

FORUM

Current Transformations of Research Agendas in East Central European Studies: Challenges and Discussions

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz spoke in the Bundestag debate on 27 February 2022 of a “turning point in time” (“*Zeitenwende*”), referring to the foreign and domestic, economic and socio-political consequences that would be experienced in Europe. The “turning point” also had a particular impact on the various states in East Central and Eastern Europe, especially those that had formerly been part of the Soviet Union. These, but also the other states of the former Eastern Bloc, which are now part of the EU and also partly of NATO, are faced with the necessity of redefining their relationship with each other, with the EU and NATO, but also with the Russian Federation and Belarus.

However, this buzzword also concerns Eastern European and East Central European studies. The Russian annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 already posed numerous challenges to Eastern European studies, not least because expertise on Ukraine was scarce. Historical research on East Central Europe is not unaffected by this *Zeitenwende*; it faces numerous challenges, such as the—hopefully—temporary inaccessibility of Ukrainian archives and libraries and, above all, the problem of whether these institutions in the Russian Federation will be accessible to non-Russian researchers at all after the war. The war will have a long-term impact on the research agenda of Eastern (Central) European historians in the region.

The contributions in the Forum section will therefore reflect a range of perspectives and assessments from the region and also from colleagues elsewhere. The ZfO/JECES editors are aware that these contributions to the discussion can only represent a certain “intermediate state” and will reflect tendencies of the current turning point in Eastern European research. However, we hope, that they will provide important impulses for further reflection on the self-perception of historians of Eastern (Central) Europe and for the reconfiguration of the historiography of this European region.

EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Baltic History after 24 February 2022—The Charm of Transnational Peripheries?

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In 2018, Johannes Remy’s Finnish-language “History of Ukraine” was published in Estonian translation as *Ukrainia ajalugu*.¹ In his review, Tartu scholar Heiko Pääbo clarifies that although the Estonian audience could relate very well to the history of Ukraine and the Ukrainians because of a shared past under the same empire(s), it was “not particularly well known.”² Indeed, the number of serious publications on Ukrainian topics published for the general Estonian reader is very small. There have been quite a number of BA and MA theses produced by political scientists since the Russian Federation started its war against Ukraine in 2014, but almost nothing has reached the general audience. Has any Estonian historian published something devoted exclusively to the Ukrainian past or the Russian-Ukrainian encounters over the centuries? If so, I am not aware of it; neither am I aware of the corresponding state of research in the Latvian and Lithuanian languages.

In the Estonian case, this gap in research has to do on the one hand with a general structural problem that is typical of small nations: the small number of historians in the country who traditionally focus on their own nation’s past. The latter observation is of course relevant because if Estonian historians do not

* This paper was presented on 28 May 2022, at the 28th Biennial AABS Conference held at the University of Washington, Seattle under the headline “Baltic Studies at a Crossroads.” I was supposed to give a talk about “Estonian Modern History or the Challenge of the Transnational,” but during the writing process it felt that in reaction to the attack of the Russian Federation on independent Ukraine I should take the conference’s motto more seriously. I was inspired by an online workshop “Historiography of the Baltic Sea Region. Current State and Further Perspectives” organized by Jörg Hackmann from the University of Szczecin where I participated in a round-table “Writing the History of the Baltic Sea Region: National Perspectives and Transnational Challenges” on May 20, 2022.

¹ JOHANNES REMY: *Ukraina ajalugu* [History of Ukraine], Tallinn 2018; JOHANNES REMY: *Ukrainian historia* [History of Ukraine], Helsinki 2015.

² HEIKO PÄÄBO: *Kuidas mõista Ukraina ajalugu?* [How to Understand the History of Ukraine?], in: *Sirp*, 2018-07-06, <https://sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/c9-sotsiaalia/kuidas-moista-ukraina-ajalugu/> (2022-05-24).

deal with “their” history, who else will? Without doubt the quantitative factor effectively impedes research on other countries’ past. There are a number of works that focus on Estonian relations and contacts with neighboring states, and quite a number of colleagues include, for instance, Russia in their research agenda in order to study Estonian history under Russian-led empires. Still, there is no tradition of “Russian studies” at Estonian universities where one might hope to find expertise also in the topic of Ukraine. A professorship in the History of Eastern Europe was created at the University of Tartu just a few years ago. And of course, given the small number of professional historians, the whole field of historical expertise is endangered if the only expert on a certain important topic retires. Needless to say, this danger exists in a lot of very important sub-fields of Estonian history, which makes it even less probably that younger colleagues get the chance to focus on other regions than their home country.¹

Paradoxically as it may seem, there is, on the other hand, in the Estonian historiographical tradition also a fixation on the imperial center, which is, of course, “Russia” (even the Soviet era is colloquially referred to in Estonian as the second “Russian times”). This comes to mind if one considers the broad debate in the international field of Eastern European and Eurasian studies that was spurred by the Russian war against Ukraine on a necessary “de-colonization” of the field.² In general, this debate draws attention to the fact that a majority of studies in the field deal exclusively with Russian history, Russian sources, and with perspectives from the imperial centers, be it Saint Petersburg or Moscow (not least, as we all know, because of linguistic limitations). The view that is produced of the multinational Russian empire is thus biased and it is not that easy to overcome this fixation. In this regard, the publication of Andreas Kappeler’s *Russland—ein Vielvölkerreich* in 1991³ introduced the idea that tsarist and Soviet history seen from the non-Russian provinces/republics offers different narratives and different angles. But alongside the usual linguistic challenges, this kind of multi-perspective frame also clearly poses problems in research logistics—you simply need a large team of experts to deal with all the regions in question on an equal basis. Moreover, if “de-colonization” is thus about diversifying the dominating Russo-centric view, it will bring back almost inevitably the seemingly fixed categories of ethnicity and nation that a de-colonization approach actually attempts to challenge, at least in the

¹ KARSTEN BRÜGGEMANN, BRADLEY D. WOODWORTH: Estonian Modern History in the Twenty-First Century, in: *Acta Historica Tallinnensia* 26 (2020), 1, pp. 79–102, <https://doi.org/10.3176/hist.2020.1.04>.

² See, e.g., GWENDOLYN SASSE: Wir brauchen eine De-Kolonisierung und Aufwertung der Osteuropaforschung, in: *Ukraine-Analysen*, 269, 2022-05-30, <https://www.laenderanalysen.de/ukraine-analysen/269/wir-brauchen-eine-de-kolonisierung-und-aufwertung-der-osteuropaforschung/> (2022-06-18).

³ ANDREAS KAPPELER: *Rußland—ein Vielvölkerreich: Entstehung—Geschichte—Zerfall*, München 1991.

case of the Russian factor. However, if Maria Mälksoo recently criticized her field of International Relations for underrating the agency of East Central European states,⁴ the situation in the field of Eastern European history is, at least to my understanding, much more diverse and balanced, given all the studies published in accessible languages on the national histories of this particular geographical space.

Before I continue with the particular challenges for Baltic history, allow me to briefly consider the other field I have recently dealt with—Russian imperial history. In response to the war against Ukraine, the editors of the journal *Ab imperio* in a recent editorial commented on the ongoing discussion. Over recent decades, the journal propagated a “New Imperial History” that “conceptualizes groupness as a function of the imperial situation of strategic multidimensional diversity, rather than [as] an ontological reality.” In their view, the war makes “the danger of ascribing certain stable qualities to a group, such as ‘Russians’ or ‘Ukrainians,’ even more painfully obvious.”⁵ In other words, the war seems to threaten the whole project of introducing alternatives to the “methodological nationalism” that in the eyes of *Ab imperio* does not take into account the multidimensional diversity of multinational states. Maria Mogil’ner, who also belongs to the team behind *Ab imperio*, asks pointedly, “how many of us took the ‘decolonizing’ claim as an epistemological challenge to go beyond sporadic inclusions of ‘imperial peripheries’ in mainstream teaching and research?”⁶

For sure, the story of national “resistance” to Russian imperial ambitions is likely to be even more pronounced under the impact of current events. Thus, in general terms, the war and at the same time, at least to some extent, the call for “de-colonization” both run the risk of leading authors to continue writing tsarist and Soviet imperial history in the spirit of the Cold War, as a story of ethnic antagonisms, oppressions and totalitarianisms. This appears to be the result of the “securitizational turn” that was often evoked during the discussions at the AABS conference in Seattle where this paper was originally presented in late May 2022. In the light of this “securitizational turn,” even the predominant direction of study, particularly in Soviet history studies, over the past decades might come under attack for going beyond totalitarianism: Studies of Late Socialism can be easily (if unjustified) criticized of having led to a problematic underestimation of the heritage of authoritarianism and imperialism in Russian society. Hence Mogil’ner asks, “do we indeed remain neutral and objective if we accept that the late socialist ‘being vne’ (the inside-out position of enjoying life without being politically engaged and hence responsible) was a stance

⁴ MARIA MÄLKSOO: The Postcolonial Moment in Russia’s War Against Ukraine, in: Journal of Genocide Research, 2022-05-11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2022.2074947>.

⁵ War and the State of the Field, in: *Ab imperio* (2022), 1, pp. 9–18, here p. 11.

⁶ MARINA MOGILNER: There Can Be No “Vne,” in: <http://www.slavicreview.illinois.edu/discussion/> (2022-06-18).

available to many then and is applicable to social and political demobilization under Putin now?”⁷

But what about Baltic history? Scholars of the past of the three Baltic states are well aware of these potential biases and the limits of the dichotomy of oppression vs. resistance as an exclusive mode of interpretation. Baltic history writing has its own past of applying the concept of colonialism (or post-colonialism), especially to the period of Soviet rule, that started already in exile after World War II.⁸ Estonian historians also use it quite actively for medieval times, not least in terms of integrating their research on the region into modern conceptional frames generally used in international scholarship on the medieval ages (which still might differ from modern understandings of the term colonialism).⁹ How to then apply the project of “de-colonization” in our field? I would suggest looking for alternative modes of discussing imperial experiences without stressing too much the relation between the colonizer and the colonized or, in other words, applying the strategy of going beyond totalitarianism (without neglecting it), in Baltic history too.

As has been stressed in the ongoing debate by the editors of *Ab imperio*, “methodological nationalism” is the “major bone of contention.” In this regard, the war has “a major polarizing effect, rearranging a broad gradient of conceptual approaches in the field of Russian history into two uneven clusters opposing each other” with a majority, according to the editors, grouping around a kind of “good,” “new” and modified national history.¹⁰ This is a clear reference to the conflict of Russian and Ukrainian views of the shared (or should I add, divided) past, but this observation can be easily applied to the historical encounters of Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians with “Russia.”

It should be recalled in this regard that one of the formative experiences of “New Imperial History” was that national historiographies in the former Soviet Republics after 1991 stressed the narrative of national victimhood against a Russian oppressor. As an alternative, this direction proposed to deconstruct the traditional Russian story of the strong central state with a focus on regional particularities, among which they tended to count also developments in the non-Russian peripheries. In contrast, from a genuine peripheral or non-Russian point of view, the proponents of New Imperial History largely follow a pro-imperial narrative, even if they propose to challenge the traditional Russian

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See, e.g., ANDRES KÜNG: *Estland, en studie i imperialism*, Stockholm 1971; ANDREJS URDZE (ed.): *Das Ende des Sowjetkolonialismus: Der baltische Weg*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1991; on the post-colonial turn see EPP ANNUS: *Soviet Postcolonial Studies: A View from the Western Borderlands*, London—New York 2018.

⁹ LINDA KALJUNDI, ARO VELMET: *Eesti ajalooteaduse uued suunad 21. sajandil* [The New Directions in Estonian Historiography in the Twenty-first Century], in: *Acta Historica Tallinnensia* 26 (2020), 1, pp. 167–189, here p. 173, <https://doi.org/10.3176/hist.2020.1.07>.

¹⁰ *War and the State of the Field*, p. 10.

narrative of statehood. Yet I still agree to a great extent with Michail Dolbilov, who once argued that historians should try to understand the fabric of the empire, be it tsarist or Soviet, through a closer look at the peripheries (even if the New Imperial History so far has dealt predominantly with Slavic-inhabited peripheries).¹¹ The stress on the “imperial situation” also doubtlessly had some inspiring impact on Baltic history in the nineteenth century.¹²

As I mention above, local Baltic historiographies have always had a strong focus on the relations of “their” peripheries with the imperial center. We need to acknowledge that this fixation on Saint Petersburg or Moscow, at least to some extent, reinforces the imperial paradigm of dependencies and antagonisms, which is true also for a post-colonial approach.¹³ I sense that in the field of Baltic history, as a branch of Eastern European or Eurasian history, the idea of a de-colonization might be applied exactly here in leaving the focus on center-periphery relations. It is true, however, that escaping this kind of often unintended consequence—fostering the imperial paradigm—is never easy. As the editors of *Ab imperio* remind us, the “history of transfers and comparative history [...] take their units of comparison for granted, thus solidifying the boundaries and stability of nations, cultures, and regions” they actually want to deconstruct.¹⁴ In this respect, the nation as a concept lures from all over as it is, of course, constitutive for many historians’ individual identities as well. Here, at least to my mind, a transnational direction might be applied especially fruitfully. This relatively new approach, at least in the context of Baltic history,¹⁵ has demonstrated an ability to question the undisputed authority of the nation as an analytical framework. There is no doubt that nationalism is necessarily constructed transnationally, which in turn means that the transnational and the national are not mutually exclusive, they are just two variations that focus on parallel, though tightly connected, developments in the past.

Finally, allow me to consider some concrete ideas of how to answer the challenge presented to Baltic history writing created by the Russian war against Ukraine. How should one react to the dilemma that is posed by Putin’s radically

¹¹ MIKHAIL DOLBILOV: *Russkii kraï, chuzhaia vera: Etnokonfessional’naia politika imperii v Litve i Belorussii pri Aleksandre II* [Russian Region, Foreign Faith: Ethno-confessional Politics of the Empire under Alexander II in Lithuania and Belarus], Moskva 2010, p. 36.

¹² DARIUS STALIŪNAS: *Making Russians: Meaning and Practice of Russification in Lithuania and Belarus after 1863*, Amsterdam 2007; KARSTEN BRÜGGEMANN: *Licht und Luft des Imperiums: Legitimations- und Repräsentationsstrategien russischer Herrschaft in den Ostseeprovinzen im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert*, Wiesbaden 2018.

¹³ See my review of, among others, Annus: KARSTEN BRÜGGEMANN: *Wie postkolonial ist der Poststalinismus Oder “Let the Hegemon Speak”?: Anmerkungen zu zwei Neuer-scheinungen*, in: *Forschungen zur baltischen Geschichte* 14 (2019), pp. 213–223.

¹⁴ *War and the State of the Field*, p. 11.

¹⁵ See the special issue of *Acta Historica Tallinnensia* 27 (2012), 1: *On Saints, Migrants and Communists: Transnational Explorations in Estonian History*, ed. by KARSTEN BRÜGGEMANN. See the introduction: *Transnational History and the History of a Nation: The Case of Estonia*, *ibid.*, pp. 3–38, <https://doi.org/10.3176/hist.2021.1.01>.

backward-oriented reductionist version of the past that almost automatically raises parallels to nineteenth-century imperialism or Stalinist variations of “alternative facts” and leaves absolutely no room for dialogue? Falling back on the same categories of antagonisms, oppression and resistance cannot be the solution, even if it is true that the attack on Ukraine is to some extent the martial revenge of an insulted empire that has not come to terms with the peaceful dissolution of its predecessor in 1989–1991 (and in this context, it is also the belated Russian answer to the “Singing Revolution” in the Baltic states). However, it is not only a challenge in terms of intellectual approaches to the past, as the war also has practical consequences. All scholars in the field will have to adopt to a situation in which the archives of the Russian Federation are closed, at least in the near future. Thus, new insight into the perspective of the imperial centers will be difficult to obtain on the spot, i.e. in the central archives.

At least to my mind, there is an asymmetrical way of answering that challenge that would also break with the predominant focus of research on the bilateral relations between national peripheries and the imperial center. Adopting a transnational view on past entanglements and transfers would also go beyond “methodological nationalism.” In this regard, I have in mind research on contacts and relations between peripheral, non-dominant groups, be it the non-Russian SSRs or contact with the countries of the socialist bloc, the peoples’ republics of Eastern Europe. Attempting to understand the fabric of the empire through the transnational network of non-Russian peripheries promises to present a completely new understanding of imperial realities beyond the capitals. A research project on “transnational peripheries” would also correspond quite nicely to a remark made by Daunis Auers during the aforementioned conference in Seattle that in the near future, we will face a shift in identity orientation in the Baltic states from Scandinavia to East Central Europe.

This is, of course, no revolutionary new approach. The late Vilius Ivanaukas, for instance, has researched contacts between Lithuanian and Georgian writers. In his study on the Second Secretaries of republican parties, Saulius Grybkauskas devotes at least some attention to inter-peripheral contacts, even if his work aptly demonstrates that apparently, Moscow always preferred to be at the center of all networks in the USSR.¹⁶ Lars Fredrik Stöcker has written about transnational cross-border contacts between Sweden, Poland and the Estonian SSR during the Cold War and focuses now on the issue of “red globalization” and transnational inspirations for the Estonian transition to a market

¹⁶ SAULIUS GRYBKĀUSKAS: *Governing the Soviet Union’s National Republics: The Second Secretaries of the Communist Party*, London—New York 2021; SAULIUS GRYBKĀUSKAS: *Economic Strategies and Immigration in the Soviet Union’s Western Borderlands: Lithuania, Latvia and Belorussia in the 1950s and 1960s*, in: *Europe Asia Studies* 74 (2022), 3, pp. 481–498; LI BENNICHT-BJÖRKMAN, SAULIUS GRYBKĀUSKAS (eds.): *Moscow and the non-Russian Republics in the Soviet Union: Nomenklatura, Intelligentsia and Centre-periphery Relations*, London—New York 2022.

economy since the 1980s.¹⁷ Under Stöcker's and Tobias Rupprecht's supervision, Kevin Axe focuses on Hungarian-Estonian scientific contacts in the field of economics during the 1980s. David Beecher presented in Seattle on the impossible friendship of an Estonian orientalist, Lennart Mäll, with the Soviet officer and later leader of Chechnya Dzhokhar Musayevich Dudayev. Another presentation in Seattle by Kādi Talvoja focused on "Soviet Baltic Art in the Global Art World" and looked in particular at the tradition of Baltic art triennials initiated at the end of the 1960s.¹⁸ As you can see, work in this direction has already begun.

In sum, I believe that seeking alternatives to nation-centered research agendas is deeply necessary and serves, moreover, as a potentially successful alternative if one wants to deconstruct the continuity of imperial paradigms that, as a rule, have also played their role in Baltic history. In looking for cross-border contacts, cooperation and comparisons, we might use the opportunity to leave the focus on bilateral relations with the Russian center(s) and include other non-dominant groups, institutions and broader transnational networks stretching out over the whole geographical space of the Russian tsarist empire and the socialist bloc during the Cold War period into our work. Our understanding of the imperial fabric can only benefit if we include Baltic contacts not only with other SSRs from Kyrgyzstan to Georgia, but potentially also those with Poland, the GDR or Bulgaria, to name but a few. We thus might ask what is left of the famous slogan of the Soviet-led "friendship of the peoples" in practice, e.g. during all these "Weeks of Georgian culture in Estonia" or other internationalist cultural happenings. Such a research agenda potentially offers new insights into the development of different discourses that may or may not support an oppositional, anti-imperial agenda. Such a future direction might lead to deeper research in Armenian, Kazakh or Ukrainian history and the inner-Soviet entanglements, and how these different actors reached out into the Soviet bloc. Finally, this might also alter the imbalance in knowledge about Estonia's Schicksalsgenossen (literally comrades in fate, fellows in destiny) among the peoples of the USSR, naturally including Ukraine.

¹⁷ LARS FREDRIK STÖCKER: *Bridging the Baltic Sea: Networks of Resistance and Opposition during the Cold War Era*, Lanham et al. 2018.

¹⁸ KĀDI TALVOJA: *Eesti kunsti internatsionaalsed ahelad: Tallinna graafikatriennaalide rollist [The International Chains of Estonian Art: On the Role of the Tallinn Triennials of Graphic Art]*, in: *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi / Studies on Art and Architecture* 30 (2021), pp. 87–104.

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