

Peripheries Uncovered: In Search of Global Approaches for the German Field of Eastern European History

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Abstract:

The edited volume *Osteuropäische Geschichte und Globalgeschichte* by Martin Aust and Julia Obertreis represents the most recent output of the on-going discussion on how to frame the regional focus of Eastern European History after the Cold War. It comprises selected contributions from a conference that took place at the Herder Institute in Marburg in 2011. By means of case studies, the authors assume global historical perspectives for their region of expertise. Though limited by the ‘positionality’ of the contributors, the articles reveal the insights that such approaches to Eastern Europe may offer to the field of global history on the whole.

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What are the gains and limits of transcending the perspective of area studies? Martin Aust and Julia Obertreis raise this question for the German field of Eastern European History in their newest publication *Osteuropäische Geschichte und Globalgeschichte*. It shares a basic premise with Aust's publication 2013 *Globalisierung imperial und sozialistisch – Russland und die Sowjetunion in der Globalgeschichte, 1851-1991* that this region has been neglected in global historical scholarship. In the more recent approach to global history, however, the editors shifted the focus away from the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union to the region that lent its name to their discipline. Thus, this edited volume explores the connections between the two fields of Eastern European History and Global History.

Aust and Obertreis seek to query the dominant role of Europe for Russian history and to open up new spaces of relations and interactions. This endeavour of overcoming national and Eurocentric frameworks of analysis is clearly situated in the institutional and discursive context of the German field of *Osteuropäische Geschichte* (p. 13). It consists of twelve articles that approach their region of expertise through the lens of global history. These case studies are followed by two comments from "non-experts of Eastern Europe" (p. 22) that seek to diversify the perspective presented in this volume from outside the discipline.

The publication emanates from the observation that Eastern Europe has been marginalised in global history: According to the editors, it is neither a continent, nor can it be regarded as one of the big civilisations or world regions (p. 8). Thus, the book seeks to redirect the attention to the peripheries that constitute Eastern Europe in three parts, which mirror established sub-fields of global history. The first group of articles investigates inter-imperial contact zones on the peripheries of the Russian Empire. The second part foregrounds transnational maritime spaces within the history of science and technology. Lastly, the third part addresses multipolar histories of the Cold War by tracing the relations between the Soviet Union and the Global South. Though the articles are different in topic and approach, questions of how the global space is perceived and established are central to them. The authors analyse how global structures such as commerce or international legislation manifest themselves on regional levels or in what ways local phenomena relate to global processes. Thereby, the challenges of pursuing global historical research become evident. In her article on the Russian polar expeditions, Birte

Kohtz is confronted with the difficulty of including the perspective of indigenous populations without written sources. Sören Urbansky's case study on a documentary film from the 1930s shows the global entanglement of the researcher when searching for material for his analysis. And lastly, Nataša Mišković's contribution addresses the inevitability of global historical perspectives in area studies. By raising the question of who invented the Non-Aligned Movement in the Cold War, she shows in what ways the regional perspective is always determined by politics and may thus prevent important insights into the phenomena investigated. Rather than tracing the movement back to initiatives from Yugoslavia or India, she highlights the continuities of pre-war internationalism in the shaping of the Non-Aligned Movement.

The twelve articles uncover regions and contact zones that have been peripheral in global history until now. Inter-imperial spaces such as Turkestan or Manchuria and relations between the Russian Empire and Iran or the Soviet Union and India show the broad scope for global historical approaches to the region of Eastern Europe. For these spaces, the authors choose not to presuppose one common global dimension, but analyse the intersections and overlaps between global, imperial, European, and Asian frameworks instead. Thus, the publication complies with the claim of opening up the discourse of Eastern European History to the field of Global History. This assessment is shared by the two commentators from outside the discipline, Birgit Schäßler and Katja Naumann, who conclude the edited volume. The final comment by Naumann also points to a number of challenges for further research in this direction. Among them, she addresses the issue of the researchers' "positionality" that is reflected in the interests of research communities that do not necessarily need to be shared across regions (p. 326).

This edited volume constitutes an initiative to de-marginalise the region of Eastern Europe in the field of global history. While the publication is able to position itself in a gap of current scholarship, it also points out the challenges in connecting both fields. The difficulty of including scholarship from outside the US-European academic community is apparent throughout the volume. Though the articles make heavy usage of primary sources in languages other than English and German, the authors only rarely refer to recent scientific publications from the region. Thus, the Eastern European region is reduced to the object of analysis. Similarly, the problem of 'positionality' comes to the fore in the understanding of global history where definitions of proponents from German-speaking academia clearly prevail. Since the understanding of Eastern Europe presented in this volume is closely connected to the German discipline of Osteuropäische Geschichte, it would also have been desirable to include more reflection on the merits and limits of this notion for the case studies.

By exploring global approaches to the region of Eastern Europe, this publication surely constitutes an important contribution to the discussion on the scope of global history. There is much potential that this offer for dialogue between historical subdisciplines will be taken up by researchers from both within and outside the field of Eastern European History. However, it remains to be seen in what ways this discussion of global history may transcend the national academic boundaries and be followed by closer interaction with scholarship from the region.