

## **Historians in Search of Borders**

### **Mapping the European East**

*by Johann Arnason*

#### **Abstract**

*The convention that the Ural mountains separate Europe from Asia has never withstood critical scrutiny; attempts to draw a more meaningful dividing line should begin with historical and cultural factors, even if their impact must ultimately be analysed in geographical terms. The essay analyses two key concepts defining the borderline between Europe and Asia – O. Halecki's „Great Eastern Isthmus“ that demarcates a region stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea, and W. McNeill's „Danubian and Pontic Europe“ (the region „where the Eurasian steppe intersects the main mountain system of the earth“). It aims to draw on their arguments to explore the historical context of European region formation and continental demarcation in the east.*

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The re-emergence of Ukraine on the map of Europe since 1991 and, in particular, in the wake of the 'Orange Revolution' of 2004 is a major event, significant enough to prompt rethinking of some broader issues concerning Europe, its internal divisions and its boundaries. More specifically, the following reflections will focus on the question of Europe's eastern borders. No discussion of that issue can bypass the Ukrainian experience, and there is a direct connection to the self-understanding of those concerned: it would seem that definitions of Ukrainian identity are, in one way or another, linked to identifications with Europe – or with particular European regions – which at the same time serve to underline the distance from Russia. The main part of this essay will engage with key texts by two Ukrainian scholars, one writing on the eve of the first Russian revolution and the other on the eve of the Soviet collapse, and draw on their arguments to explore the historical context of European region formation and continental demarcation in the east.

Let us first locate the issue in a more general context. If it is accepted that we can speak of Europe as a historical region (or perhaps more precisely as a macro-region divisible into smaller regions), some kind of geographical demarcation is needed. The present discussion will take this starting-point for granted. According to a well-known view, the next step is to note a major difference between two kinds of borders: on the northern, western and southern sides, Europe is surrounded by seas, but no such natural boundaries can be found in the east. The convention that the Ural mountains separate Europe from Asia has never withstood critical scrutiny; attempts to draw a more meaningful dividing line should begin with historical and cultural factors, even if their impact must ultimately be analyzed in geographical terms. The boundary problem thus seems to present itself in two starkly different ways, separating the east from the other quarters.

### **Halecki on Europe and its East**

The most seminal work on Europe as a historical region, Oskar Halecki's *Limits and Divisions of European History*, links up with this widely shared interpretive model and adds new nuances to some of its aspects, most notably with regard to the eastern boundaries. One chapter of the book is devoted to „oceans, seas, islands and straits.“ The title foreshadows the observation that „even in the three [...] directions where maritime shores seem to fix such natural boundaries of Europe without any possible doubt, the course of history has not always been determined by these limits“. Improving navigation techniques make seas more manageable; islands have on various occasions played important roles in European history; and straits have put Europe in close contact with other continents. All these factors were particularly visible and enduring in the Mediterranean section of Europe's borders, which was also – as Halecki saw it – the site of a crucial prelude to the making of Europe (Caesar's conquest of Gaul was the beginning of the transition from Mediterranean to European history). But for our purposes, the most interesting part of Halecki's tour d'horizon is his account of the eastern borders. He coined the term „Great Eastern Isthmus“ for a loosely demarcated region stretching from the Baltic to the Black sea. His definition of it is less concerned with a precise location on the map than with recurrent perceptions of a continental divide, from classical distinctions between a European and an Asian „Sarmatia“ to contemporary ones between European and Asian parts of Russia. Modern versions of this dualism are rooted in historical experiences that go back to the High Middle Ages: Kievan Rus developed, as a state and as a cultural centre, in close connection with the civilizational domain of Western Christendom, as well as with Byzantium, whereas the more peripheral princedoms emerging on its northeastern fringe from the twelfth century shifted towards cultural isolationism and autocratic government, and this trend was massively reinforced by the Mongol conquest and its long-term consequences. It should be noted that Halecki does not interpret the divide in ethnic

or national terms: three East Slavic nations, Ukrainians, White Russians and Great Russians (those of Novgorod and Pskov prior to the Muscovite conquest) are all represented on the European side.

Halecki goes on to imply – although this part of the argument is not very clearly formulated – that modern Russian thought has transfigured the divide into alternative visions of Russia and its destiny. Westernizers wanted the whole empire to take the path prefigured by its European fringe; the Slavophile response, centred on Russian cultural and religious identity, was fundamentally defensive; a more ambitious and dangerous alternative was proposed by the Eurasianists, who saw the Mongol Empire as a legitimate ancestor of modern Russia. According to Halecki, Stalinist Russia practiced Eurasianism without preaching it. A regime that came to power with internationalist pretensions mutated into a culturally and politically anti-European empire, strong enough to shift the continental border into the middle of old Europe.

When discussing the „Great Eastern Isthmus“, Halecki uses the term „frontier“, but not as a theoretical concept. It is nevertheless clear that his line of argument lends itself to comparison with historical studies which have made more use of frontier perspectives, mostly (but not exclusively) in relation to premodern societies, where borders were less clearly drawn than in later times. The literature on the subject is vast and variegated; to cut a long story short, a few thematic foci may be distinguished. One image of the frontier, most frequently associated with Turner’s well-known interpretation of American history, presents it as a moving line continually redrawn by an expanding society: „the outer edge of the wave – the meeting-point between savagery and civilization“. This ongoing expansion is intertwined with internal dynamics of the societies in question, not invariably in the ways analyzed by Turner. Another view stresses the intermediate – often inter-regional or even inter-civilizational – character of the frontier, as a zone of exchange and conflict between different social-historical formations. Owen Lattimore’s book *Inner Asian Frontiers of*

*China* is perhaps the most acclaimed example. Finally, frontier areas can develop in ways that transform this original openness to external currents into a more specific identity, often of a markedly composite character. In all three regards, the frontier is an eminently historical category. There are no natural frontiers, and supposedly natural borders will often – on closer examination – turn out to be parts of frontier configurations.

As we shall see, all above-mentioned aspects of the frontier problematic are relevant to the question of Europe’s eastern limits. But before engaging with the work of historians who have approached the field from this point of view, it may be useful to take another look at Europe’s boundaries on the other three sides; the specific features of the east will then stand out in relief. Obviously, the northern limit of the European world comes closest to being a natural border. For most of European history, there was no movement across the Arctic, and recent exploration of that area was of very marginal significance. If the category of the frontier is to be applied to the northernmost part of Europe, it can only refer to the very gradual process of Europeanization through cultural and political influences from the south. Halecki had already noted this point. The Atlantic is a different story. Here a massive natural border was, at a certain historical juncture, transformed into a particularly dynamic frontier. Two phases of this process may be distinguished. The medieval Viking expansion in the North Atlantic, from the ninth to the eleventh centuries, did not result in a major enlargement of the European world, and it failed to establish a lasting trans-Atlantic foothold, but it gave rise to a distinctive set of societies and historical experiences. The short-lived North Atlantic empire created by Norwegian rulers in the thirteenth century was a postscript to this phase. The second round began with the early modern Western European expansion. The Atlantic became a prime case of frontier history in the first sense noted above, and moved closer to the second one as interaction between the Old and the New World intensified. Whether we can at any stage speak of the Atlantic world as

a frontier transformed into a region in its own right is a more difficult question. The historians who have treated the political upheavals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as interconnected Atlantic revolutions are suggesting developments of that kind.

The Mediterranean is an exceptionally rewarding topic for frontier history. For the early civilizations of the Ancient Near East, it was a frontier zone in the sense associated with expansion (commercial and cultural to a much greater extent than political). With the formation of more complex societies and the emergence of new civilizational centres on Mediterranean shores, a frontier of interaction took shape; the wars between the Greeks and the Persians can perhaps be seen as the most decisive step in that direction. Most importantly, however, the Mediterranean world acquired a new kind of unity through the Roman Empire and its composite civilization. The very long process (it lasted more than two millennia) that culminated in this result was probably the single most striking case of a frontier transformed into a structured and markedly self-contained region. With the Islamic conquest of the eastern and southern shores, the Mediterranean became again a frontier of interaction and conflict. However, the search for an underlying or overarching unity has been a strong trend in modern historiography, and it produced the most acclaimed and influential of all works on regional history – Fernand Braudel's *Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World*. It seems clear that the very long shadow of the Roman Empire counts for something in this persistent vision. But as the most recent and ambitious attempt to deconstruct the Braudelian model – *The Corrupting Sea* by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell – shows, the issue remains as controversial as ever.

This briefly sketched context will help to clarify the question of frontiers in the east, where historical divisions and interconnections are farthest removed from any kind of natural borders. The most visible aspect of the geographical background is the great Eurasian steppe that extends all the way to East Asia. Historians have occasionally compared it to a sea, but such metaphors do not take us very far. In any

case, it would – to say the least – be counter-intuitive to describe an area of that size as a frontier; and its defining historical dynamics were never grounded in interaction between its eastern and western sides. Processes of expansion, paving the way for interaction, first unfolded on a much smaller scale: between the Chinese Empire and the eastern margin of the steppe. The consolidation of the imperial Chinese state towards the end of the last millennium BCE triggered and inspired imperial ambitions among its nomadic neighbours; in due course, these „shadow empires“, as historians have called them, created a distinctive Inner Eurasian tradition of state formation. At a later stage, some of its offshoots came under Islamic influence, but there was no borrowing from European sources. On the other hand, ramifications of Inner Eurasian geopolitics affected the Russian periphery (as it then was) from a very early stage; some historians now argue that the first power centres established by Scandinavian warriors and traders settling among Eastern Slav tribes were influenced by neighbouring Turkic states before turning to more systematic adaptations of the Byzantine model. In any case, the territories that came to be identified as Russian emerged into history as a frontier area exposed to incursions and influences from all sides, but the transformation into a more centred and bounded region began early: with the formation of the Kievan Rus state during the tenth century. To foreshadow a point to be further developed below, the Russian trajectory was nevertheless – at crucial junctures and with lasting consequences – shaped by external currents to such an extent that it seems appropriate to describe Russia as an intermediate region between Europe and Inner Eurasia. This view is very much in line with conclusions drawn by some of Russia's greatest historians. To quote one of the most forceful statements, Vasily Kliuchevsky argued that Russia was neither Europe nor Asia, but inseparably joined to Europe and always attracted to Asia.

### The steppe frontier

If Russia represents (from a long-term perspective) a very large frontier that gradually acquired a more distinctive but markedly composite identity, while at the same time retaining some features of an intermediate area, it remains to be seen whether the more narrowly defined idea of the frontier – as a zone of expansion and interaction – can be applied on a geographical and historical scale. One of the most influential twentieth-century historians, William McNeill, took that view and built a wide-ranging interpretation of Central and Eastern European history around his analysis of Europe's steppe frontier. The frontier in question was what McNeill also called „Danubian and Pontic Europe“, the region „where the Eurasian steppe intersects the main mountain system of the earth“. In terms of present political geography, it comprises Ukraine together with parts of Hungary and Romania, and its historical boundaries have always been blurred. It consists of plains divided by mountains and forests but linked by rivers. Its traditional forms of economic life combined agriculture and pastoralism, with various mixtures in between; on the political and military levels, the typical frontier pattern of competition between expanding powers centred elsewhere prevailed and took its logical course.

McNeill's history of the steppe frontier deals only with the early modern period, roughly from 1500 to 1800. Towards the end of this phase, the Danubian and Pontic territories had become borderlands of the Habsburg, Ottoman and Russian Empires, and the story ends with these three great powers in complete control. But this „victory of bureaucratic empire“ had not always been a foregone conclusion. In the early seventeenth century, political and to some extent cultural centres closer to the region had still been in the running: „Transylvania, the Rumanian principalities, the Zaporozhian Cossacks, and the Crim Tartars, each made bids for independent sovereignty“, and Jagellonian Poland may be seen as an early but unsuccessful contender for imperial status. Among the three survivors, the Ottoman Empire proved the least capable of implementing the new techniques of power

that decided the outcome; during the eighteenth century, it was more and more on the losing side of gains made by its Habsburg and Russian adversaries, whose progress on the steppe frontier was closely linked to activities and transformations in other parts of the European world. But the closure of the frontier, completed around 1800, did not mean the end of history in the region. A twentieth-century historian reconstructing early modern developments cannot ignore the fact that in a more recent phase, imperial rivalries in this corner of Europe lit the fuse for a conflict that engulfed the whole continent and brought about a general crisis of European civilization. The conflicting geopolitical interests of Austria-Hungary and Russia, related to the formerly Ottoman-ruled Balkans as well as to the prospects for further gains within the shrunken Ottoman Empire, triggered the chain reaction that led to world war in the summer of 1914. But the empires did not collide in a vacuum. Their perceptions of problems and opportunities reflected the dynamics of a world increasingly shaped by nation-states and national movements; that trend affected the three empires in significant but different ways. Although this sequel falls outside McNeill's chronological frame of reference, it can be assumed that an implicit view of it entered into his portrayal of the past. In this regard, it seems worth noting that the book ends on an astonishingly undifferentiated note: it invokes „the irruption of the still uncivilized peasantries of southeastern Europe upon the political scene (a movement in which, incidentally, Ottoman territories led the way)“ and which „gave Danubian and Pontic Europe of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries its own distinctive historical character“. This is an unpromising approach to the problem of modern national mobilization and its divergent paths, both within and between regions.

To conclude this part of the discussion and prepare for the next one, an important but somewhat muted aspect of McNeill's narrative should be noted. He stresses the multi-central character and the competitive dynamics of the process that culminated in the absorption of the Danubian-Pontic frontier; but there is no denying that the Russian

Empire played a particularly crucial role. Although McNeill does not spell this out, it can be argued that Russian imperial strategies (and the forces that aided their success) shaped the course of events in the region at four decisive junctures. By closing a frontier farther to the east and reversing the traditional dynamic of expansion, the Muscovite state created essential preconditions for a separate history of Danubian-Pontic Europe: the annexation of Kazan in 1552 and the subsequent conquest of Siberia insulated the western frontier from Inner Eurasia. The mid-seventeenth century incorporation of Ukraine east of the Dnepr into the Russian Empire changed the balance of power within the region and ended Polish aspirations to hegemony. Late eighteenth-century conquests farther south established Russia as the dominant power in the Black Sea region; and at roughly the same time, the partition of Poland enabled Russia – the main instigator and the main beneficiary – to expand into Europe on a broader front than before, and that helped to consolidate its position in the Danubian-Pontic region.

### **Hrushevsky's deconstruction of imperial Russia**

Any attempt to link the narrowly defined steppe frontier to a broader view of Europe's eastern borderlands will thus have to tackle the question of the Russian Empire and its relation to Europe. The following discussion will first return to a seminal work on that topic, somewhat older than the texts quoted above but still very instructive, and then move on to more contemporary perspectives. Mykhailo Hrushevsky's programmatic essay „The traditional scheme of 'Russian' history and the problem of a rational organization of the history of the Eastern Slavs“, first published in 1904, does not deal with frontiers or regions as such, but as I will argue, it clarifies essential aspects of the background to their specific configurations on the eastern margins of Europe. Hrushevsky's search for an adequate interpretation – or, as he put it at the time, a „rational organization“ – of Eastern Slav history led to results that have yet to be fully assimilated into the mainstream of European comparative history.

Two aspects of Hrushevsky's argument should be distinguished: he set out to demolish a dominant model, and to develop an alternative to it. The dominant model was based on an amalgamation of three different themes: the history of the territories that had, at various points in time, become parts of Russia; the history of the Russian state that had absorbed them; and the history of the Great Russian people, defined by its identification with this state. A mutually transfiguring fusion of territory, state and population is anything but uncommon in nationalist historiography. In the Russian case, however, the exceptional size of the state and the extreme ethnic diversity of its subjects made this scheme more problematic than elsewhere. On the other hand, it could seem more plausible when attention was focused on the unusually sustained expansionist policies of the Russian state. The commitment to expansion shaped institutions – especially the two pillars of the traditional order, autocracy and serfdom – and affected all domains of social life to such a degree that historians could, with some justification, insist on the primacy and centrality of the state. Although Hrushevsky refers to the refocusing of history on people and society as a generally accepted principle, he obviously acknowledges that it is less easily applicable to the Russian case than to most others. But as a result of nineteenth-century social transformations, and in response to signs of an approaching crisis of the whole regime, the paradigm criticized by Hrushevsky had to adapt to its mode of interpretation, and some variants took a more critical view of relations between state and society (Kliuchevsky's work is the most obvious case in point).

Hrushevsky was, however, proposing a paradigm shift that went far beyond such critical adjustments. When reading his text after a particularly eventful century, with some of the most spectacular changes having taken place in the very region he was discussing, new perspectives grounded in later experience are bound to affect our understanding of the issues, and may throw light on their less explicit historical connotations: in this case, the „hermeneutical significance of temporal distance“ (Gadamer) is particularly relevant. It is never-

theless possible – up to a point – to distinguish Hrushevsky's overt intentions from the more implicit meanings which the wisdom of hindsight helps to extract from the text. I will highlight four aspects of the argument, three of which are more or less clearly spelt out, whereas the last one follows logically from Hrushevsky's main points and has been brought to prominence by later developments.

The first point to be noted is a multi-dimensional conception of social and historical processes, in the sense that they involve multiple factors in changing combinations; no invariant primacy can be claimed for any specific components, but one factor may prevail over others in particular situations. „The political factors and those of statecraft are important, of course, but in addition there are many other factors – economic, cultural – which may be of greater or lesser importance or significance“. It was the extraordinary predominance of political factors in Russian history, over more than half a millennium, that had most effectively lent support to the statist-imperial paradigm. Political institutions of a particular kind – the Muscovite model of rulership and its cultural framework – imposed their logic on social life and subordinated it to enduring geopolitical imperatives. It may be noted that this general view of the social and historical world is in line with the approach that sociologists identify as Weberian, although Hrushevsky's version of it seems to have grown directly out of his historiographical work.

On a more specific level, the proposed new scheme of Eastern Slav history is multi-linear. In the most elementary sense, this applies to the construction of historical narratives. One of Hrushevsky's complaints about the traditional scheme is that it privileges and exaggerates certain lines of development and sequences of events at the expense of others. It is thus unable to produce an intelligible account of those trajectories that do not lend themselves to complete inclusion in the dominant current; in particular, Ukrainian history „is left not only without a beginning, but appears in piecemeal fashion as *disiecta membra*, disjointed organically, the periods separated one from the

other by chasms“. The most salient of these separate episodes is that of the seventeenth-century Zaporozhian Cossacks, but it does not serve to integrate a longer story. With regard to contents, the more complex narrative that Hrushevsky envisages would stress geopolitical and geocultural multilinearity. On the western side, the lines to be reconstructed lead in directions different from those of Muscovite history. A brief glance is enough to reveal the central role of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, „a highly heterogeneous body“. The Lithuanian state that emerged as a major power in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was a pagan polity, and as such unique in the European context of the High Middle Ages. But its rulers were flexible enough to use their position on the borders between Western and Eastern Christendom to engage in prolonged negotiations about conversion. In the course of their rise to regional power and European status, they incorporated large areas inhabited by Slav populations who brought their own legacies to bear on the organization of the state. Hrushevsky ascribes this input to „two nationalities – the Ukrainian-Rus and the Byelorussian“. In the end, however, the Lithuanian power centre gravitated westwards and merged with the Polish kingdom. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth became an integral part – and saw itself as the eastern bulwark – of Western Christendom; but it remained in close contact with and partial control of territories with more formative links to the Orthodox world, and its later destinies affected that part of its environment in multiple ways. In short, a multi-linear narrative would allow for complex interconnections with borderlands as well as forward centres to the west. On the eastern side, the pendant to these broader historical horizons is the Mongol conquest and its long aftermath – unmentioned in this particular context, but discussed in Hrushevsky's other works, and very familiar to readers of the 1904 text. Ongoing controversies about the extent and meaning of Mongol influence do not affect the widely shared view that, in any case, northeastern Russia in general and the Muscovite state in particular were thus drawn into the orbit of Inner Eurasian forces and thereby set on a new historical

path.

To grasp the underlying meaning of Hrushevsky's proposal for a multi-linear history of the Eastern Slavs, we must note another point that backs up his argument, even if it is not formulated in the terms now current among historical sociologists: the story is about multiple lines of state formation. Only this perspective can do justice to Hrushevsky's reflections on Kievan Rus and its divided posterity. The Kievan process of state formation reached its most ambitious stage in the mid-eleventh century, and its contacts with both Byzantium and Western Christendom were then at their most intensive; internal problems and blockages became more pronounced in the twelfth century; but it was definitely derailed by the Mongol onslaught, and replaced by a multi-central and multi-linear constellation. When Hrushevsky argues, against advocates of the statist-imperial scheme, that relations between the Kievan and Volodymyr-Moscow states „may more accurately be compared to the relations that existed between Rome and the Gaul provinces than described as two successive periods in the political and cultural life of France“, his analogy can only be fully understood if we take it to include dynamics of peripheral state formation in Gaul during the decomposing phase of the empire. That kind of historical offshoot seems to have been in the making in the Volodymyr-Moscow area during the twelfth century, and it underwent a more separate development after the Mongol conquest. In the south, the destruction of Kiev as a political centre caused a more lasting setback to state building, but the Galician offshoot of the Kievan state survived long enough to embark on a distinctive path and draw closer to the Western Christian world; although this part of the borderlands was soon absorbed into a resurgent Polish kingdom, the Galician interlude left traces which were of some importance for the later history of the region. In the northwest, as we have seen, Lithuanian ascendancy marked the beginning of a new phase of state formation.

Hrushevsky was, however, less interested in the ups and downs of states as such than in the significance of such developments for

the historical destinies of nations. His model is, in contrast to the traditional unilateral focus on the growth and expansion of the great Russian nation, multi-national in the double sense of stressing the genesis of separate national identities as well as the diversity of national contributions to history. This part of the argument is most directly linked to his political concerns (but the historical claims must be understood and assessed on their own terms). Hrushevsky was primarily interested in the three Eastern Slav nations: the Great Russians, the Ukrainians and the Byelorussians (there is, however, no reason why the analysis could not be extended to other nationalities involved in the same historical processes). When it comes to more concrete points, a certain ambiguity of key formulations may be noted. Hrushevsky sees nations as products of history: he refers to the „formation of the great Russian nationality“, to the „social and cultural processes“ involved in the „development of the Ukrainian-Rus nationality“, and to the varying combinations of factors – including statecraft – that enter into the making of different nations. On the other hand, nations appear as makers of history and creators of states: the Kievan state is described as the „creation of one nationality, the Ukrainian-Rus, while the Volodymyr-Moscow state was the creation of another nationality, the Great Russian“. Here Hrushevsky seems to put nations as historical subjects at the very beginning of the processes from which he elsewhere derives them. This more meta-historical idea of the nation leads him to claim that the Byelorussian nationality does not „appear clearly as a creative element“, but as he admits, almost in the same breath, its input was in fact important, notably but not only in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The lack of conceptual precision is obvious; our retrospective view of that problem will, however, depend on more general assumptions. The streamlined modernist approach to nations and nationalism – the „modernist orthodoxy“, as its critics like to call it – has recently been subjected to telling criticism, and now seems to be in full retreat. It is giving way to a more historical and comparative focus on nation formation as a long-term process. In



the European context, this reorientation has led to growing interest in medieval sources and phases. Hrushevsky's stance is closer to this new trend than to the modernist orthodoxy, and his ambiguities seem more understandable if we take into account the unsettled conceptual issues that loom large in contemporary analyses of nation formation.

Taking all three aspects of the argument together (the multi-dimensional, multi-linear and multi-national perspectives), it seems legitimate to add a fourth one that follows the spirit if not the letter of Hrushevsky's model: the historical constellation that he has in mind is multi-civilizational. An adequate history of the eastern Slavs cannot be written without proper allowance for contacts with and inputs from surrounding civilizational formations and traditions: Byzantium, Western Christendom and Inner Eurasia (all of which were, moreover, very significantly affected by interaction with the Islamic world), as well as more interstitial and transitory power centres (such as the Lithuanian state). To put it another way, the vast area improperly subsumed under the traditional statist-imperial model was a field of intercivilizational encounters, but its very size and the strength of the state that came to dominate it gave rise to more self-contained visions of history and claims to identity. From this point of view, the historiographical tradition that Hrushevsky set out to criticize can be seen as an integral but derivative part of the history that he proposed to reconstruct. The statist-imperial scheme was not invented by historians; they only refined and rationalized an operative paradigm inherent in the empire-building process. The strongest force in the field thus strove to impose a self-image that denied the very presence of the others. On the level of explicit ideological constructs, less susceptible to critical corrections than were the models of the historian, this underlying interpretation of conditions and prospects could develop in different directions. The glorification of the Russian state focused on its imperial mission (the „gathering of Russian lands“ and the turn of the Eurasian tide). Claims to civilizational status began with the elevation of the empire to a „third Rome“, but other variations on that

theme proved possible, including nineteenth-century constructions of Russia as positively opposed to Europe (most emphatically in the work of N. Danilevsky, whom historians of ideas have sometimes seen as a precursor of Oswald Spengler). In the more recent phases of Russian history, attempts to align the imperial state with national identity were more important (and closer to the historiographical scheme targeted by Hrushevsky), although the tension between these two historical forces could never be overcome. The notorious formula of „autocracy, orthodoxy, nationality“, invented by a minister under Nicholas I, is perhaps best understood as a forced amalgamation of all available unifying and legitimizing devices. After the collapse of the Tsarist regime, the Soviet model provided a new framework for articulating and institutionalizing the civilizational claim in a way that could absorb the imperial one and accommodate multi-national realities on a subordinate level.

### Far Eastern Europe

Let us now retrace our steps. It is not immediately obvious that Hrushevsky's reflections help to clarify the question raised in the first part of this paper: he was not dealing with the demarcation problems of regions and frontiers. But he did take a major step towards re-mapping the macro-historical configuration that both linked and separated Europe and Inner Eurasia. It appears as a field of interaction between states, nations and civilizations, each of which was also to some extent affected by more distant forces. This picture might serve as a background to renewed discussion of regions and frontiers: can a more specific frontier, and perhaps a frontier region, be demarcated within the vast domain surveyed in Hrushevsky's programmatic essay? Danubian and Pontic Europe, as analyzed by McNeill, covers only a part of the area that has to be taken into account when defining Europe's eastern borders, and the above reflection suggested that its early modern history – crucial to McNeill's argument – is best understood as a relatively self-contained fragment of a larger field into which it was later re-absorbed. As for Halecki's idea of the Great Eastern

Isthmus, it identifies the frontier with a thoroughfare: an isthmus is by definition an accessible route from somewhere to somewhere else. This is a rather one-sided perspective on the historical environment in question, and it does not seem far-fetched to suggest that Halecki's perception of it was influenced by his keen awareness of the fact that the Soviet empire had succeeded in shifting the isthmus far to the west. If the frontier could be moved in this massive way, there was less reason to take interest in its temporary historical contours.

To conclude, I will briefly consider a more recent account of Europe's eastern borderlands and argue that it represents a more promising approach to the changing interrelations of geography, history and identity. Roman Szporluk's interpretation of „Far Eastern Europe“ was put forward in the context of debates about the Soviet crisis, then visibly moving towards a climax, and the more general implications of this new regional construct have – as far as I can judge – not been discussed. I will first recapitulate the main points of Szporluk's analysis, and then suggest that the idea of Far Eastern Europe can be developed beyond the limits that his use of it implies; but as I will also try to show, an expanded definition, more attuned to the historical specificity of the region, can draw on arguments and indications in Szporluk's other writings.

The starting-point of Szporluk's article „The Soviet West or Far Eastern Europe?“, published in 1991 in the journal *East European Politics and Society*, was the observation that the western fringe of the Soviet Union – especially the Baltic countries and Ukraine – had become the least governable part of an empire in quest of reform (the external periphery, made up of satellite states, was already lost). This situation was obviously not unrelated to the fact that the whole area – from the Baltic states annexed in 1940 to Moldavia, incorporated into the Soviet Union at the same time – was acquired and in most cases reconquered after a brief interval during World War II. This set the western fringe apart from the rest of the Soviet Union, but was not reason enough to impute any kind of internal unity to an otherwise

extremely disparate grouping of territories. It remained to be seen whether cumulative historical experiences of the pre-Soviet past could justify a long-term regional perspective. The interwar period was not a strong basis for such conclusions. Between 1918 and 1939, the Baltic part of the area had been made up of separate states, and this brief phase of independence had given rise to notions of Baltic affinity that obscured the fundamental differences between Estonia and Latvia on one hand and Lithuania on the other; a much larger part had been divided between states emerging or benefiting from the collapse of the empires defeated in 1918, and the historical relationship between part and whole varied from case to case (Bessarabia – later Soviet Moldavia – did not relate to Romania in the same way as West Ukraine to Poland).

Only when the focus moves further in time, to the pre-1914 constellation and its early modern background, can we speak of a more distinctive overall pattern that also throws light on the most recent developments. As Szporluk stresses, the area in question had for a long time been a contested terrain where multi-national states (if not empires, then at least contenders for imperial status) confronted each other. In the north, the early modern Swedish kingdom had held sway over eastern and southern parts of the Baltic; further to the south, the much older preponderance of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had lasted until late in the seventeenth century. The Habsburg Empire entered the field at a later stage and gained control of large parts of the area through the partition of Poland. The Ottoman Empire, most marginal to this region, controlled both core and peripheral parts of the later Romanian kingdom through more indirect rule than in the Balkans. All these four regional powers confronted an eastern rival that defeated three of them and outlived the fourth one through an unprecedented mutation. In the aftermath of World War I, the Habsburg Empire collapsed and was replaced by a cluster of successor states with problematic claims to national legitimacy, whereas the Russian Empire was restored through revolution.

This picture of a multi-imperial frontier, evolving through successive geopolitical shifts towards an uncontested domination of one empire, has obvious points of contact with McNeill's account of the early modern steppe frontier. But it covers a much larger area (the whole of far Eastern Europe, from the Baltic to the Black Sea), and it takes us closer to the post-Soviet fin-de-siècle. The story does not end with the triumph and transfiguration of the Russian Empire. Rather, the final episode is a crisis that confronts the decaying empire with the very problems that had undermined its defunct Habsburg rival. At this point, however, Szporluk's argument takes a turn that seems to cast doubt on the idea of Far Eastern Europe as a distinctive area. He makes it clear that the comparison of late Habsburg and late Soviet problems is meant to be more than a loose analogy: „nation-building processes known in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Habsburg monarchy and the Balkans appear to be continuing – are resuming? – in the western fringes of the USSR“. Given these fundamental similarities (also emphasized by Ernest Gellner, whom Szporluk quotes with approval), it is tempting to merge Far Eastern Europe with the more broadly defined region of Central and Eastern Europe. For some historians, the latter term encompasses the whole area between Germany and Russia, as well as much or all of the Balkans. Szporluk refers to Masaryk's reflections on this enlarged region during and after World War I, and reads them as anticipating Gellner's comments on the declining Soviet Union; Masaryk's main concern was the self-determination of nations in „a huge geographical area extending across Europe from north to south“.

In the end, Far Eastern Europe thus seems to fade away. If its most defining feature was the enduring rivalry between multi-national states with contested borderlands, the final outcome of nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments appears to align this frontier region with neighbouring areas to the west and south – the remaining difference being that similar processes repeat themselves with a significant time-lag. There may, however, be some reasons to dispute this

conclusion. To begin with, Szporluk's genealogy of far eastern Europe should be reconsidered. His retrospect does not go beyond the earliest of the multi-national states in quest of empire, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; is there a case for adding an earlier historical layer? The thirteenth- and fourteenth-century history of the area between the Baltic and the Black Sea has some characteristics that seem relevant to the later course of events. At the Baltic end, the de-centred „Northern Crusades“ did not have the same impact as the combination of imperial proximity and German migration in East Central Europe: there was no counterpart to the state of the German order in Prussia, and no parallel to the Christianized indigenous kingdoms on the eastern borders of the Holy Roman Empire. At the southern end of the Baltic margin, Lithuania constituted the one and only case of a successful pagan state-building response to the expansion of Western Christendom; the Mongol invasions and the resultant de-stabilization of a vast area further to the south enabled the Lithuanian state to expand and grow into a major power. But the result was a very mixed and fragile polity. It was transformed by the union with Poland, but not completely absorbed: tensions between the new centre and the former Lithuanian heartland continued for some time, and territories conquered in the east during the ascendant phase became a bone of contention between the Commonwealth and the Muscovite state. On the southwestern side, the first stage of Lithuanian consolidation was accompanied by the Galician bid for separate statehood, but this episode was cut short by the rise of a unified Polish kingdom. Finally, the Danubian principalities (remote ancestors of the Romanian kingdom) began to take shape during this period and established a permanent foothold on the Pontic margin of the region. But from the fifteenth century onwards, they were drawn into the orbit of the Ottoman Empire.

There is a certain pattern to these developments. Inconclusive and often mutually contested processes of state formation (some driven by more ambitious projects than others – unfolded in an area unsettled by the Mongol invasion but – in contrast to northeastern Russia –

outside the range of Mongol domination. It can be assumed (although this aspect of the situation that at the same time, cultural and ethnic divisions in the region were affected by these processes – both in the sense of crystallization around political centres and through enhanced separation from them. But the overall results were inconclusive. And to cut a very long story short, it seems that the more successful multi-national states that imposed their power structures on the region repeated a similar pattern on a different scale: they did not absorb pre-existing identities and divisions. In the end, a highly variegated substratum, and more specifically a cluster of nations in varying stages of formation re-emerged from the ruins of imperial power.

If the general idea of long-term processes of nation formation is accepted, the question of medieval beginnings is no less legitimate in Far Eastern Europe than elsewhere. In the present context, it cannot be pursued further. But a brief look at modern outcomes may tell us something about specific regional paths. It seems appropriate to begin with Szporluk's discussion of the Ukrainian case in his article „Ukraine: From imperial periphery to sovereign state“ of 1997; as he describes it, the pattern of nation formation differs markedly from the more familiar East Central European types. The most striking aspect is the fusion of peripheral areas belonging – simultaneously or successively – to several different states or empires centre elsewhere (Russia, Poland, the Habsburg Empire and the Ottoman Empire): „In sum, then, the Ukrainian nation-building project was nothing more nor less than an undertaking to transform the peripheries of several nations, which themselves were civilizational peripheries of the West, into a sovereign entity able to communicate directly with the larger world.“ This emergence of a nation and – in the end – a nation-state from multiple peripheries has no parallel further to the west. Romania might be cited as another example of a nation crystallizing across the borderlands of several empires (Habsburg, Ottoman and Russian); but the crucial difference is that the Danubian principalities had maintained a tradition of separate statehood that was then transmitted to

the Romanian kingdom. As for Poland, the state was reconstructed after division between three neighbouring ones, but this interlude was relatively brief compared to the multi-secular absence of statehood in Ukraine, and the idea of national identity did not need reconstruction.

How does this national synthesis of multiple peripheries fit into a more long-term picture? According to Szporluk, the Ukrainian project entered its decisive phase in the late nineteenth century, when the very term „Ukraine“ was adopted as a label for the territories in question. Both the political decision to establish a common literary language and Hrushevsky's paradigmatic synthesis of Ukrainian history may be seen as integral parts of this transformation. The political intention is too pronounced and the envisaged identity too obviously constructed for the result to be described as a triumph of ethnic nationalism. In view of this, Szporluk opts for the modernist approach: nations are „a very modern phenomenon“, and Benedict Anderson's conception of the nation as an „imagined community“ is quoted with approval, whereas Miroslav Hroch's analysis of nation formations criticized for not doing justice to the political meaning and the constructionist logic of modern projects. Szporluk's own account of the Ukrainian project and its prehistory can, however, be read in a way that highlights the long-term dynamics of nation formation and raises questions about the divide between modern and premodern phases. Well before the political construction of an imagined community across imperial borders, there was a historical definition of Ukraine as Little Russia; Szporluk quotes a 1762 poem as one of the earliest formulations of this idea. His own view of its historical background is that it „was a kind of a premodern or historic Ukrainian-Cossack nation“. This historical legacy was not simply left behind by the architects of the more future-oriented nineteenth-century project: it entered into the image of Ukrainian nationhood (this is particularly clear in Hrushevsky's reconstruction of Ukrainian history). But the historical definition was, in turn, a response to developments at the very centre of the imperial Russian power structure. When the „Little Russian“ part of the more

broadly defined later Ukraine was incorporated into the empire in the seventeenth century, this western periphery became a very active participant in the transformation of the centre. The Little Russian input into the political restructuring and the cultural reorientation of the Muscovite state was so disproportionate that some historians have spoken of a „Ruthenization of Russian culture“ (Hans-Joachim Torke) that began before Peter the Great. As Szporluk notes, the late eighteenth-century turn towards „declarations of a distinct Ukrainian cultural identity“ is best understood as a movement of dissent from the original involvement in the imperial project. Here the „refusal of metropolitan integration“, which Charles Taylor has singled out as a recurrent feature of modern nationalisms, took a very particular form: it begins as a cultural secession from an imperial-metropolitan establishment to which an earlier generation of the same ethnic intelligentsia had made a decisive contribution. The trend that provoked the secession is perhaps best described in terms of two stages. In the later decades of the eighteenth century, the policies of a homogenizing absolutist regime led to the elimination of local institutions and practices, and thus to reactions in defence of traditions previously taken for granted. As imperial integration took a more leveling turn, the position of peripheral elites became more problematic. In the nineteenth century, and especially with the regressive consolidation of autocracy after the Decembrist revolt in 1825, a more overtly Great Russian conception of unity was superimposed on absolutist uniformity. That was the background to the historiographical scheme which Hrushevsky attacked at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In short, there is a complex story behind the final version of the Ukrainian project. For present purposes, the question of the divide between modern and premodern phases is less important than the point that this process of nation formation took place in a very distinctive context, different from the East Central European one. The same could be said about other cases within Far Eastern Europe, even if they also differed from the Ukrainian pattern. At the Baltic end of

the region, separate peripheries in close proximity to one imperial centre crystallized into nations – in a sense this was the opposite of the Ukrainian trajectory.

Far Eastern Europe is perhaps best described as a frontier region that has, over a long history, alternated between three geopolitical patterns: a constellation of multi-national states dominating the region but centred outside it; uncontested domination by an empire of Eurasian dimensions; and a plurality of smaller internal centres. For the time being, the third alternative seems to have prevailed. Processes of nation formation reflect these changing overall configurations, but more specific features vary from one part of the region to another. There has, over the last two decades or so, been a marked revival of interest in the comparative history of regions, but the role of regional factor in nation formation is still one of its least developed branches. Far Eastern Europe is certainly not the least interesting of the areas waiting to be explored from this point of view.