

The Black Sea as a Historical Meso-Region

150 years after the Crimean War, the Black Sea, with the Russian annexation of the Crimea in spring 2014, returned to the centre of world politics. The Black Sea region has, once again, become the scene of shifts in the basic order of Europe, reflecting its geopolitical importance as well as the strong symbolic and affective charge of the Black Sea.¹

1 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 analyzing 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-region;² some well-established examples include “East-Central

1 “Batumi, Odessa, Trabzon: The Cultural Semantics of the Black Sea from the Perspective of Eastern Port Cities,” outline of a research project of the Leibniz-Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung (ZfL), accessed June 26, 2023, <https://www.zfl-berlin.org/project/batumi-odessa-trabzon-black-sea-semantics.html>.

2 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, no. 2 (2003): 173–88; Stefan Troebst, “‘Historical Meso-Region’: A Concept in Cultural Studies and Historiography,” *EGO – European History Online*, March 6, 2012, <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/crossroads/the-historical-region>; Stefan Troebst, “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: Zentrum für Deutschland und Europastudien, 2004), 15–24; Holm Sundhussen, “Die Wiederentdeckung des Raums: Über Nutzen und Nachteil von Geschichtsregionen,” in *Südosteuropa: Von vormoderne Vielfalt und nationalstaatlicher Vereinigung*, ed. Konrad Clewing and Oliver Jens Schmitt (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2005), 13–33; Maria Todorova, “Spacing Europe: What Is A Historical Region?,” *East Central Europe* 32, no. 1–2 (2005): 59–78.

Europe,” “Northeastern Europe,” and “Southeastern Europe.”³ 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.

It is only in recent years that 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-regions, thereby rediscovering the Polish historian-in-exile Oskar Halecki's seminal book *The Limits and Divisions of European History of 1950*.⁴ The early modernist Heinz Schilling can be mentioned as a representative example in Germany;⁵ internationally notable examples include the Icelandic expert on comparative civilizations Johann Arnason,⁶ the Swiss ethnologist Christian Giordano,⁷ and the British sociologist Gerard Delanty.⁸

3 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, no. 2 (2003): 393–408; Holm Sundhussen, “Was ist Südosteuropa und warum beschäftigen wir uns (nicht) damit?,” *Südosteuropa-Mitteilungen* 42, no. 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; Stefan Troebst, “Nordosteuropa: Geschichtsregion mit Zukunft,” *Scandia: Tidskrift för historisk forskning* 65, no. 2 (1999): 153–68; Stefan Troebst, “Northeastern Europe?,” *Herito: Dziedzictwo, kultura, społeczność / Heritage, Culture & the Present* 20, no. 3 (2015): 70–81; Stefan Troebst, “‘Intermarium’ and ‘Wedding to the Sea’: Politics of History and Mental Mapping in East Central Europe,” *European Review of History* 10, no. 2 (2003): 293–321.

4 Oscar Halecki, *The Limits and Divisions of European History* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1950). See also Stefan Troebst, “From Halecki to Hann: The Historiography of Historical Regions,” *Explorations in Economic Anthropology: Key Issues and Critical Reflections*, ed. Deema Kaneff and Kirsten W. Endres (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021), 35–51; Stefan Troebst, “European History,” in *European Regions and Boundaries: A Conceptual History*, ed. Diana Mishkova and Balázs Trencsényi (Oxford: Berghahn, 2017), 235–57; 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*, ed. Matthias Middell and Lluís Roura (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 257–314.

5 Heinz Schilling, “Die europäischen Mächte und Mächtezonen,” in *Konfessionalisierung und Staatsinteressen: Internationale Beziehungen 1559–1660* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2007), 191–419.

6 Johann P. Arnason, “Interpreting Europe from East of Centre,” in *Domains and Divisions of European History*, ed. Johann P. Arnason and Natalie J. Doyle (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 139–57.

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

8 Gerard Delanty, “The Historical Regions of Europe: Civilizational Backgrounds and Multiple Routes to Modernity,” *Historická sociologie* 3, no. 1–2 (2012): 9–24.

2 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 regional frame that at times has been called the “Black Sea World” and at others “Southeastern Europe” (broadly defined and used as a synonym for the Balkan-Black Sea-Caucasus region).⁹ 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 region 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 science¹⁰ is transferable for our purposes (transnational comparative research) to a Balkan-Black Sea-Caucasus space¹¹ can now be answered positively.

The Black Sea region appeared on the European horizon in connection with the Eastern Question, that is, the international problem 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 2014.¹² 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! Britannia rule the waves” as prominent slogans. In the nineteenth century, historians followed suit, and points of culmination were and are the concept of coastal societies like the “Indian

9 Stefan Troebst, “Schwarzmeerwelt: Eine geschichtsregionale Konzeption,” *Südosteuropa-Mitteilungen* 46, no. 5–6 (2006): 92–102.

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

11 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.

12 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: R. Oldenbourg, 1979–2006).

Ocean,” the “Adriatic,” or an “Atlantic World”¹³ as well as the intense and ongoing historiographic debate on the role of seas in globalization processes.¹⁴

3 Mackinder, Toynbee, and Rostovtzeff: 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 the south of the Russian Empire and in the Black Sea region.¹⁵ 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 of the “Near East.” His “Near East” encompassed both the Balkans and the Caucasus.¹⁶ That same year, the Russian émigré historian of antiquity, Mikhail Rostovtzeff, published his seminal work *Iranians and Greeks in South Russia*, which 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.”¹⁷

13 Kurti N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Kurti N. Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean Before the Rise of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Dieter Rothmund and Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, eds., *Der Indische Ozean: Das afro-asiatische Mittelmeer als Kultur- und Wirtschaftsraum* (Vienna: Promedia, 2004); Jan-Georg Deutsch and Brigitte Reinwald, eds., *Space on the Move: Transformations of the Indian Ocean Seascape in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century* (Berlin: Schwarz, 2002); Marina Cattaruzza, ed., *L'Adriatico: Mare di scambi tra Oriente e Occidente* (Pordenone: Edizione Concordia Sette, 2003); Eugenio Turri and Daniela Zumiani, eds., *Adriatico mare d'Europa: L'economia e la storia* (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: Oxford University Press, 2001); David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Juliette Roding and Lex Heerma van Voss, eds., *The North Sea and Culture (1550–1800): Proceedings of the International Conference Held at Leiden 21–22 April 1995* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1996).

14 Felix Schürmann, “Raum ohne Ort? Meere in der Geschichtsforschung,” *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 67, no. 51–52 (2017): 41–46.

15 Halford J. Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904): 421–44. See also Geoffrey Sloan, “Sir Halford J. Mackinder: The Heartland Theory Then and Now,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 22, no. 3 (1999): 15–38.

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

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

To this day, Mackinder, Toynbee, and Rostovtzeff continue to influence how the Black Sea region is represented in historical studies. For example, in his well-known book of 1995, *The Black Sea*, the British historian Neil Ascherson took Rostovtzeff's work as his starting point,¹⁸ while his German colleague Dan Diner explicitly referenced Mackinder's "pivot of history" in his history of the twentieth century, *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."¹⁹ "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 Odessa, looking outward South and West."²⁰ Accordingly, Diner constructs his interpretation, utilizing the East, that is, East-Central Europe, Southeastern Europe, and the Middle East, as the geographical focal point for a history of 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 and the Black Sea and Caspian regions, Diner represents "the recurring Eastern Question as the midwife of the Cold War."²¹ From this perspective, the Cold War was born in the Balkans, namely with the Greek Civil War from 1946 to 1949. Its 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.

4 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

¹⁸ Neal Ascherson, *Black Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

¹⁹ Dan Diner, *Cataclysms: A History of the Twentieth Century from Europe's Edge* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 6. For the reference to Mackinder, see Diner, 7.

²⁰ Diner, *Cataclysms*, 7.

²¹ Diner, 266.

of the Byzantine Empire, was published posthumously in 1969 as *La Mer Noire des Origines à la Conquête Ottomane*. Interestingly, it was the Munich-based publishing house Societas Academica Dacoromana, established by an exiled Romanian, that brought it to print.²²

At the same time as Brătianu, but without any knowledge of his yet-to-be-published opus, the French historian Fernand Braudel was also working intensively with the concept of historical meso-regions 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,” 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 *sui generis*.²³ 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 to the 1990s, including his 1994 monograph *The First and Last Europe*. In his conceptualization of the Balkan world(s), the Black Sea figured as a mere backyard.²⁴

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

23 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 Sea published posthumously, see Fernand Braudel, *Les Mémoires de la Méditerranée: Préhistoire et antiquité* (Paris: Édition 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 and 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; Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, “Four Years of Corruption: A Response to Critics,” in *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, ed. William V. Harris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 348–75. For a synopsis of the discussion, see Stefan Troebst, “Le Monde méditerranéen – Südosteuropa – Black Sea World: Geschichtsregionen im Süden Europas,” in *Der Süden: Neue Perspektiven auf eine europäische Geschichtsregion*, ed. Frithjof Benjamin Schenk and Martina Winkler (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2007), 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.

24 Traian Stoianovich, *Between East and West: The Balkan and Mediterranean Worlds*, 4 vols. (New Rochelle, NY: Caratzas, 1992–95); Traian Stoianovich, *Balkan Worlds: The First and Last Europe* (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 1994). In a recent German handbook on Mediterranean studies, the Black Sea does not figure at all: Mihran Dabag et al., eds., *Handbuch der Mediterranistik: Systematische Mittelmeerforschung und disziplinäre Zugänge* (Paderborn: Fink, 2015).

5 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.²⁵ 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 neighboring states as well as others such as Greece and Albania.²⁶ 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, Yerevan, Tbilisi, Kyiv, 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.

In the 1990s, the prospect of Romania and Bulgaria gaining membership of 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* have 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 neighboring 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.²⁷

²⁵ See, for example, Yannis Tsantoulis, *The Geopolitics of Region Building in the Black Sea: A Critical Examination* (London: Routledge, 2020). This observation is true even for the wider sphere of culture. For the field of literature, see *pars pro toto* Katharina Raabe and Monika Sznajderman, eds., *Odessa Transfer: Nachrichten vom Schwarzen Meer* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), and for cuisine Caroline Eden, *Black Sea: Dispatches and Recipes – Through Darkness and Light* (London: Quadrille Publishing, 2018).

²⁶ Panagiota Manoli, *The Dynamics of Black Sea Regionalism* (London: Routledge, 2019).

²⁷ *Il mar nero* 1 (1994): 7.

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 "Southeastern Europe proper."²⁸ In addition to Romania, this "real Southeastern Europe," according to Iliescu, would include Bulgaria, Moldova, Ukraine, 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.

6 Enlightenment from the Bosphorus: 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 Ankara's Middle East Technical 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.²⁹ 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 1768–74. 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 the Ottoman Empire, crossing the borders of each. A series of Black Sea port cities, that is, Trabzon in eastern Anatolia with its proximity to the Persian trading metropolis Tabriz, the new Russian city of Odesa, which served as a gateway to the Ukrainian breadbasket, and Brăila and Galați on the lower Danube on 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,

²⁸ Konrad Schuller, "Iliescu für EU-Beitritt der Türkei. 'Die EU sollte sich nicht als das christliche Europa definieren,'" *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 27, 2003, 6.

²⁹ Y. Eyüp Özveren, "A Framework for the Study of the Black Sea World, 1789–1915," (*Fernand Braudel Center*) 20, no. 1 (1997): 77–113.

thereby creating a new triangular trade, escaping control of the once dominant Istanbul.”³⁰ The fact that this transnational movement of goods across the borders of the Ottoman, Habsburg, and Russian Empires in the long nineteenth century was initiated from below by mercantile actors in the abovementioned ports, rather than by the authoritative seats of power of said empires, Özveren interpreted as proof of “the unity of geography.”³¹ “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.”³² For Özveren, merchants figured prominently among these actors, more specifically Pontic Greeks, whom he identified as part of the region’s Byzantine heritage. 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 inquired into 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.”³³ 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 professional traders, namely Greek merchants, as Stoianovich too had claimed earlier.³⁴ Özveren provided historical back-references for his perspective (for example, 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,” one could paraphrase Özveren, the original ancient text has resonated as a Byzantine text since Küçük Kaynarca at the latest. Put differently, even empires cannot permanently resist the power of economic geography. However, he also stressed that the spatialization of social and economic processes, that is, 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, a system formed from a contemporary cognitive map made up of economic centers 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 mer-

³⁰ Özveren, 85.

³¹ Özveren, 82.

³² Özveren, 86–87.

³³ Özveren, 89.

³⁴ Traian Stoianovich, “The Conquering Balkan Orthodox Merchant,” *Journal of Economic History* 20, no. 2 (1960): 234–313.

chant, Cairo, also under Ottoman rule, was situated far beyond the horizon, while Russian Odesa was only a short, albeit dangerous, sea passage away.³⁵

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.³⁶ In contrast to the *Annales* approach of Braudel and his student Stoianovich, who classified the Black Sea as a largely passive annex of the Mediterranean Sea and the Balkans, respectively, Özveren assigned the region great significance; in fact, he turned the tables, describing not the Black Sea 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.”³⁷ Özveren’s primary inspiration is Brătianu, whom he considers “the obscure Braudel of the Black Sea”³⁸ and whose work he 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 (for instance, 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).

7 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 2004.³⁹ King’s book is original insofar as the chapter titles read ‘Black Sea’ in five different languages: Pontus Euxinus, Mare Maggiore, Kara Deniz, Chernoe More, and Black Sea, thereby clearly indicating the imperial orientation of each respective epoch: Hellenic antiquity, the Byzantine-Venetian-Genovese medieval era, the Ottoman early modern era, the “Russian” long

35 The history of Odesa, founded in 1794, 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).

36 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: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 61–84.

37 Özveren, 71.

38 Özveren.

39 Charles King, *The Black Sea: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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.⁴⁰

Compared with Özveren's highly sophisticated analysis of structural factors, the rather simple reasoning in Charles King's *The Black Sea* appears to be 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 modernization 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 its social, economic, and ecological structure.

The gloomy outlook of Charles King, a professor of international affairs and government at Georgetown University in Washington DC, 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.⁴¹

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."⁴²

⁴⁰ King, see book jacket, back cover.

⁴¹ Özveren, "The Black Sea World as a Unit of Analysis," 79.

⁴² Özveren.

8 Conclusion: “a geographical pivot of history” Once More

The current *pax turco-rossica* brought about by Presidents Putin and Erdoğan most probably does not provide the law and order Özveren hopes for. To the contrary, the Russian-Georgian tensions, the ongoing aggression of the Russian Federation towards Ukraine in the Donbas region and the Sea of Azov, the unresolved conflicts in the Dniester Valley in eastern Moldova and in Abkhazia in northwestern Georgia, but above all the Russian Federation’s intervention, occupation, and ultimately annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea in 2014 followed by the full-fledged invasion of Ukraine by the armed forces of the Russian Federation from the north, east, and south in 2022 and the ensuing multi-front war of attrition destabilize the region for the foreseeable future. This holds, in particular, for Moscow’s massive extension of its exclusive economic zone in the Black Sea in the wake of the annexation of Crimea. This extension cuts off Ukraine from the resources of offshore natural gas and oil, not to mention the still untapped deposits of manganese at the bottom of the sea. Also affected is the pipeline project from Baku in Azerbaijan to the EU territory of Romania via Poti in Georgia. 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” (sixteen 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.

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 the “Atlantic world,” the “Red Sea,” or the “Indian Ocean.” Moreover, it can serve as the focus region of “Transottoman mobility dynamics,” whereas the concept “Transottomanica” itself has been conceived recently as a larger, social relational spatial condensation of concrete mobilities of people, objects, and knowledge between and across the Ottoman Empire, Persia, Muscovy/Russia and Poland-Lithuania (plus the relevant successor states) from 1500 to the mid-twentieth century, thus systematically opening up the perspective on a shared history between and beyond the container spaces of the “Near East/Middle East” and “Eastern Europe.”⁴³ Finally, a Black Sea meso-region sharpens

⁴³ For an introduction, see Stefan Rohdewald, Stephan Conermann, and Albrecht Fuess, eds., *Transottomanica: Osteuropäisch-osmanisch-persische Mobilitätsdynamiken. Perspektiven und Forschungsstand* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019). For the numerous publications elaborating and using the concept, see “DFG Priority Programme Transottomanica,” www.transottomanica.de, and the fundamen-

our understanding that the historical meso-regions of Europe extend far beyond the conventional political, geographic, or cultural structures of “Europe.”

tal volumes of the homonymous series in open access: <https://www.vandenhoeck-ruprecht-verlage.com/themen-entdecken/geschichte/osteuropaeische-geschichte/14840/transottomanicav>. In this context, see a special issue on the Black Sea seen from a Transottoman perspective: Lyubomir Pozharliev, Florian Riedler, and Stefan Rohdewald, eds., “Transottoman Infrastructures and Networks Across the Black Sea,” special issue, *Journal of Balkan and Black Sea Studies* 3, no. 5 (2020).

