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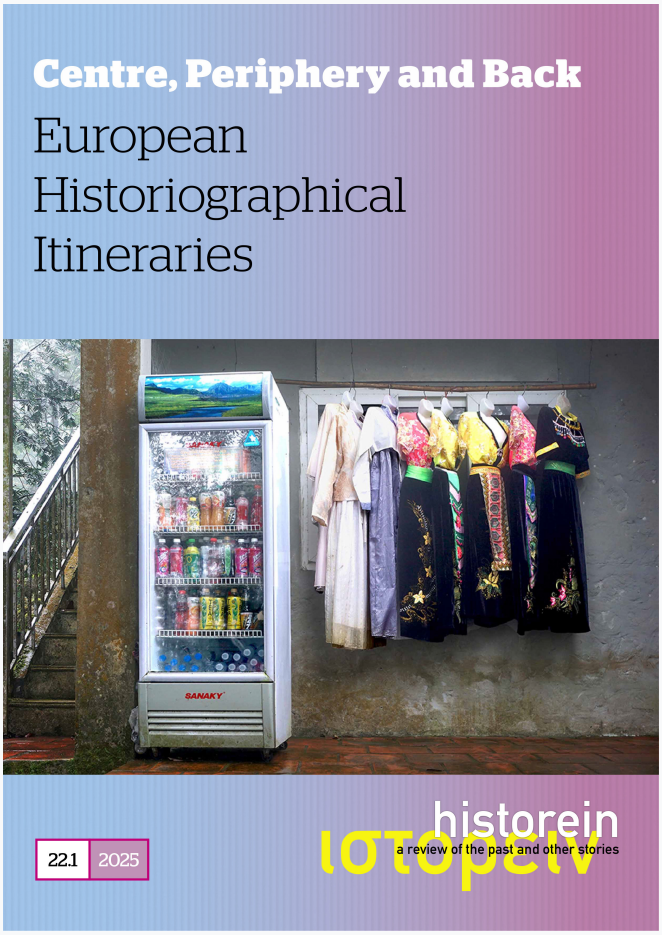
Centre, Periphery and Back: European Historiographical Itineraries



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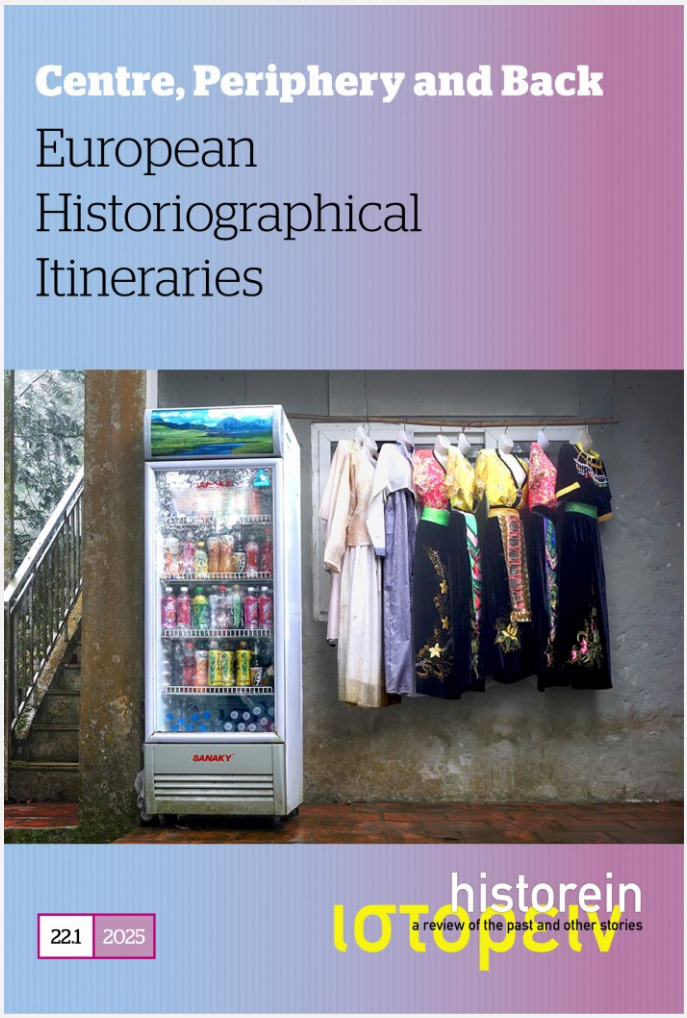

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Afterword. Decentring and Renarrating Europe (One More Time): Echoes of War (One More Time)

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The current issue of *Historein* is a product of a conference held in the border city of Komotini by the Democritus University of Thrace in 2018. The hospitable organisers welcomed the participants to Alexandroupolis, a town with a geographical significance, located at a critical juncture on the northeastern Aegean Sea, near the borders with Bulgaria and Turkey, controlling access between the Balkans, Eastern Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

Even in 2018, historians trained in Russian/Soviet history needed to use a degree of imagination to foresee the Russo-Ukrainian war, despite the warning signs following the Euromaidan protests and the Russian Federation's annexation of Crimea (2014). The war drew the US army's and Nato's attention to Alexandroupolis – what the *New York Times* called the "sleepy Greek port" – transforming it into a US arms hub and causing a broader shift in regional security dynamics, while demonstrating the flexibility of local, regional, and peripheral boundaries.

New European security constellations also marked the end of Swedish and Finnish nonalignment, the pan-Nordic security options, Nordic and Baltic cooperation, and historical and contemporary narratives of Arctic geopolitics. Not only the Nordic countries but also the ex-Soviet Baltic states are emerging today as central European actors. The war transformed two peripheries of the imagined European geography – North and South – bringing them to the centre of contemporary geostrategic constellations and politics.

The war, which affected the political, economic and cultural boundaries of Europe and the West, also had a significant impact on historiography. It raised questions about the current "geography" of European centres and peripheries. This is not new in European history, as it is always closely linked to the prevailing political dynamics and processes of the time. Europe has historically experienced several centres and peripheries. As the contributions to this volume demonstrate, Europe's historical borders were not solely geographical or political, but also cultural and mental. These frontiers were constantly under negotiation, shaped by the rich tapestry of cultural, intellectual and economic exchanges that crisscrossed the continent. These exchanges were not just transactions, but the building blocks of spatial hierarchies, constantly redefining the notion of Europe and the

meanings of Europeanisation. This situation raised, and raises, important questions, such as where are the peripheries located, what types of borders separate the cores from the peripheries and how centres and peripheries influence and shape each other. From this perspective, Europe should not be viewed as an essentialist category of analysis but rather as an open concept studied in its historical context.

As Athena Syriatou points out in the Introduction, "positionality," the researcher's position, affects how they conduct history. My own peripherality shapes my perspective. I am a historian who belongs to the academic community of Greece, a country located by geographical constructions on the European periphery, and I study another European periphery: Russia.

Russian history – whether that of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union or the current Russian Federation – raises a persistent question in our modern times: Where, exactly, are the eastern borders of the European continent, which are intricately connected to the landmass of Eurasia? The conventional definition is that Europe stretches from the Urals to the Atlantic, rendering regions like Russia, Turkey and the Caucasus semi-European from a geographical perspective. However, historically, the Russian and Ottoman empires served as "European" centres for various regions that were part of imagined European peripheries, such as the Balkans during the nineteenth century.[1]

On the other hand, the Baltic provinces, considered a peripheral region from a Western European perspective, were transformed during the Russian Empire's expansion into a core region of the empire. The history of the hybrid and complex Russian Empire, which included a variety of peoples, ethnicities, cultures, languages, religions and diverse regions, with distinct spatial, political, cultural and economic characteristics, provides valuable insights into how the "power asymmetry" can drive the formation of an empire's centres and its peripheries, highlighting the nonstatic nature of imperial cores: the imperial centre often shifted and did not always align with the political capital. As Michael North argues, the Baltic case reveals how the Russian Empire simultaneously constructed its self-image as a European colonial empire while transforming these provinces into its western provinces. This case shows that the peripheries are not inherently defined; intricate economic strategies and imperial objectives shape them, and their significance can change over time. Additionally, Russia's eastward economic expansion challenges traditional Eurocentric perspectives and the Eurocentric map of the world by demonstrating how Russia's imperial periphery redefined the Pacific as a vital hub within its trade network, placing it at the centre of the Russian system of trade.[2]

In the 1990s, various historiographical "turns", including transnationalism, entangled histories, imperial history and global history, revitalised European historical narratives and challenged the traditionally Western-centric approach to writing history. This shift meant that European peripheries and regions redefined Europe's borders, moving the East–West

nexus back and forth and linking Europe to the broader global context in diverse ways. Many critics have brought to the fore the issue of Eurocentric and Western-centric perspectives and the field's failure to overcome the East–West dichotomy, colonial attitudes or gaze towards the peripheries or other localities. They maintained that the challenge lies in adopting inclusive and multilingual approaches, considering diverse local historiographical perspectives. Crossing linguistic and cultural barriers could foster a more pluralistic and universal understanding of the past.[3]

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 renewed the study of European history and partially liberated the field of Russian studies from the constraints imposed by the Cold War and Sovietology. This shift allowed scholars to reflect deeply on these issues and led to the emergence of historical studies that emphasised the need to "Rethink Russia and Europe." Thirty years later, and under the weight of a disastrous war, the above imperative was replaced by two other urgent issues: "Rethinking Ukraine and Europe/West" and "Rethinking Ukraine and Russia" or "Decolonise Ukrainian studies".

New and old institutions, depending on their political agenda, have attempted to answer this question. As we know, institutions produce scientific debates and elaborate on the political agendas of scholarly organisations through scholarships, awards, funding, new job opportunities and the development of new university curricula aimed at generating new knowledge. The issues at stake extend beyond historical realities to encompass the languages historians use to describe and construct historical narratives and dynamics.

The Russo-Ukrainian War has profoundly changed the international discipline formerly known as Russian studies, which traditionally encompassed Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and the wider post-Soviet space, often at the expense of acknowledging other nations' agency, identity and history. In response to the war, many scholars have argued for a decolonisation of Slavic studies – placing Ukraine, the Baltic states, Central Asia and the Caucasus as subjects of their history, not as appendices to Russia.

From the perspective of Ukrainian studies, Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine has presented an opportunity to liberate the field from the colonial narratives that have long dominated the Western perception of Ukraine, its culture and its history. The goal is to establish a new tradition of research and university curricula that recognise Ukraine as a fully autonomous multidisciplinary area of study.[4] Departments are invited to revise course offerings, reading lists and research priorities to include more Ukrainian, Central Asian and Caucasian content and to interrogate Russian imperialism and colonialism critically.[5] The Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEES), made "decolonisation" the theme of its 2023 conference and called "for the reassessment and transformation of Russo-centric relationships of power and hierarchy both in the region and in how we study it".[6] The call to decolonise European history and imperial histories, be they Russian or otherwise, by amplifying marginalised voices, acknowledging the legacies of imperialism and colonialism and challenging dominant narratives, is not a new research imperative. However, the war lent it a new urgency.

The war has reshaped Ukraine's self-perception from a peripheral "borderland" (a term rooted in its historical position between empires) to a frontline state defending European values. This shift challenges Russia's narrative of Ukraine as an artificial construct and reinforces its identity as a sovereign, European nation.[7] Many Ukrainians and scholars of Ukrainian history view national history as a way to reveal what has remained unseen or overlooked by Russians: the Ukrainian nation and its historical roots. Others argue that Western scholars have, like Russians, studied Ukrainian history, primarily as an intermediate zone of contacts, thus depriving it of its subjectivity and overlooking the complexity of Ukrainian society. In this context, the "imperial turn" in the study of the post-Soviet space is associated with Putin's imperial dreams. Methodological nationalism and national history have gained new momentum, returning the field to a state reminiscent of the early 1990s.[8]

Another issue concerns which region Ukraine belongs to: is it part of the post-Soviet space, of Eastern Europe, of both, or otherwise? The naming of regions, be it the Balkans, Central, Eastern or Central-Eastern Europe, is an ideological construct and a tool of power.

Inhabitants of the region traditionally known as Eastern Europe are increasingly focused on addressing the inequalities accompanying negative stereotypes about countries not aligned with Western Europe and the broader West. These stereotypes often include notions of sociopolitical backwardness, underdevelopment, corruption, authoritarianism, nationalism, xenophobia, inadequacy and inferiority. Researchers and policymakers have confronted and tried to overcome these perceptions and foster a more accurate and positive understanding of the region. Many contemporary conferences aim precisely to transcend these perceptions and discuss new perspectives for Ukraine's integration into European, regional and global history.

Many scholars have turned their attention to the heritage of Central and Eastern Europe, recognising the region's distinctive character and arguing that, especially today, it is crucial to deepen studies on the heritage of Central and Eastern Europe, explore shared European values and consider how these values can be promoted and defended. This inquiry is particularly relevant amid the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia, which has brought issues of identity, borders and belonging to the forefront. They contend that reflecting on the shared social and cultural past of Central and Eastern Europe, beyond the obvious post-socialist/post-Soviet-legacy, is essential in an era marked by globalisation, rising nationalism and war. Such reflection, these scholars argue, offers valuable insights into how Europe might address its current challenges.[9] In the context of conceptualising the Central and East European region and heritage, an old geopolitical concept has been reborn: the "Intermarium". The concept envisions an alliance of countries that extends from the Baltic Sea through the Black Sea to the Aegean Sea. This alliance aims to establish a third power bloc between Germany and Russia. It is part of a longstanding tradition of

geopolitical thought that seeks to promote unity among Central and Eastern European states.

Historically, the region caught between the German-led Mitteleuropa in the nineteenth century, and Moscow's "Near Abroad" after 1991, has continually searched for unifying models, drawing inspiration from entities like the Jagiellonian dynasty, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The notion of the "middle of Europe" or the "land between the seas" has thus repeatedly resurfaced, reflecting the region's ongoing quest for a distinct identity amid powerful neighbours. On a broader conceptual level, the question arises: what is Europe – its values, its borders and its relations to another geopolitical imaginary, Eurasia, which many historians promoted after 1991?[10]

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the concept of Eurasia was proposed to disconnect the region's history from its Cold War connotations.[11] Historians of Russian/Soviet history had proposed the concept as a "topos" for transnational and entangled histories, which could methodologically foster the renewal of the field and bring together the local, the regional and the global. After 2022, the concept of Eurasia, which is historically a very complex concept with many conflicting semantic and ideological layers, was associated, and partly rightly, with Putin's imperial plans.

RUTA, another new network of scholars and activists, has grown out of networks that emerged in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, aligning itself with transforming area studies. Its mission statement mentions that "RUTA promotes and supports Central, South-Eastern, Baltic, Caucasus, Central and Northern Asia Studies in Global Conversation. It centres and builds on the knowledges, scholarly traditions, and expertise of scholars, artists, and social justice advocates in the region(s)."[12] This perspective that alters Slavic/Russian studies does not intend to exclude engagement with Russian history, but to decentralise it in accordance with current demands.

The Russo-Ukrainian War has redefined centre-periphery historiography by destabilising Russian imperial narratives, fostering national cohesion and prompting scholarly engagement with decolonial and comparative frameworks. While Ukraine asserts itself as a historical and geopolitical centre, new tensions have emerged from wartime decentralisation and global dependencies, ensuring that the reshaping of historical narratives remains an ongoing, dynamic process. Contemporary European history is defined, fertilised or challenged by regional, local/national histories. A "peripheral" perspective offers the potential to renew the prospects and expectations in the understanding of the centre, and in this manner go beyond the Western-centric study and thinking of Europe, which, despite the criticism it has endured in the last 30 years, continues to "colonise" the writing of history. As a subject of study, Europe consistently defies efforts to present it as a uniform or homogenous entity; it is difficult to place Europe in a single space and time.[13] Europe is simultaneously local and global. It comprises many languages, identities, peripheral stories and perspectives that offer plural visions of

European history, reminding us that it cannot be reduced to one identity or era.

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[1] Diana Mishkova, "Symbolic Geographies and Visions of Identity: A Balkan Perspective," *European Journal of Social Theory* 11, no. 2 (2008): 237–56.

[2] Michael North, "From the Baltic to the Pacific: Trade, Shipping and Exploration on the Shores of the Russian Empire," in *Re-maping Centre and Periphery: Asymmetrical Encounters in European and Global Contexts*, ed. Tessa Hauswedell, Axel Körner, and Ulrich Tiedau (London: University College London, 2019), 63–76, https://doi.org/10.1353/book.81370.

[3] See, for example, the criticism of Eurocentrism by Alessandro Stanziani, in connection with global history. Stanziani argues that uncritical adoption of Western categories, such as "progress" or "modernity" marginalises non-English historiographies and highlights the significance of multilingualism, particularly within historiography, and the study of empirical objects as a starting point for transcending the centre-periphery dichotomy. Alessandro Stanziani, *Eurocentrism and the Politics of Global History* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018).

[4] Andrii Portnov, "Rethinking East European Studies in Times of Upheaval: Some Reflections on Ukrainian Studies in Germany (and Not Only)," *TRAFO: Blog for Transregional Research*, 3 November 2022, https://trafo.hypotheses.org/42337.

[5] Andy Byford, Connor Doak, and Stephen Hutchings, "Introduction: Russian and Slavonic Studies at the Crossroads: The Implications of the War in Ukraine," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 60, no. 3 (2024): 336–38, https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cqae042.

[6] 2023 ASEEES Convention Theme, ASEEES, https://aseees.org/convention/2023-convention/2023-aseees-convention-theme/.

[7] Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "How War Is Rebordering Ukraine," *Current History* 123, no. 855 (2024): 249–55, https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2024.123.855.249.

[8] Ilya Gerasimov, Sergey Glebov, Marina Mogilner, and Alexander Semyonov, "War and the State of the Field," *Ab Imperio* 1 (2004): 9, https://doi.org/10.1353/imp.2022.0000.

[9] Kinga Anna Gajda, *The Heritage of Central and Eastern Europe* (Peter Lang: Frankfurt am Main, 2023).

[10] For a critical examination of this concept in its historical and contemporary perspective, see Marlene Laruelle and Ellen Rivera, "Imagined Geographies of Central and Eastern Europe: The Concept of Intermarium," *IERES Occasional Papers*, March 2019.

[11] Mark von Hagen, "Empires, Borderlands, and Diasporas: Eurasia as Anti-Paradigm for the Post-Soviet Era," *American Historical Review* 109, no. 2 (2004): 445–68, https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/109.2.445.

[12] "Mission Statement," RUTA, https://ruta-association.org/mission-statement/.

[13] Denis de Rougemont, *Lettres aux députés européens* (Neuchâtel: Ides et Calendes, 1950).