölnische Zeitung*, Nr. 745, 25. August 1919, p. 1.

⁴⁵ “Mitteleuropa und Randeuropa”, *Vossische Zeitung*, Nr. 316, 22. Juni 1916, p. 3; “Die Furcht vor Mitteleuropa”, *Vossische Zeitung*, Nr. 12, 8. Januar 1917, p. 1.

⁴⁶ “Deutschlands Europapolitik”, *Vossische Zeitung*, Nr. 235, 9. Mai 1918, pp. 1-2.

masses were the condensed mass media networks of communication and the strong transnational interweavements that existed within the public debates on Europe even during World War I. At the same time, publishing reports on *Mitteleuropa* allowed British and American journalists to put themselves forward as political actors (Bösch and Geppert 2008). They created horror images of an anti-liberal European unification that lacked a *Realpolitik* basis and in this way put pressure on official circles and called for a more critical media audience. The daily press thus discussed the future of Europe and turned the attention of the Allied debate on war aims to democratic federal alternatives for a continental unification.

Contrary to the view that the unfettered nationalism which characterized the years between 1914 and 1918 put the European idea into hiatus – a view that some researchers advance even today –, the First World War thus invigorated the notion of a unified Continent and proved to have a subtle effect as a “unifying force” (Pegg 1983, 8-13). For paradoxically, the negative perception of Germany’s *Mitteleuropa* plans in English and American newspapers made conceptions of an alternative European integration based on liberal principles “sayable”. At a crucial moment in history Naumann’s idea thus promoted the articulation of European thinking in wider circles. In this sense, it was also the corner stone for intensifying the discourse on Europe in the 1920s.

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