

**The Black Sea in Trans-Imperial and Transnational History: An International Works-in-Progress Workshop**

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The Black Sea is a region lodged between two area studies disciplines: Russian and Eurasian Studies when its northern shores are concerned and Near and Middle Eastern studies for its southern shores. What can scholars working in these regional studies learn from one another?

In order to seek some answers to this question, this international workshop. Participants represented scholars at all levels, from Ph.D. students to professors, working in countries around the world, from the United States to Germany, Austria, Georgia, Turkey, and Switzerland.

The workshop opened with a keynote address by EILEEN KANE (Global Islamic Studies Program, Connecticut College). Kane outlined the main research questions characterizing modern historical Black Sea studies. They pertain to specify *what* Black Sea studies are, *where* the scope of the sea's location is, as well as *why* Black Sea studies are of merit. Kane proposed three frames in which the Black Sea could be historically understood: the Black Sea as a „hub“ in a globally networked world, as a „highway or bridge“ bringing together people and goods, or as an „arena“ or realm of competition. During a lively discussion that followed, a fourth frame emerged, one in which the Black Sea as an „imagined space“ could be studied. Over the course of the workshop that followed, yet a fifth frame was discussed: the Black Sea as a „non-space“—a sea sometimes ignored by the states along its shores, which often acted in more inward-looking ways.

The workshop itself was organized around three sessions and a panel on concluding remarks. Session 1 included two papers focusing on two book projects on the Black

Sea as a socio-cultural region. NINJA BUMANN and KERSTIN JOBST (both University of Vienna) presented an ongoing book project, entitled *Handbook on the History and Culture of the Black Sea Region*. In this handbook, the authors conceive the Black-Sea region conceptually as a mesoregion formed historically by structural factors categorized among three main themes: Ideas and Identities; Mobility and Transfers; and Violence, Conflict, and Conflict Resolution. DOMINIK GUTMEYR's (University of Graz) presentation on *Europe and the Black Sea Region: A History of Early Knowledge Exchange (1750-1850)*, a book he co-edited with Karl Kaser, was part of a larger Horizon 2020 project entitled „Knowledge Exchange and Academic Cultures in the Humanities: Europe and the Black Sea Region, late 18th – 21st Centuries.“ Gutmeyr argued against viewing the historical transfer of knowledge as simply flowing towards the Black Sea, rather acknowledging that the region itself has been a hub of exchanging knowledge, culture and institution building until today. The book presented here was one of six books which the project aims to publish. A discussion led by FABIAN BAUMAN (University of Basel) emphasized both projects' attempt to challenge the conception of the Black Sea region as a closed system. The projects, he argued, both incorporated the hinterlands and showed how knowledge exchange towards the imperial or nation-state centers - such as St. Petersburg / Moscow - was common practice.

Session 2 covered three papers with an emphasis on social policies of ethnicity and refugee regimes. TIMOTHY BLAUVELT (Iliia State University, Tbilisi) presented a chapter from his upcoming history of Soviet Abkhazia titled *The Tsebelda Affair: Tobacco, Clientalism and Corruption in Early Soviet Abkhazia*. The chapter, which examined how family networks were juxtaposed with economic and political networks under the early Soviet regime, illustrated the possibilities of engaging in economic activities on the local level in ethnically diverse contexts. In her following paper PINAR ÜRE (TOBB University of Economics and Technology, Ankara) discussed why and how Russian refugees during the civil war (so-called „White Russians“)

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chose to stay in Turkey in the first decades of the republic. By adopting Turkishness and converting to Islam, it was easier for these refugees to be accepted as citizens of a purportedly secular state, a fact that, as Üre argued, demonstrated discursive continuities from the late Ottoman Empire. In his contribution ETIENNE PEYRAT (Sciences Po, Lille), shed light on the role of memories in making sense of the political and societal transformations having occurred in the region. The closure of borders during Cold War period, engendered both new circulation patterns, such as a tourism due to a lack of alternatives, as well as the preservation of grassroots memories about the Black Sea as a space for connection. ALEXANDER BALISTRERI's (University of Basel) discussion pondered the role that the Black Sea played in each paper's analysis and questioned the hypothetical boundaries of a field of „Black Sea studies.“

Session 3 approached the region's trade history, both on a local level and in the hinterlands. BORIS GARNICHEV's (Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich) *The Transcaucasian Transit Route: Stepping Stone to the World or the Empire's Backyard Market? (1821-1883)* showed how political and macroeconomic factors trumped Russian imperial logic and contributed to the Black Sea region being a hub and bridging together with the Caspian Sea, thereby forming a new region in the South Caucasus. MICHEL ABEËR's (University of Freiburg im Breisgau) paper illustrated how a particular city on the Black Sea Rostov Don could be forged by the merging and coexistence of different migrant communities such as Armenians, Greeks, Cossacks and Jews – before the rise of nationalism in the late 19th century reconfigured these relationships. Kerstin Jobst's discussion highlighted the implications of the Black Sea as a mesoregion based on trade and the necessity of pragmatism felt by the surrounding states as they made policies, including in the establishment of the Transcaucasian Transit Route. In regards to the final paper, Jobst argued, the politics of gender and the role of masculinity could be an enriching perspective.

Finally, the concluding remarks given by BORIS BELGE (University of Basel) discussed

the workshop's main findings and posed follow-up questions. These included hitherto understudied lenses of understanding the Black Sea region: either as a hub of the globally connected world (a bridge or a potential divide, depending on the context) or as a socially constructed region living in the memories of everyday life. Belge also posed questions of scale, namely how scholars could establish synergies between micro, meso and macro levels of analysis. Empirically, the Black Sea could be studied as part of a network of further water systems, such as the Mediterranean and Caspian. Finally, participants discussed the need to integrate questions of gender and masculinity into the research framework.

### Conference Overview:

#### Keynote Address

Eileen Kane (Connecticut College): Black Sea Crossings: Migrants and the Worlds They Made

Alexander Balistreri and Boris Belge (University of Basel): Introductory Remarks

#### Session I

Ninja Bumann and Kerstin Jobst (University of Vienna): The Black Sea Region as Historical Space. A Cultural Historical Handbook

Dominik Gutmeyr (University of Graz): Europe and the Black Sea Region. A History of Early Knowledge Exchange (1750-1850)

Discussant: Fabian Baumann (University of Basel)

#### Session II

Timothy Blauvelt (Ilia State University, Tbilisi): The Tsebelda Affair: Tobacco, Clientalism and Corruption in Early Soviet Abkhazia

Etienne Forestier-Peyrat (Centre d'histoire de Sciences Po, Paris): Circulations and Their Memories in the Black Sea Space, 1920s-1980s

Pınar Üre (TOBB University of Economics and Technology, Ankara): Vestiges of Empires: Russian Refugees and Citizenship Regime in Turkey, 1923-1938

Discussant: Alexander Balistreri (University of Basel)

*Session III*

Boris Ganichev (Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich): The Transcaucasian Transit Route: Stepping Stone to the World or the Empire's Backyard Market? (1821-1883)

Michel Abeßer (University of Freiburg im Breisgau): When to Fight, When to Trade – Russian, Cossack and Armenian Economic Cultures in Rostov on Don in the 18th and 19th Century

Discussant: Kerstin Jobst (University of Vienna)

*Concluding Remarks*

Boris Belge (University of Basel)

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