

Between Empires? Bessarabia as a Contested Borderland during the ‘Long Nineteenth Century’

Using the case of Bessarabia as a ‘pretext’ and starting point, my presentation will critically engage with three fundamental models of interpreting and analyzing the borderland experience in Eastern Europe in the ‘long nineteenth century:’ 1) Alfred Rieber’s ‘geopolitical model’ (the ‘complex frontier regions’ and the ‘struggle over the borderlands’), privileging the macro scale of Eurasia and what might be called ‘inter-imperial entanglements’; 2) Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz’s model of the ‘shatterzone of empires,’ emphasizing the multi-layered and dynamic character of borderland phenomena in Eastern Europe and the interaction of imperial, national, and local players in a shifting space characterized by complex links between co-existence, violence, and the various forms of the political imaginary which made the borderlands essentially ‘protean’ and 3) Alexei Miller’s Russian-centered model focusing on the ‘situational approach’ and on the ‘scope’ and possible alternative scales (*jeux d’échelle*) of conceptualizing and writing a Russian imperial history in the twenty-first century. Placing Bessarabia in this theoretical context, I have argued, in my previous research, that the region’s history during the nineteenth and early twentieth century can be studied from three distinct, but complementary points of view. First, Bessarabia represented not only a revealing example of a ‘borderland’ situated between rival empires, but also a ‘transitional’ space between the Russian Empire’s Western peripheries and the intensely colonized expanses of New Russia, thereby combining the essential features of the two. Second, the nineteenth century witnessed fundamental changes in the languages of description and perception of this region by the Russian authorities, stemming from two alternative concepts of imperial space: one emphasizing the ‘direct gaze’ of imperial agents, epitomized through travel, and another focusing on the rational, abstract, and impersonal ‘gaze’ of modern bureaucracy. Third, during the second half of the nineteenth century Bessarabia became a directly contested borderland, an object of rivalry and ‘symbolic competition’ between the Russian Empire and the Romanian nation-state. In fact, Bessarabia was the only Russian territory claimed both by the empire and by a fully crystallized nation-state. Finally, I will address the issue of whether (and to what extent) the case of Bessarabia fits into the three conceptual models summarized above.