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The concept of Central Europe, a region that encompasses contemporary Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, Hungary, Slovenia, and Croatia. The historical frontiers of Central Europe extend somewhat further to the east and the southeast than the current borders of these states. Therefore, on occasion this book also will refer peripherally with the Baltic states, western Belarus, and western Ukraine, because they were parts of Poland between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as with Transylvania in Romania, parts of Serbia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina because they were territories of the kingdom of Hungary in the Middle Ages, the Habsburg Empire thereafter, or the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary after 1867.

Unlike a considerable amount of the previous literature on the region, this book does not cover the eastern part of Central Europe—Poland, the former Czechoslovak Republic, and Hungary—as one region belonging distinctly to “the East” and the western part of Central Europe—Germany and Austria—as another that is part of “the West,” nor does it venture out onto the Balkan Peninsula or into Russia, as many surveys of the post-1945 Communist version of “Eastern Europe” have done in the past. The religious, cultural, economic, and political criteria used to define Central Europe as one region instead of two, on the one hand, and to distinguish it from Eastern and Southeastern Europe, on the other, are outlined in the Introduction.

As a survey, this book covers literally a lot of ground; from the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century to the fall of the Soviet empire in the end of the twentieth century. It is designed to introduce readers to the histories of Central Europe’s kaleidoscope of peoples. One of the guiding ideas behind this book is to look at historical patterns of conflict, cohabitation, and cooperation in Central Europe—hence its subtitle, *Neighbors, Friends*. In particular, it tries to acquaint readers with the central events in the histories of the smaller peoples in the region.

Each chapter is thematically organized around a few key issues or events important to understanding the period addressed. The complexity of Central Europe that stems from its delightful, astonishing, and sometimes puzzling diversity is something all students of the region discover, and the brevity of a survey conceived for nonspecialized readers demands a relatively high level of generalization and also some omissions. It has not been my intention to make the region appear less complex than it really is but to reduce the difficulty to a point of comprehensibility.