

The Black Sea as Historical Meso-Region: Concepts in Cultural Studies and the Social Sciences

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Abstract:

The concept of historical meso-regions, developed by German-speaking historians of Eastern Europe, has been *avant la lettre* employed by a number of authorities in the field of the history and culture of the Black Sea Region – Arnold Toynbee, Mikhail Rostovtzeff and Gheorghe Ion Brătianu, implicitly also by Fernand Braudel. In their footsteps Neal Ascherson and Charles King wrote their popular monographs while Eyüp Özveren elaborated his historical ‘Framework for the Study of the Black Sea World’. Still, however, research results on the Black Sea as a historical meso-region remain mostly in the regionalist community and are rarely perceived in fields like Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, Balkan, East European, Eurasian or West Asian history. It has to be seen whether the recent resurfacing of the Black Sea Region in international geopolitics will bring about a change.

Key words: Black Sea, meso-region, geopolitics, historical region, regionalism

With the annexation of the Crimea by Russia in the spring of 2014, 150 years after the Crimean War the Black Sea has returned into the center of world history. Again the Black Sea Region turned into the arena of shifts in Europe's basic order. It proofs the geopolitical significance as well as the strong symbolic and affective connotations of the Black Sea.

Batumi, Odessa, Trabzon. Cultural Semantics of the Black Sea in the Perspective of Eastern Port Cities. Outline of a research project of the

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Introduction: What is a historical meso-region?

The concept of historical meso-region as an analytical framework for transnational-comparative research has its genesis in the historical sub-discipline of Russian and East European history, as it emerged in the German-speaking world. Consequently, the level of awareness of this middle-range theory has been confined to a narrow guild. It is a concept, that is to say, a working hypothesis utilized for comparative historical research. As such, it serves as a heuristic device for analysing de-territorialized, yet time-specific, conceptual units that traverse the boundaries of states, societies, and even civilizations. The aim of this type of comparative analysis is to identify and differentiate clusters of structural attributes over the *longue durée*. From this perspective, it is the various combinations of markers of this type, rather than the individual markers themselves, that make it unique and therefore cluster specific. A cluster covering a large geographic space and limited to one or more specific epochs, can be referred to as a historical meso-region¹; some well-established examples include 'East-Central Europe', 'Northeastern

¹ Arno Strohmeier, "Historische Komparatistik und die Konstruktion von Geschichtsregionen: der Vergleich als Methode der historischen Europaforschung," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte und Kultur Südosteuropas* 1 (1999): 39-55; Stefan Troebst, "What's in a Historical Region? A Teutonic Perspective," *European Review of History* 10:2 (2003): 173-88; idem, "Historical Meso-Region': A Concept in Cultural Studies and Historiography," *EGO - European History Online*, March 2012 (URL <http://www.iegeo.eu/en/threads/crossroads/the-historical-region>); idem, "Historical Mesoregions and Transregionalism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Transregional Studies*, ed. Matthias Middell (London: Routledge, 2018), 169-78; Frithjof Benjamin Schenk, "The Historical Regions of Europe - Real or Invented? Some Remarks on Historical Comparison and Mental Mapping," in *Beyond the Nation: Writing European History Today* (Bielefeld and Saint Petersburg: Zentrum für Deutschland und Europastudien, 2004), 15-24; Holm Sundhussen, "Die Wiederentdeckung des Raums: Über Nutzen und Nachteil von Geschichtsregionen," in *Südosteuropa. Von vormoderner Vielfalt und nationalstaatlicher Vereinigung*, eds. Konrad Clewing & Oliver Jens Schmitt (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2005), 13-33; Maria Todorova, "Spacing Europe: What Is A Historical Region?," *East Central Europe* 32:1-2 (2005): 59-78.

Europe', and 'Southeastern Europe.'² Here too, the specific is inconceivably removed from its surroundings; one historical meso-region can only be understood in the context of others. Accordingly, relationality and relational dependency complement the internal structures of a historical meso-region.

Only in recent years historians, art historians, and literary scholars as well as those in other fields of the humanities and social sciences have made use of the concept of historical meso-region, thereby rediscovering the Polish historian-in-exile Oskar Halecki's seminal book *The Limits and Divisions of European History of 1950*.³ The early modernist Heinz Schilling can be mentioned as representative example in Germany⁴; internationally notable examples include the Icelandic expert on comparative

² Klaus Zernack, *Osteuropa. Eine Einführung in seine Geschichte* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1977), 20-30 and 88-92; Dietmar Müller, "Southeastern Europe as a Historical Meso-Region: Constructing Space in Twentieth-Century German Historiography," *European Review of History* 10:2 (2003): 393-408; Holm Sundhaussen, "Was ist Südosteuropa und warum beschäftigen wir uns (nicht) damit?," *Südosteuropa-Mitteilungen* 42:5-6 (2002): 93-105; Stefan Troebst, "Vom *spatial turn* zum *regional turn*? Geschichtsregionale Konzeptionen in den Kulturwissenschaften," in *Dimensionen der Kultur- und Gesellschaftsgeschichte. Festschrift für Hannes Siegrist zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Matthias Middell (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2007), 143-59; idem, "Nordosteuropa: Geschichtsregion mit Zukunft," *Scandia. Tidskrift för historisk forskning* 65:2 (1999): 153-68; idem, "Northeastern Europe?," *Herito. Dziedzictwo, kultura, społeczność / Heritage, Culture & the Present* 2015:3 (20), 70-81; idem, "'Intermarium' and 'Wedding to the Sea': Politics of History and Mental Mapping in East Central Europe," *European Review of History* 10:2 (2003): 293-321.

³ Oscar Halecki, *The Limits and Divisions of European History* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1950). See also Stefan Troebst, "European History," in *European Regions and Boundaries. A Conceptual History*, eds. Diana Mishkova & Balázs Trencsényi (Oxford, New York, NY: Berghahn, 2017), 235-57 (= *European Conceptual History*, 4); and Diana Mishkova, Bo Stråth, and Balázs Trencsényi, "Regional History as a 'Challenge' to National Frameworks of Historiography: The Case of Central, Southeast, and Northern Europe," in *Transnational Challenges to National History Writing*, eds. Matthias Middell & Lluís Roura (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 257-314.

⁴ Heinz Schilling, "Die europäischen Mächte und Mächtezonen," in idem, *Konfessionalisierung und Staatsinteressen. Internationale Beziehungen 1559-1660* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2007), 191-419.

civilizations Johann Arnason⁵, the Swiss ethnologist Christian Giordano⁶, and the British sociologist Gerard Delanty.⁷

The Black Sea Region as a histor(iograph)ical meso-region

The concept of historical meso-regions is strongly associated with Eastern Europe and specifically the Black Sea area, namely in the form of an interdisciplinary and also intercontinental lregional frame that at times has been called 'Black Sea World' and at others 'Southeastern Europe' (i.e. broadly defined and used as a synonym for the Balkan-Black Sea-Caucasus area).⁸ Most importantly, the restoration of communication lines in the states and societies surrounding the Black Sea that had been disrupted during the decades of East-West confrontation has prompted historians to approach conflict and cooperation in the Black Sea area from a meso-regional perspective. Naturally, these historians have looked for precedents in earlier historical writings and in past writings of related disciplines and have made some interesting discoveries. Thus, this essay will undertake a historiographical journey through those genres of social and cultural studies that have now created a veritable research direction. The question as to whether the spatial concept of Southeastern Europe, as developed in political science⁹, is transferable for our purposes (transnational comparative research) to a Balkan-Black Sea-Caucasus space¹⁰ can by now be answered positively.

The Black Sea region appeared on the European horizon in connection with the Eastern Question, i.e. the international problem

⁵ Johann P. Arnason, "Interpreting Europe from East of Centre," in *Domains and Divisions of European History*, ed. Johann P. Arnason & Natalie J. Doyle (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 139-157.

⁶ Christian Giordano, "Interdependente Vielfalt: Die historischen Regionen Europas," in *Europa und die Grenzen im Kopf*, eds. Karl Kaser, Dagmar Gramshammer-Hohl & Robert Pichler (Klagenfurt/Celovec: Wieser, 2003), 113-35; idem, "Südosteuropa – eine Region eigener Art?," in *Kulturelle Orientierungen und gesellschaftliche Ordnungsstrukturen*, eds. Joachim Jesko von Puttkamer & Gabriella Schuber (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 19-39.

⁷ Gerard Delanty, "The Historical Regions of Europe: Civilizational Backgrounds and Multiple Routes to Modernity," *Historická sociologie* 3:1-2 (2012): 9-24.

⁸ Stefan Troebst, "Schwarzmeerwelt. Eine geschichtsregionale Konzeption," *Südosteuropa-Mitteilungen* 46:5-6 (2006): 92-102.

⁹ See, e.g., *The Southeast European Challenge: Ethnic Conflict and the International Response*, eds. Hans-Georg Ehrhart & Albrecht Schnabel (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1999).

¹⁰ Stefan Troebst, "Eine neue Südosteuropa-Konzeption? Der Balkan-Schwarzmeer-Kaukasus-Raum in politikwissenschaftlicher Sicht. Ein unvorgreiflicher Vorschlag zur Diskussion," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte und Kultur Südosteuropas* 2 (2000): 153-59. See also *Handbook of the History of the Black Sea Region*, ed. Kerstin S. Jobst, Stefan Troebst & Stefan Rohdewald (Berlin, Boston, MA: De Gruyter, forthcoming).

posed from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century by the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. It arose particularly vividly during the Crimean War from 1853 to 1856 and on this basis assumed a prominent role in geopolitical considerations at the turn of the century. The global importance of this war had been ignored in recent historical scholarship, until Orlando Figes rescued it from oblivion in his 2010 bestseller *Crimea: The Last Crusade*, which appeared in print just a few years prior to the Russian Federation's annexation of Ukrainian Crimea in March 2014.¹¹ In general, the pre-imperial age brought about a global geopolitical discourse on the maritime dimension of great power politics—with “Russia’s urge to the warm waters” and “Rule, Britannia! rule the waves” as prominent slogans. In the 19th century then historians followed suit, and points of culmination were and are the concept of coastal societies like ‘Indian Ocean’, ‘Adriatic’ or an ‘Atlantic World’¹² as well as the intense and ongoing historiographic debate on the role of seas in globalization processes.¹³

Mackinder, Toynbee & Rostovzeff: An early cohort and its followers

In 1904, the London-based British geographer Halford Mackinder situated the ‘geographical pivot of history’ as the overlapping hegemonic spheres of tsar and sultan, specifically in southern Russia and in the Black

¹¹ See Orlando Figes, *Crimea: The Last Crusade* (New York: Lane, 2010). See, however, also the multi-volume document edition by Winfried Baumgart *Akten zur Geschichte des Krimkriegs 1853-1856* (Munich, Vienna: R. Oldenbourg, 1979-2006).

¹² Kurti N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: CUP, 1985); idem, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean before the Rise of Islam* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990); *Der Indische Ozean. Das afro-asiatische Mittelmeer als Kultur- und Wirtschaftsraum*, eds. Dieter Rothermund & Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik (Vienna: Promedia, 2004); *Space on the Move. Transformations of the Indian Ocean Seascape in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*, eds. Jan-Georg Deutsch & Brigitte Reinwald (Berlin: Schwarz, 2002); *L' Adriatico. Mare di scambi tra Oriente e Occidente*, ed. Marina Cattaruzza (Pordenone: Ed. Concordia Sette, 2003); *Adriatico mare d'Europa. L'economia e la storia*, eds. Eugenio Turri & Daniela Zumiani (Bologna: Silvana, 2002); Predrag Matvejevitich, *La Méditerranée et l'Europe. Leçons au Collège de France et autres essais* (Paris: Favard, 2005); Barry Cunliffe, *Facing the Ocean: The Atlantic and its Peoples 8000 BC - 1500 AD* (Oxford: OUP, 2001); *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, eds. David Armitage & Michael J. Braddick (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); *The North Sea and Culture (1550-1800). Proceedings of the International Conference Held at Leiden 21-22 April 1995*, eds. Juliette Roding & Lex Heerma van Voss (Hilversum: Verloren, 1996).

¹³ Felix Schürmann, “Raum ohne Ort? Meere in der Geschichtsforschung,” *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 67:51-52 (18 December 2017), 41-6.

Sea region.¹⁴ The decade of war in the region from 1912 to 1922 also attracted the interest of international historical scholarship. In 1922, Arnold Toynbee published his antithetically titled book, *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey: A Study in the Contact of Civilizations*, in which he introduced a meso-regional approach under the rubric 'Near East'. His 'Near East' encompassed both the Balkans and the Caucasus.¹⁵ That same year, the Russian émigré historian of antiquity, Mikhail Rostovtzeff published his seminal work *Iranians and Greeks in South Russia* that took a much more explicit meso-regional perspective:

I take as my starting-point the unity of the region which we call South Russia: the intersection of influences arriving by way of the Caucasus and the Black Sea, Greek influences spreading along the sea routes, and the consequent formation, from time to time, of mixed civilisations, very curious and very interesting.¹⁶

To this day, Mackinder, Toynbee, and Rostovtzeff continue to influence how the Black Sea region is represented in historical studies. For example, in his 1995 well-known book *The Black Sea*, the British historian Neil Ascherson took Rostovtzeff's work as his starting point,¹⁷ while his German colleague Dan Diner explicitly referenced Mackinder's 'pivot of history' in his 1999 history of the twentieth century, *Das Jahrhundert verstehen: Eine universalhistorische Deutung*, published in English translation in 2008 as *Cataclysms: A History of the Twentieth Century*. Diner took Mackinder's reference literally, telling the history of the century 'from its eastern periphery – from the periphery inward.'¹⁸ 'Such a vantage point', Diner continued, 'starting from the fringes of the continent, might be that of a virtual narrator situated on the legendary steps of the Odessa, looking outward South and West.'¹⁹ Accordingly, Diner constructs his interpretation, utilizing the East, i.e. East-Central Europe, Southeastern Europe, and the Middle East as the geographical

¹⁴ Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal* 23:4 (April 1904): 421-37 (Discussion, 437-44). See also Geoffrey Sloan, "Sir Halford J. Mackinder: The Heartland Theory Then and Now," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 22:3 (1999): 15-38.

¹⁵ Arnold J Toynbee, *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey: A Study in the Contact of Civilizations* (London: Constable, 1922).

¹⁶ Mikhail Rostovtzeff, *Iranians and Greeks in South Russia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), 1.

¹⁷ Neal Ascherson, *Black Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

¹⁸ Dan Diner, *Das Jahrhundert verstehen. Eine universalhistorische Deutung* (Munich: Luchterhand, 1999); for the English edition, from which the above quotation has been taken, see Diner, *Cataclysms: A History of the Twentieth Century from Europe's Edge*, trans. William Templer with Joel Golb (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 6. For the reference to Mackinder, see *ibid.*, 7.

¹⁹ Diner, *Cataclysms*, 7.

focal point for a history of the twentieth-century Europe; his against-the-grain orientation provides a history that is just as consistent and enlightening as more traditional approaches. With a view to the post-war confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States in the Balkans, the Black Sea region, and the Caspian region, Diner represents 'the recurring Eastern Question as the midwife of the Cold War.'²⁰ From this perspective, the Cold War was born in the Balkans, namely with the Greek Civil War from 1946 to 1949. Its certificate of birth is marked by President Harry Truman's speech on March 12, 1947, in which before a joint session of the US Congress he explicitly asked for American assistance for Greece and Turkey to forestall Soviet expansionism – the so-called Truman Doctrine. Here too, the pivot of history is situated in the Black Sea region. Indeed the Cold War in Greece and the Megali idea of establishing a Greek state that would encompass all ethnic Greek-inhabited areas were dialectically linked.

Gheorghe Ion Brătianu – the 'obscure Braudel of the Black Sea'

However during the interwar years, it was a Romanian, who was primarily responsible for propagating the meso-regional concept of the Black Sea. The economic historian Gheorghe Ion Brătianu, who in the 1930s and 1940s developed the concept in a two-volume history titled *La Mer Noire et la Question d'Orient*. Unfortunately, the second volume covering the Black Sea region during the Ottoman period remains missing to this day (The author was a political prisoner in Stalinist Romania and died in prison in 1956). However, Part One, covering the region's pre-sixteenth century history as part of the Byzantine Empire, was published posthumously in 1969 as *La Mer Noire des Origines à la Conquête Ottomane*. Interestingly, the Munich-based publishing house 'Societas Academica Dacoromana', established by an exiled Romanian, brought it to print.²¹

At the same time as Brătianu, but without any knowledge of his yet to be published opus, the French historian Fernand Braudel was also intensively working with the concept of historical meso-region in general and in relationship to the Black Sea region. In his well-known 1949 study on the Mediterranean region during the early modern period, he came to the conclusion that the Black Sea was little more than an 'Ottoman lake,'

²⁰ Diner, *Das Jahrhundert*, 266.

²¹ Gheorghe Ion Brătianu, *La Mer Noire des origines à la conquête ottomane* (Munich: Societas Academica Dacoromana, 1969).

albeit a 'well-guarded' one. He went on to describe it as a 'fringe area' of the 'extended Mediterranean' (not unlike the Sahara) and as a 'hunting ground of Constantinople.' In short, it was no historic region *suis generis*.²² The American-Macedonian historian Traian Stoianovich assessed the Black Sea region essentially in the same light as Braudel. Utilizing Braudel's concept of the Mediterranean world as his model, Stoianovich postulated a Balkan world in numerous studies from the 1960s until the 1990s, including in his 1994 monograph *The First and Last Europe*. In his conceptualization of the Balkan world(s), the Black Sea figured as a mere backyard.²³

1989 and all that

The actual breakthrough for a historical meso-regional concept of the Black Sea world, as noted earlier, was facilitated by the epochal year of 1989. As had happened in earlier times, it opened the region, making it once again relevant from an economic standpoint as well as from a geo-strategic perspective. One result of the events of that year was the creation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), which took place at Turkey's initiative in 1992; BSEC's membership includes neighbouring

²² Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*. 2 vols., (Paris: Colin, 1949). For Braudel's ancient history of the Mediterranean published posthumously, see Fernand Braudel, *Les Mémoires de la Méditerranée. Préhistoire et antiquité* (Paris: Éd. de Fallois, 1998), for discussions of Braudel's work see Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000). This first of two planned volumes triggered a large response. See Brent D. Shaw, "Challenging Braudel: A New Vision of the Mediterranean," *Journal of Roman Archeology* 14 (2001): 419-53; Elizabeth Fentress & James Fentress, "The Hole in the Doughnut," *Past and Present* 173 (2001): 203-19. For the authors' response to this reaction, see Nicholas Purcell, "The Boundless Sea of Unlikeness? On Defining the Mediterranean," *Mediterranean Historical Journal* 18 (2003): 9-29 and Peregrine Horden & Nicholas Purcell, "Four Years of Corruption: A Response to Critics," in *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, ed. William V. Harris (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 348-75. For a synopsis of the discussion, see Stefan Troebst, "Le Monde méditerranéen – Südosteuropa – Black Sea World. Geschichtsregionen im Süden Europas," *Der Süden. Neue Perspektiven auf eine europäische Geschichtsregion*, eds. Frithjof Benjamin Schenk & Martina Winkler (Frankfurt/M., New York: Campus, 2007), 49-73, here 55-60. – Incidentally, it is also often overlooked that Braudel not only constructed the regions making up the Mediterranean world, but also divided all of Europe into four regions or isthmuses: the Russian, the Polish, the German, and the French isthmus.

²³ Traian Stoianovich, *Between East and West: The Balkan and Mediterranean Worlds*, 4 vols. (New Rochelle, NY; Caratzas, 1992-1995); idem, *Balkan Worlds: The First and Last Europe* (Armonk, NY, London: Sharpe, 1994). – In a recent German handbook on Mediterranean studies the Black Sea does not figure at all: *Handbuch der Mediterranistik. Systematische Mittelmeerforschung und disziplinäre Zugänge*, eds. Mihran Dabag et al. (Paderborn: Fink, 2015).

states as well as other states such as Greece and Albania. The official language of this multilateral organization for practical reasons, rather than political, is Russian. Another result of '1989' was the founding of GUAM in 1996, which in 1999 became GUUAM; the acronym is short for Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova. If we consider the geographic relation of Tashkent, Baku, Erevan, Tbilisi, Kiev, and Chişinău, it becomes clear that here we are primarily dealing with a transport route for Caspian oil to the EU via the Black Sea that explicitly circumvents the territory of the Russian Federation. The likewise russophone GU(U)AM was temporarily robbed of its *raison d'être* by the proposed Gazprom South Stream Pipeline. However, with the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 that could change; but it would be without Armenia. The BSEC appears now to be dead, because its members have only been able to reach a consensus in the area of economics and ecology.

The prospect in the 1990s of Romania and Bulgaria gaining membership in NATO and the EU also generated demand for a regional identity, which especially in Romania provoked a veritable Brătianu-Renaissance. Thus, the yearbooks *Il mar nero: Annali di archeologie e storia* has appeared in Romania since 1994 and the book series *Bibliotheca Pontica* since 1996, both in Italian. The first issue of *Il mar nero* included the following programmatic statement:

In the course of its one thousand-year existence, the Black Sea has played a dual role, i.e. a role in regional history and one in global history. As an area of contact between neighbouring civilizations and peoples, whose contact it has always facilitated, the Black Sea was also a crossroads for movements of major intercontinental trade, civilizations, and ideas. Like the sea, which is the object of its research, the journal *IL MAR NERO* serves as the meeting place of scholars, who in the East and the West dedicate their research to this factor in world history.²⁴

The Brătianu-Renaissance in Romania should be seen against the backdrop of Bucharest's new *Ostpolitik*. Thus, the former Romanian President Ion Iliescu advocated in 2003, prior to his country's accession to NATO, the idea of the Black Sea as a 'future "European" sea' that together with the Caucasus would form the 'proper Southeastern Europe'.²⁵ In addition to Romania, this 'real Southeastern Europe', according to Iliescu, would include Bulgaria, Moldova, the Ukraine,

²⁴ *Il mar nero* 1 (1994): 7.

²⁵ [Konrad Schuller,] "Iliescu für EU-Beitritt der Türkei. „Die EU sollte sich nicht als das christliche Europa definieren“,“ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 27 September 2003, 6.

Turkey, Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. Thus, they too should have the prospect of EU accession. Iliescu deliberately excluded the Russian Federation from his conception of the Black Sea countries. In the academic sphere, Iliescu's 'real Southeastern Europe' found expression in a political science journal called *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*. The product of a 2001 Greek initiative, this journal is now firmly established in the highly competitive market of international periodicals. Even within West German political science a 'broad' Iliescu-like concept of Southern Europe is occasionally used.

Enlightenment from Mt. Uludağ: Y. Eyüp Özveren

In the world of historians, the ground-breaking essay, 'A Framework for the Study of the Black Sea, 1789-1915' by the Turkish economic historian Eyüp Özveren of Bursa's Uludağ University marked a decisive push in the direction of the meso-regional concept of the 'Black Sea world'; the essay first appeared in *Review*, a journal founded by Immanuel Wallerstein in 1976 as the official publication of the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems and Civilizations at Binghamton University in New York.²⁶ Özveren substantiated his view of an interactive Black Sea world using the momentous effects of the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, which ended the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774. Under the terms of the treaty, the Sultan was forced to concede to the Russian Empire access to the heretofore-Ottoman *mare clausum*, including the Bosphorus, Dardanelles, and the Danube. According to Özveren, an internal economic dynamic arose that transcended the economic spheres of both the Russian and Ottoman Empire, crossing the borders of each. A series of Black Sea port cities, i.e. Trabzon in East Anatolia with its proximity to the Persian trading metropolis Täbriz, the new Russian city of Odessa, which served as a gateway to the Ukrainian breadbasket, and Brăila and Galați on the lower Danube in Ottoman Empire territory but oriented toward the Habsburg Empire, took advantage of Istanbul's loss of absolute control over the Black Sea region to create a new trade relationship. 'These ports', Özveren concluded now, 'could trade among themselves, thereby creating a newngular trade, escaping control of the once dominant Istanbul.'²⁷ The fact that this transnational movement of goods across the borders of the Ottoman, Habsburg and Russian empires in the long

²⁶ 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.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 85.

nineteenth century was initiated from below by mercantile actors in the above-mentioned ports, rather than by the authoritative seats of power of said empires, Özveren interpreted as proof of 'the unity of geography'.²⁸ 'We now recognize this geography', Özveren stated, 'as a historically-constituted unit of analysis, a "world", the reality of which precedes in importance the actors placed on it'.²⁹ For Özveren, merchants figured prominently among these actors, and more specifically Pontic Greeks, whom he identified as part of the Byzantine heritage of the region. In keeping with this research direction, he studied other coastal societies, focusing on their specific trans-maritime interactions and parallels – for example, those surrounding the Indian Ocean and more recently the North Sea; and asked after the relationship between the constituent elements and the whole. His hypothesis was: 'The level of integratedness among themselves of the constituent elements of the Black Sea world is greater than the integration of each element by itself to the circuits of the outer world.'³⁰ In other words, at least in the sphere of commerce, Özveren's Black Sea world operated as a cohesive unit; accordingly, it was as dominant in shaping its constitutive elements as the respective competing political units (e.g. Ottoman, Russian, Habsburg) to which these elements belonged.

For the period of the Eastern Question, Eyüp Özveren postulated a historical Black Sea region, created by means of regional exchanges of goods, and thus also cultural transfers. These exchanges owed to the ubiquity of an ethnic, large group of professional traders, namely Greek merchant, as also Stoianovich had claimed earlier.³¹ Özveren provided historical back-references for his perspective (e.g. Byzantium and the Kingdom of Trebizond and also the Pontus Euxinus of antiquity) and invoked a unifying, almost timeless, geography. Through the Ottoman re-captioning of the palimpsest 'Black Sea', so one could paraphrase Özveren, the original ancient text resonates as a Byzantine text at the latest since Küçük Kaynarca. Put differently, even empires cannot permanently resist the power of economic geography. However, he also stressed that the spatialization of social and economic processes, i.e. the mercantile activities (including their cultural dimensions) of Pontic Greeks and other merchants in the Black Sea port cities, turned the concrete space of action into a perceptual and imaginative space. Indeed,

²⁸ Ibid, 82.

²⁹ Ibid, 86-7.

³⁰ Ibid, 89.

³¹ Traian Stoianovich, "The Conquering Balkan Orthodox Merchant," *Journal of Economic History* 20:2 (1960): 234-313.

a system formed from a contemporary cognitive map made up of economic centres and their catchment areas that heretofore had not interacted and which had even taken on similar structures. For in the entrepreneurial coordinate system of a Trabzon merchant, Cairo, also under Ottoman rule, was situated far beyond the horizon, while Russian Odessa was only a short, albeit dangerous, sea passage away.³²

In a 2001 essay, 'The Black Sea World as a Unit of Analysis', Özveren utilized his 1997 empirical findings to create a theoretical foundation for his concept of a historical meso-region.³³ In contrast to the *Annales* approach of Braudel and his student Stoianovich, who classified the Black Sea respectively as a largely passive annex of the Mediterranean Sea and the Balkans, Özveren assigned the region great significance; in fact, he turned the tables, describing the Black Sea not as an appendage of the Balkans, but the Balkans as an appendage of the Black Sea: 'It is my contention that the Balkans constitute a zone within the Black Sea world, rather than being a meaningful unit of analysis itself.'³⁴ Özveren's primary inspiration is Brătianu, who according to him is 'the obscure Braudel of the Black Sea'³⁵ and whose work Özveren comprehensively details and reviews.

According to what could be called the Özveren-Brătianu thesis, the meso-regional features of the Black Sea world consist of two axioms. First, the Black Sea region is characterized by a North-South opposition, whereby during antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the early modern era, the innovative impulses originated from the South, with tsarist Russia encroaching from the North. Second, the Black Sea world has been defined by long periods of imperial hegemony and *mare clausum*-policy – as enforced under Byzantine, Ottoman, and Soviet rule – interrupted by periods of openness and multilateralism (e.g. in the late Byzantine era with the economic penetration of Genovese and Venetian traders, during the long nineteenth century, which here extended to the beginning of World War II, and again since the end of the East-West conflict).

³² The history of founded in 1794 Odessa is particularly well-researched. Cf. Patricia Herlihy, *Odessa. A History, 1794-1914* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991), and Evrydiki Sifneos, *Imperial Odessa: Peoples, Spaces, Identities* (Leiden: Brill, 2017) (= Eurasian Studies Library, 8).

³³ Eyüp Özveren, "The Black Sea World as a Unit of Analysis," in *Politics of the Black Sea: Dynamics of Cooperation and Conflict*, ed. Tunç Aybak (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 61-84.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Brătianu 2.0? Charles King

Also following in Brătianu's footsteps is the American historian, Charles King, whose monograph *The Black Sea: A History* was published in 2004.³⁶ King's book is original in so far as the chapter titles read 'Black Sea' in five different languages: Pontus Euxinus, Mare Maggiore, Chernoe More and Black Sea, thereby clearly indicating the imperial orientation of each respective epoch: Hellenic antiquity, Byzantine-Venetian-Genovese medieval era, Ottoman early modern era, the 'Russian' long nineteenth century and East-West bloc confrontation in the twentieth century. However, King's justification for the Black Sea region as a framework for investigation and a unit of analysis is much less innovative:

The lands surrounding the Black Sea share a colourful past. Though in recent decades they have experienced ethnic conflicts, economic collapse, and interstate rivalry, their common heritage and common interests go deep. Now, as a region at the meeting point of the Balkans, Central Asia, and the Middle East, the Black Sea is more important than ever.³⁷

Compared with Özveren's highly sophisticated analysis of structural factors, the rather simple reasoning in Charles King's *The Black Sea* appears a throwback to Rostovtzeff's description of the region as 'very curious and very interesting.' King's Black Sea world is not based on structural or regional history nor is it limited to a specific time period. Instead it is static, timeless, and thus almost essentialist.

Even when King does attempt to identify the region's structural characteristics, his analysis remains orthodox, and essentially considers only one factor: insufficient modernisation in the region. The modern territorialized state, the culturally based nation, and eventually the nation-state, according to his argument, arrive here only in the twentieth century – much later than elsewhere. In keeping with this negative assessment of the region's progress, his book ends on a pessimistic note: The integration of large parts or the entirety of the Black Sea region into NATO and the EU will trigger a process of migration that will leave the region largely depopulated and consequently will change the social, economic, and ecological structure of the region.

The gloomy outlook of Charles King, a professor of international affairs and government at Georgetown University in Washington DC,

³⁶ Charles King, *The Black Sea: A History* (Oxford: OUP, 2004).

³⁷ Ibid, see book jacket, back cover.

differs sharply from that of his Turkish colleague, Eyüp Özveren, whose thesis King inexplicably ignores. Özveren, in fact, is quite optimistic about the future of the Black Sea world:

Present trends in the region reveal a momentum for the Black Sea to recuperate its losses and assume an important role with respect to both the states and peoples of the region as well as in relation with the global political economy in-the-making by way of blocs along the Eurasian axis.³⁸

Thus, he sees a 'return' to a political polycentrism similar to the regional integration of the late Byzantine era or of the long nineteenth century as being within the realm of possibility, so long as one central condition is met: 'the effective – and hopefully this time voluntary – constitution of law and order within the Black Sea world'.³⁹

Conclusion: Once more 'a geographical pivot of history'

The current *pax turco-rossica* brought about by presidents Putin and Erdoğan most probably does not provide the law and order hoped for by Özveren. To the contrary, the Russian-Georgian tensions, the ongoing aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine in the Donbass region and the Azov Sea, the unresolved conflicts in the Dniester Valley in Eastern Moldova and in Abkhazia in Northwestern Georgia, but above all the Russian intervention, occupation and ultimately annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea destabilize the region for the foreseeable future. This goes, in particular, for Moscow's massive extension of its exclusive economic zone in the Black Sea in the wake of the annexation of the Crimea. This extension cuts off Ukraine from the resources of offshore natural gas and oil, not to mention the so far untapped deposits of manganese on the bottom of the sea. Also affected is the pipeline project from Baku in Azerbaijan via Poti in Georgia to the EU territory of Romania. The impact of actors like the European Union with its "Black Sea Synergy", the People's Republic of China with its "New Silk Road" and a "16+1 Initiative" (16 East European countries plus China) or Poland with her concept of a "Trójmorze" (Three Seas Initiative), aiming at the region between the Baltic, the Adriatic and the Black Seas, will most probably be limited.

³⁸ Özveren, "The Black Sea World as a Unit of Analysis," 79.

³⁹ Ibid.

The discussion on a Black Sea meso-region, now in full swing, should be of interest to historians for multiple reasons: First, it directly affects how we construct meso-regional spaces, such as 'Southeastern Europe', 'East-Central Europe', or 'Eurasia.' Second, it offers possibilities for comparison with other maritime-based meso-regional concepts, such as 'the Mediterranean', 'the Levant', 'the Adriatic' or 'the Baltic Sea'/'Northeastern Europe'. Third, it provides a gateway to a global historical approach to trans-maritime seascapes and coastal societies, such as 'Atlantic world', 'Red Sea', or 'Indian Ocean'. Finally, it sharpens our understanding that the historical meso-regions of Europe extend far beyond the conventional political, geographic, or cultural structures of 'Europe'.

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