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Special Issue

“Transottoman Infrastructures and Networks across the Black Sea”

Editors

Lyubomir Pozharliev*, Florian Riedler*, and Stefan
Rohdewald*

* Dr. phil., Leibniz-Institut für Länderkunde, Leipzig, ORCID ID: 0000-0003-4395-8211
e-mail: l_pozharliev@leibniz-ifl.de

* Dr. phil., University of Leipzig, ORCID ID: 0000-0003-4908-3727
e-mail: Florian.Riedler@uni-leipzig.de

* Prof. Dr., University of Leipzig, ORCID ID: 0000-0001-8318-9686
e-mail: stefan.rohdewald@uni-leipzig.de

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Introduction to the Special Issue:

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Lyubomir Pozharliev, Florian Riedler, and Stefan Rohdewald

Traditionally, the larger Black Sea area acted as a pivot that connected the Ottoman realm with the empires in the north such as Poland–Lithuania and Russia, as well as the territories of Moldova, Walachia, and Hungary and also the Habsburg Empire via the Danube, and Persia via the Trabzon route.¹ This special issue aims to explore such connections by looking at the infrastructures that organized them spatially and socially. We are particularly interested in tracing the transformation of older Transottoman connections and networks through the development of modern infrastructures in the larger Black Sea region.² From the nineteenth to the twentieth century when the geopolitical outlook of the whole region changed, Russia and the Ottoman Empire as well as other states were connected in new ways. New technologies such as steam shipping on the Black Sea, the Danube, and other rivers, as well as railways in the hinterland, played a decisive role in the transformation of the entire region and its connections. New goods and products such as wheat or oil called for new transport infrastructures and resulted in new trans-imperial competition. Old ports and new ports were (re)connected to the hinterland and the Black Sea region in its global context.³

¹ Y. Eyüp Özveren, "A Framework for the Study of the Black Sea World, 1789–1915," *Review: A Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center* 20 (1997): 77–113; Charles Issawi, "The Tabriz–Trabzon Trade, 1830–1900: Rise and Decline of a Route," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 1, no. 1 (1970): 18–27.

² Stefan Rohdewald, Stephan Conermann, and Albrecht Fuess, eds., *Transottomanica – Osteuropäisch-osmanisch-persische Mobilitätsdynamiken: Perspektiven und Forschungsstand* (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2019).

³ Constantin Ardeleanu and Andreas Lyberatos, eds., *Port-Cities of the Western Black Sea Coast and the Danube: Economic and Social Development in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Corfu: Black Sea Project, 2016), <https://books.blacksea.gr/en/15/>; Edhem Eldem, Sophia Laou, and Vangelis Kechriotis, eds., *The Economic and Social Development of the Port-Cities of the Southern Black Sea*

In a narrow sense, infrastructures are material components of wider networks that enable exchange and mobility, e.g., roads, railways, canals, ports, and others. Only as part of networks and in close collaboration with the human actors can they offer insight into the development of social life. Because they function as sociotechnical systems, infrastructures in a wider sense can also include associations, institutions, networks of merchant houses or banks. Thus, they can be associated with all structured practices of transport, migration, and the mobility of people and objects in general. Both aspects, the material and the social, come together in Thomas P. Hughes's notion of large technological systems.⁴

From a historical perspective, infrastructure is intricately connected to the state and its development. Because of the huge investment costs involved, infrastructures were often constructed with public money and this expense was justified by declaring their effects a common good. In particular, the ability of transport infrastructures to penetrate territories and to project power has made them interesting for states in their attempt to intensify or extend their domination. This is true for foreign colonies as well as for home territories that were subjected to "internal colonization."⁵ The following contributions will examine this issue in greater detail in relation to the nineteenth-century infrastructure policies of the Ottoman Empire and Russia. Focusing on infrastructure development can provide a new perspective on specific state policies. From such a perspective, the element of planning gains a special importance, and through it we can access geopolitical visions of power and mental maps of state actors that do not necessarily match with reality.

However, although infrastructure development is very often politically driven, it lies beyond political boundaries. Thus, it is linked to transnational and trans-imperial studies and can also enhance our understanding of larger trends such as modernization. The map that modern infrastructure outlines does not necessarily overlap with the political one – it is a map of economically and symbolically important centers constituted by the various infrastructural networks themselves. Technological skills and specific knowledge are intertwined in its

Coast and Hinterland, Late 18th–Beginning of the 20th Century (Corfu: Black Sea Project, 2017), <https://books.blacksea.gr/en/6/>.

⁴ Thomas P. Hughes, "The Evolution of Large Technological Systems," in *The Social Construction of Technological Systems*, ed. Wiebe E. Bijker, Thomas P. Hughes, and Trevor Pinch (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 45.

⁵ Dirk van Laak, *Imperiale Infrastruktur: Deutsche Planungen für eine Erschließung Afrikas 1880–1960* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2004); Joanna Guldi, *Roads to Power: Britain Invents the Infrastructure State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

construction. The direction and nature of the transfer of knowledge, along with the networks of mobile actors engaged with this transfer, become visible through them.

Once built, infrastructures become a conduit for the exchange of goods and people. Therefore, by setting the focus on infrastructure in a broad sense, this special issue attempts to change the dominant prism of studying the Danube and Black Sea region in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a bipolar conflict zone between the Ottoman and Russian Empires. Rather, it seeks to place the connection between the two empires, but also between other political actors, in a wider framework of Transottoman connections that include perspectives on all regions around the Black Sea, from the Danube to the Caucasus, Persia, the Caspian Sea and the Don-Volga regions, but especially the former Polish-Lithuanian territories within Russia and the Danubian connections to the Habsburg Empire via Walachia and Bulgaria. The contributions unveil the intertwined trajectories of mutual interest in the regions, the established networks constituted by cooperation and competition, and the consolidation of hubs or centers of communication and infrastructures of structural importance in the formation of a cross-imperial or Transottoman society.

At the same time, the impact of modern infrastructure, as well as various aspects to and imaginations of modernity are complex. Besides connecting and transporting necessary goods, technologies, and knowledge, the consolidated infrastructure also facilitates the rapid spread of life-threatening epidemics, wars and weapons, or a change of perception in criminal activities surrounding drugs and prostitution. It simultaneously changes the interpretations of the trajectories through which it passes, upsets local everyday routines, and brings uncertainty as part of the connotations of modernity. As before, infrastructures enabled trade, transcultural exchange, migration, and mobility, all of which went beyond bilateral connections between the imperial centers. But often these connections were transformed and reshuffled in line with new technological possibilities. For example, new trade routes and railways opened the Black Sea region in a now direct connection via the Caspian Sea to the emerging world market;⁶ Orthodox pilgrims from Russia and Muslims from Central Asia discovered the opportunities of rail and steamer transport in reaching Jerusalem and Mecca respectively via

⁶ Reinhard Nachtigal, *Verkehrswege in Kaukasien: Ein Integrationsproblem des Zarenreiches 1780–1870* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2016).

Batumi, Sevastopol, and Odessa.⁷ Exploring the dual nature of infrastructure will shed light on the practice and conception of what is called “modernity” in the different societies of the area in focus here.

Finally, yet importantly, the focus on infrastructures will explain the geopolitical restructuring of the region as a consequence of transformed patterns of mobility. As mentioned above, this concerns the integration into new global economic flows and patterns of migration. Moreover, this also concerns the consolidation of cross-regional, Transottoman society and the internal restructuring of states and empires. Van Laak binds the construction of large-scale infrastructure projects to colonial domination and the imposition of imperial power.⁸ The concrete analysis in the cases examined in this special issue can illustrate a more complex relationship. For instance, the upgrading of infrastructure in the Ottoman Empire was driven to some degree by recognized and certainly new and challenging self-understandings that relate to their own lack of technical equipment. For the Ottomans, the acknowledged paucity of new technologies and knowledge was linked to the lack of cultural prestige and, ultimately, to imperial legitimation. The question remains though: who were the actors who triggered the imperial centers to invest in new infrastructures from the eighteenth to the twentieth century? Were they the imperial elites, lobbyists for Western interests, or to some degree independent mobile players from the provinces with – let us call them Transottoman – cross-imperial horizons of actions and interests?

Is there a reversal in the implementation of imperial policy not only conceived in terms of the movements of troops, weapons, and military infrastructures, but through the broader and general, economic and societal usage of forms of technological acceleration of time and their respective spatial accessibility? Conversely, did the new infrastructures and technologies offer a chance to emancipate imperial subjects from the center and to formulate cross-regional societal horizons of action and economic interest? These are some of the questions that the contributions to this special issue attempt to address.

Boriana Antonova-Goleva’s contribution starts by depicting early Ottoman railway development through the example of the Silistra Railway Project. During the 1850s, the Ottoman Empire started to develop its own railway infrastructure. The project for this line was one of the first railway

⁷ Eileen Kane, *Russian Hajj: Empire and the Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

⁸ Laak, *Imperiale Infrastruktur*.

schemes in Rumelia that was introduced to the Ottoman government by a British group of investors. The group's primary aim was to strengthen other railway schemes along the Lower Danube in which some members of the group were directly involved, and to foster grain trade via the Black Sea, the Principality of Serbia, and the Danubian Principalities. They competed with another group that favored an alternative railway route. As a result of their competition, after 1850 the urban centers on the Lower Danube became a focus for Transottoman and global infrastructure enterprises.

Boris Belge illustrates old and new trade practices in the port of Odessa in the second half of the nineteenth century. He makes clear why the port of Odessa, which had become a high-performing hub, rather quickly lost its importance after a few decades of blossoming, and how it faced growing competition from a regional rival such as Nikolaev (Mykolaïv). The causes can be explained in terms of the port's infrastructure: the connection to the imperial railway network was not good enough to ensure links between waterfront and hinterland. Although the port and regional administration lobbied the capital, they were unsuccessful as the empire's governmental priorities shifted to other ports on the Black Sea shore that could be used by the army, too.

Lyubomir Pozharliev continues in this context, and argues that the creation of the Russian Steam Navigation and Trading Company (ROPiT) in 1856 was not enough to make up for other systemic infrastructural shortcomings: Although the state intended that the company play a dominant role in Russia's imperial policy of control and influence over the Black Sea and its Southern territories, this was structurally hampered by the bigger picture – the continued lack of roads and railway routes linking the interior of Russia to Odessa and insufficient investments for other Russian Black Sea and Caucasus ports.

Florian Riedler, finally, turns to the Ottoman side again, and illustrates how the Ottoman bureaucratic elite adopted modern technological and infrastructural thinking and how it collaborated with international experts. He does so through the example of preparations for international cooperation on the regularization of the Danube at the Iron Gate and its delta. As a consequence of new technical and infrastructural solutions, older Transottoman routes of trade and travel were transformed and intensified.

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