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ASI Conversation

Navigating the Eastern European Borderlands in the Aftermath of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine*

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Anton Kotenko is a research fellow at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. He defended his PhD at the Central European University in Budapest in 2014, and until 2022 worked at the Department of History at the Higher School of Economics (St. Petersburg, Russia). His research interests focus on the history of East European modernity in the second half of the nineteenth century. Currently, he is finalizing a book manuscript, *In Search of Ukraine: Ukrainian National Territorialisation, 1840s–1921*, which presents a history of the emergence of the spatial concept of modern Ukraine. In 2024–2026, he will lead the DFG research project “Zootopia: History of the Zoological Gardens in the Romanov Empire” at the University of Düsseldorf.

Andrei Cușco is a researcher at the A. D. Xenopol Institute of History of the Romanian Academy in Iași, Romania. He holds an MA (2002) and a PhD degree (2008) from the Department of History of the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest. For a number of years, he has been working on issues related to Bessarabia's symbolic geography, the competing Russian and Romanian visions of this contested region in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, as well as on broader issues of Russian and Romanian intellectual history. He is the author of *A Contested Borderland: Competing Russian and Romanian Visions of Bessarabia in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century* (Central European University Press, 2017), and co-authored with Viktor Taĭi Бессарабия в составе Российской империи (1812–1917) (Новое литературное обозрение, 2012) and *Imperial Designs, Postimperial Extremes: Studies in Interdisciplinary and Comparative History of Russia and Eastern Europe* (Central European University Press, 2023).

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* This conversation took place in Sapporo on December 1, 2022.

National Consciousness in Central and Eastern Europe (Academic Studies Press, 2020) and the co-editor (with Darius Staliūnas) of *The Tsar, the Empire, and the Nation: Dilemmas of Nationalization in Russia's Western Borderlands, 1905–1915* (Central European University Press, 2021).

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Yoko Aoshima: Russia's war against Ukraine started on February 24, 2022. Putin is using historical interpretation to justify it. In this sense, the question of how we should develop historical research on the eastern borderlands of Europe in the future has become a significant issue for historians. To consider this issue, we have invited three promising young historians specializing in this region—Catherine Gibson, Andrei Cușco, and Anton Kotenko. We believe that the issues we raise and consider today will be relevant to the study of other borderlands of Russia's empire.

I would like to start our discussion by asking all the panellists about the subjects you are working on. At first glance, all of you address nationalism or nations. If not, how can you describe your research agenda? Alongside this, I would like to ask about nationalism. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the construction of national histories has been important for the newly independent states. Meanwhile, global history, history of empires, and regional histories have been popular for relativizing national narratives. In this ongoing war, nationalism seems to have regained new vigour and plays a significant role in many respects. Given that, do you think we will post our main historical concern again on national history in the future? Even if we do, as no nation has taken shape in history in a consistent manner, how can we conceptualize continuity and rupture within each national history? In border regions, national histories are often diverse, multi-layered, and overlapped.

Catherine Gibson: Thank you, Yoko and to the SRC for inviting us to participate in this very timely roundtable discussion. Yoko's first question raises a lot of different points. I will be mainly talking from the perspective of my research on the Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire: the territories corresponding to present-day Estonia and Latvia. Coming to your first question about the writing of national histories, I think this is something which is very pertinent to the Baltic states, as they are small countries with languages only spoken by a very relatively small number of people. There is always the question: if Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians do not write about their history, who else will? There has been a very strong tendency to frame the region's past in national terms. My own research, however, has tried to explore what the particular Baltic experience can tell us about how Russia functioned as an empire, as well as the history of nineteenth-century Europe more broadly.

My book *Geographies of Nationhood* takes as its starting point the question of how mapmakers used cartography to interrogate the big questions of their age. I was interested in how concepts of nation, ethnicity, and territory have been understood in different times and places by different people, and also the various visual techniques used to depict them on maps. On the one hand, I looked at the role of maps in promoting and spreading awareness of spatial concepts of nationhood, and consolidating the idea of defined Estonian and Latvian territories within the Russian Empire. At the same time, I was also intrigued by how maps open a view onto counter

histories of alternative spatial approaches to imagining nations in the past, which might be less visible or absent from dominant national historiographies. For example, some nineteenth-century mapmakers conceived of Estonians and Latvians as populations who were part of larger pan-Slavic or pan-German cultural spaces; others used cartography to draw attention to various ethnolinguistic and religious minorities—such as Livonians—who didn't fit into nationalizing agendas and were in danger of being assimilated; others, meanwhile, took a much broader perspective in the context of turn-of-the-century global migration patterns, whereby Estonians and Latvians were not only concentrated in their Baltic “homelands” but had a global presence in places such as North and South America as well. My work, in essence, tries to use maps to raise questions of how concepts of nationhood emerged and were defined in the past, who the architects of these geographical imaginaries were, and why certain ideas came to hold so much resonance in nationalist imagination, while others were largely forgotten.

The question of which parts of history are included in national canons also shaped my earlier work about the politics of history and memory in contemporary Latvia, specifically in relation to the eastern region of Latgale. Latgale is in many ways a quintessential border region, which has often been sidelined from mainstream Latvian historical narratives. In the nineteenth century, it was administered as part of Vitebsk Province, together with territories which are now part of Belarus. Before that, it was a vassal of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. For me, it was an interesting case study through which to address some of the questions that you posed at the beginning about multiethnic and multiconfessional diversity, multi-layered borderlands, and the overlapping of national, regional, and imperial spaces.

Andrei Cușco: Thank you. I'm very grateful for being here. This is truly an example of how global our scholarship is today and, hopefully, of how Eastern Europe—for reasons unfortunately that do not have a lot in common with history itself or historiography, but rather with recent developments—has suddenly become central in many ways to our historical perception.

I would build on what Catherine has just said about the centrality of the category of borderlands in her research, because this is exactly what I have been doing as well. I focus on an even less well-known borderland of Eastern Europe, i.e., Bessarabia, a strip of land between Romania and what is today Ukraine. Territorially speaking, this region is coterminous today to a large extent with the Republic of Moldova. The category of borderland was central to my research, for reasons that are partially similar and partially quite different from Catherine's case. These reasons have to do with the role nationalism played, or rather did not play, as I argue, in the emergence of this region on the map and in the mind in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Just to introduce very briefly what I'm talking about, the region called Bessarabia actually had quite an ephemeral existence on the map, for only 130 years. This region was first carved out in 1812, when it became part of the Russian Empire. However, the reason I became interested in this territory was not simply because I hail from there, but mostly because it is a conspicuous example of how nationalism has consistently failed to attract, mobilize, and shape the local population. In those rare instances when it did influence local affairs, the local population's agency was severely limited by all kinds of factors. Thus, in a way, nation building was never finished or completed. In fact, it is still a process that is developing in the current Republic of Moldova. One can

see this, for example, in the polarization that Moldovan society displays in terms of its perceived belonging, of the space it identifies with, geopolitically and symbolically, and so on.

Why is Bessarabia relevant? Because, indeed, it was quite a marginal region, to all intents and purposes. This marginality had multiple roots and explanations. First of all, Bessarabia is an excellent case study of how we can think about nationalism as a framework of analysis, about its impact on historical narratives, but also of how we can think about empires, simultaneously. I would provoke my fellow panellists as well by asking the following questions: Are empires hotbeds of national movements? Or are they indifferent to nationalism? Do they suppress nationalism? Perhaps empires do all of that, at the same time, in different contexts. This seems to be the case, at least in the region I was dealing with, in the sense that we have some clear examples of national indifference. Of course, I mean here the category introduced so famously, and so controversially, by Tara Zahra and some other authors.¹ I have also written about such instances of national indifference in Bessarabia, that is, about how the bulk of the population remained either completely unaffected by or reluctant towards stimuli for nation building, towards nationalism.

To return to Yoko's question about how local, as well as East European historiographies in general have dealt with the issue of Bessarabia, Moldova is a classic example of a nationalizing historiography, both in its Romanian (the main nationally articulate claimant to this territory) and in its local, Moldovan guise. One of the incentives for my research was exactly to go beyond national narratives. My overall answer would be related to the broader question: should we return to the national paradigm? In my view, absolutely not. The war between Russia and Ukraine is all the more reason not to do so, because it was ignited by ultra-nationalism. I hope to return to this point a bit later.

Again, to return to the question of why I think Bessarabia is relevant at all. One of my central claims was that, even though the local population, mainly the Romanian-speaking population, was clearly lacking agency, Bessarabia was important because it was, intellectually speaking and symbolically speaking, from the point of view of

1 The category of national indifference has been analysed and elaborated upon by Tara Zahra in Tara Zahra, "Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis," *Slavic Review* 69:1 (2010), pp. 93–119. For some relevant works discussing national indifference and the reluctance to engage with nationalism in Eastern and Central Europe (mostly focusing on the Habsburg Monarchy, but also dealing with the Russian Empire), see Pieter M. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); Maarten Van Ginderachter and Jon Fox, eds. *National Indifference and the History of Nationalism in Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2019); Per Bolin and Christina Douglas, "'National Indifference' in the Baltic Territories? A Critical Assessment," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 48:1 (2017), pp. 13–22; Karsten Brüggemann and Katja Wezel, "Nationally Indifferent or Ardent Nationalists? On the Options for Being German in Russia's Baltic Provinces, 1905–17," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 20:1 (2019), pp. 39–62. My own perspective on the applicability of this concept to Bessarabia (and its limitations) can be found in Andrei Cusco, "Russians, Romanians, or Neither? Mobilization of Ethnicity and "National Indifference" in Early 20th-Century Bessarabia," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 20:1 (2019), pp. 7–38.

symbolic geography the only territory of the Russian Empire that was also explicitly claimed by a neighbouring nation state during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, before World War I. Bessarabia is exceptional in this sense, but also not unique at all, because it displays many of the phenomena that other borderlands display relating to multi-layered social structures, to various entanglements, to multi-ethnicity. These phenomena were manipulated, distorted, and abused by state builders.

The last point I would touch upon is this: what methodological alternatives to nationalism do we have, both to nationalism as produced by those who articulate it, and to the so-called methodological nationalism widespread among historians? One of these alternatives that has been quite popular is entangled history, which claims to somehow take into account all these complicated borderlands, where histories are overlapping, where they can be narrated from multiple points of view. But even this methodological alternative, which I have found quite fruitful for my own research, does not answer all the questions. It could be quite productive in the case of some borderlands where one witnesses a lot of conceptual transfers, a lot of population movements and exchanges between them. But in the case of others, like Bessarabia, where the region's status as a borderland was defined from outside, that is, by Romania and the Russian Empire, rather than from below or from within, and not by the local population itself, the story is much more complicated.

Anton Kotenko: Ideas of nationalism became an important factor shaping our lives not in the twenty-first century; today, we date them back to the nineteenth century, although some scholars of Western Europe even suggest that they appeared even earlier. Critical examination of these ideas started in the twentieth century with 1983 being an important landmark.² Therefore, I do not think that our experience of the last ten or so years will have a tremendous impact on the way scholars think of nationalism; primordialism will not be less of a dead horse, to restate Rogers Brubaker.³ Modernism will remain a reigning way of talking about nationalism, of course, with the most recent additions to it paying more attention to, for instance, the global history of this phenomenon or history of national indifference. The global history of nationalism does not seem that problematic to me, and I posit the complete validity of the argument that whatever phenomenon from the past that we talk about—be it animals, sports, the way of cultivating grain, ideas—we have to keep in mind its global context. The idea of national indifference, which was considered by the historians of the Habsburg Empire—Miroslav Hroch, I think, was the first to do so⁴—is more problematic. In the case of Ukraine, which is my main area of interest, there are scholars who support it—Mark Baker not that long ago published a book about this topic on the example of

2 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). See an overview of the history of scholarly engagement with nationalism in Umut Özkirimli, *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2000).

3 Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 15, footnote 4.

4 Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

Kharkiv Province⁵—but there are others who might object to it relying on other sources to study the events of 1917–1921 in other regions of Ukraine. A particular case of Ukraine, where one still lacks profound studies of dissemination of national movement, is a good example of still having to find primary sources to actually be able to talk about national engagement or indifference.

Yoko Aoshima: I'm going to ask Catherine about the points posed by Andrei and Anton. What do you think about national indifference and entangled history, for instance?

Catherine Gibson: When considering national indifference in the Russian Empire, it is important to mention the forum from several years ago in the journal *Kritika*, which sought to apply the concept of national indifference to analysing the political strategies of various elite groups in the western borderlands.⁶ Building on this, together with two colleagues—Irina Paert and Liliya Berezhnaya—I recently co-edited a forum for *Ab Imperio* on the topic of national indifference and religion.⁷ We invited contributors to consider the extent to which national indifference might be a useful lens through which to examine different kinds of confessionally based loyalties, identifications, and practices which developed alongside, intertwined with, and sometimes clashed with emerging nationalist movements, modernizing empires, and the policies of new state governments in the first half of the twentieth century. The authors' case studies show that the concept of national indifference is by no means a catch-all solution to the problems of so-called methodological nationalism, a phrase used by the editors of *Ab Imperio* in their introduction to the spring 2022 issue in reference to the nationalization of history after February 24, 2022.⁸ At the same time, we highlight how thinking about national indifference can still be useful for raising questions from sources that we might not otherwise ask and for generating new insights. In particular, we observed how the contributors leveraged the concept of national indifference to give agency to lower-class populations, address questions of historical contingency, and think about the circumstances in which nationalism manifested, and in which situations nationalism seem to have little or no resonance.

Entangled history isn't an approach that I have specifically used in my own work to date, although I completely agree with Andrei that it can be a really useful one. In a similar vein, transnational history has also emerged as a popular approach that has some overlaps with entangled history. On the one hand, transnational history attempts to challenge nationalist frameworks and paradigms. On the other hand, it has also been criticized for failing to unpack and go beyond the conceptual containers of nation and state. Nevertheless, in my work, I found transnational history to be helpful for pulling

5 Mark Baker, *Peasants, Power, and Place: Revolution in the Villages of Kharkiv Province, 1914–1921* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 2016).

6 Alexei Miller, "National Indifference as a Political Strategy?" *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 20:1 (2019), pp. 63–72; Brüggemann and Wezel, "Nationally Indifferent or Ardent Nationalists?"; Cusco, "Russians, Romanians, or Neither?"

7 Irina Paert, Catherine Gibson, and Liliya Berezhnaya, "Confession, Loyalty, and National Indifference: Perspectives from Imperial and Postimperial Borderlands," *Ab Imperio* 2 (2022), pp. 91–116.

8 "From Editors: War and the State of the Field," *Ab Imperio* 1 (2022), pp. 2–18.

together different bodies of historiography which might otherwise exist in different orbits and rarely interact with one another. For example, the Baltic Germans present us with an opportunity to open dialogues between German-language historiography on German-speaking Central Europe and Russian-language historiography on the Russian Empire.

Yoko Aoshima: When you talk about transnational history, do you assume the existence of some nations, or you imagine something different?

Catherine Gibson: I work mainly on the nineteenth century, a period about which it is anachronistic to talk about nationalism as an ideology or form of identification with mass appeal. The word I prefer to use in my work is transimperial to frame these connecting threads not in national terms, but as linkages across empires and the movements of people and ideas between them.

Yoko Aoshima: Now, I would like to move on to a question about empire. Here, I am particularly interested in the relationship between national histories of the border regions and Russian history, whatever it means. The current Russian Federation is also seemingly trying to build a coherent national narrative from ancient times toward the present day. But can we put Muscovy, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation into one continuous national history? If so, what connects those states to create one united national narrative? Or should we consider those states essentially different from each other? It seems to me that we should consider those states to be separate because they have different territories, different state ideologies, and different populations. I am asking these questions, partially, because I wonder how we can rethink the so-called imperial history and Soviet history. Can we or do we need to, in the first place, reconstruct a history of empires that is different from the history of Russia proper?

When we exchanged opinions through emails, Andrei suggested that we rather think about “Russia’s empires” in the plural along the lines of Valerie Kivelson and Ronald Suny’s recent book.⁹ When we speak of “Russia’s empires,” what does this “Russia” refer to? Andrei’s alternative suggestion is to decentralize Russian history, and possibly replace it with a history of Northern Eurasia as suggested by *Ab Imperio*’s interpretation of the new imperial history. How can the peoples of the empire be involved in such an imperial history? How can the subjectivity of the peoples within the empire, probably including Russians, be restored in the history of the empire? Who are the rulers of the empires? How did the nature and the priorities of imperial rule change over time? Or, as Catherine wonders, we probably don’t have to write the history of the non-Russian regions of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union only in terms of their relations, with two centres of power, St. Petersburg or Moscow. We probably should explore other possibilities of connections between and across non-Russian regions.

9 Valerie A. Kivelson and Ronald Grigor Suny, *Russia’s Empires* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Andrei Cușco: I have been reflecting on some of these questions while writing my book on Bessarabia, for obvious reasons. I have also been quite interested in the heyday of these debates on the history of empires, since the early 2000s. Let's start with the issue of continuity and rupture in Russian history. I don't think one can provide a definitive answer to Yoko's questions about whether the Russian state can claim any continuity, or whether these were in fact different states. Let's not forget that we have substantial historiographical baggage, which often clouds our vision as historians, rather than clarifying it. One could start with the early nineteenth century, when the Russian imperial historians consciously attempted, and, I would say, succeeded, in producing a coherent narrative of continuity. This seems true, at least, if we are thinking about the imperial period, starting from Nikolai Ustryalov through Sergey Solovyov and Vasilii Klyuchevsky, although we are dealing here with very different versions of this narrative. While they imposed this view of a coherent Russian political entity through the ages, it has been challenged, quite rightly so, by recent approaches. In this case, I mean both older interpretations, like that of Geoffrey Hosking, who famously sought to emphasize the opposition between nation building and empire building in Russian history, and newer approaches. Here, I would exemplify by mentioning the works of Alexei Miller,¹⁰ the book by Valerie Kivelson and Ron Suny, invoked earlier, and the one by Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper.¹¹

I do think that there are important and fundamental differences, of course, between Muscovy, the pre-Petrine period, and the modern Russian Empire starting from 1721. These differences are obvious mostly in terms of ideological self-presentation, of what Richard Wortman called the symbolic elevation of the emperor and the representation of the monarch as an outside force that conquered the empire while building it. But this is only one dimension, primarily a question of self-representation. Of course, ideologically and unequivocally, the post-Petrine Russian Empire was a state formation that consciously sought to relate itself to the ancient and other modern empires—to Rome, first of all, and second to its contemporary Western counterparts. In terms of ideology, when the ruler of this empire presented himself or herself, in the eighteenth century, as the embodiment of a state principle that was abstract by definition, of a *common good*, this vision could not have been further removed from the ideological foundations of Muscovy. A similarly deep ideological caesura is of course visible in the case of the Soviet Union. This was, ideologically, a complete and ostensible rupture and rejection of the past.

Things get much murkier, however, when it comes to imperial space management strategies, to what Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper would call the approach of producing and dealing with difference, the emphasis being on difference as a governing principle. Continuities and ruptures cannot be so clearly perceived in this case, because some of the strategies used by Muscovy in its later stages to manage its subject populations were also used and deployed during the imperial period, after Peter the Great, and even during the Soviet period, despite the USSR's well-known radically innovative and revolutionary, path-breaking nationality policies. The Soviets did

10 Alexei Miller, *The Romanov Empire and Nationalism. Essays in the Methodology of Historical Research* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008); Stefan Berger and Alexei Miller, eds. *Nationalizing Empires* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015).

11 Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

not completely forego or totally reject earlier imperial legacies, as Francine Hirsch convincingly showed in her fruitful debate with Terry Martin.

There is also the issue of a certain teleology of empire, which exists both in the minds of the imperial rulers and of some historians who deal with empire. I would, however, suggest that thinking about Russia's empires cannot be reduced to their chronological sequence. This issue also relates to the difference in managing the peripheries, in managing the multi-ethnic population, which always was, and has remained at least until recently, the main conundrum of empire management. This brings me to the connected question of who ruled the empire. To what extent can one even think about the ethnic Russians as the ruling group within the Russian Empire? That is indeed a very contentious point. It depends on the period and on the exact form of government of this polity. I would contend that almost at no point in time were the ethnic Russians, as such, the dominant group in the empire. Again, I have in mind mostly the Petrine polity and the Soviet Union. Neither the Russian Federation nor Muscovy are my areas of expertise, and they are much simpler, in many respects, less composite, less complex, as polities go, as state constructions go. I think I will leave my thoughts on the role of the centre in Russian history for later.

Yoko Aoshima: Do you think that imperial management strategy has continued to some extent till now?

Andrei Cuşco: In the Russian Federation?

Yoko Aoshima: Is there any significant change nowadays?

Andrei Cuşco: There is indeed a significant change. One should only look closely at the founding texts of Putin's regime, and also at his recent changes to the constitution, which finally made Russia an ethnically based nation state. This is probably the first time in Russia's long imperial history that it develops in this direction. So, in this sense, the change is obvious. How successful it will be remains to be seen. I personally am quite sceptical that it could work. But, then again, I am only a peripheral historian. I really think this is the starting point of a caesura, a rupture, in historical terms. But it could go in all directions. These developments are too new and too contested, they are too closely linked with recent events to provide enough materials for a really coherent interpretive scheme. But I believe that, if the Russian Federation continues to follow this track, it will definitely repudiate many of the imperial traditions of managing multi-ethnicity that it claims to uphold and cherish.

Anton Kotenko: Thank you, Andrei, for this nice introduction. When I am thinking about these problems of continuities and ruptures in Russian history, of who are those Russians that rule the empire, and about what a future history of the empire might look like, two possibilities seem to be relevant. First, I think we will pay more attention to the question of how the Romanov Empire shaped the lives of its subjects' including Russians. Coming back to an episode from Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, I am very much expecting to see more studies asking themselves "what have the Romans ever done for us"? Second, as a scholar of Ukraine, I am very much expecting to see more studies on the Ukrainian impact on the Russian Empire. Due to a complex history of

identification of inhabitants of the empire's southwest, until now, we do not really know how much they shaped the history of that empire. For instance, a recent book on Russian Armenia by Stephen Riegg describes the conquest of the Southern Caucasus in the early nineteenth century. According to the author, "Many prominent tsarist officials tasked with expanding and securing new frontiers were non-Russians, reflecting both Alexander I's cosmopolitanism and the realities of empire building."¹² Who were those prominent non-Russians described by Riegg? He lists Baltic Germans (Karl Nesselrode and Karl Heinrich Knorring), an Italian (Philip Paulucci), an Armenian (Ivan Lazarian), and a Georgian (Pavel Tsitsishvili). The latter was in charge of the Caucasian administration until he was shot in 1806 and was succeeded by a "Russian" general Ivan Vasil'evich Gudovich. Maybe this indeed was the case; maybe this is how Gudovich identified himself. But there is a chance that Ivan Vasyliovych Hudovych, son-in-law of the last hetman of Ukraine Kyrylo Rozumovsky, actually identified himself differently, and we can establish this only after we ask ourselves this question, which Riegg does not do while relying on the unproblematic category of "Russians." That is why one of my favourite books on Russian imperial history is the one by David Saunders,¹³ who wrote precisely about that—the Ukrainian impact on the empire, which was built not by some abstract and unproblematic "Russians" from Riegg's narrative, but among others—by people coming from the southwest of the empire, by all those Cossacks, who yes, changed their Turkish sabres into French swords, yes, put on wigs, and yes, then took an active part in creating the empire. And meanwhile, as is shown in Saunders' book, which for some reason has never been translated either into Russian or Ukrainian, even being the empire builders, some of the highest ranking of these Cossacks did not necessarily feel themselves to be "Russians."

Catherine Gibson: I would like to continue with what Anton has said and expand it a bit. One of the most exciting areas of research in Russian imperial history is precisely this question of how different groups within the empire—not only Ukrainians and Armenians, but also Baltic Germans, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, etc.—were involved in the Russian imperial structures and lived their lives as imperial subjects. Biographical research presents us with one way of problematizing the category of "Russian" and thinking historically about how that label was used. One of the texts I have found most useful for generating discussions around this theme with students is Willard Sunderland's *The Baron's Cloak*.¹⁴ Through his account of the life of the Baltic German aristocrat Baron Roman Fedorovich von Ungern-Sternberg, Sunderland invites us to think about what it meant to be a subject of the Russian Empire, the transimperial lives of nineteenth-century individuals, and how a panoramic story about an empire can be constructed out of an individual's career trajectory. There is more of this kind of research coming out each year. For example, there is a recent book by Latvian historian Ēriks Jēkabsons about the experiences of Latvian officers in the Imperial Russian

12 Stephen Badalyan Riegg, *Russia's Entangled Embrace: The Tsarist Empire and the Armenians, 1801–1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), p. 16.

13 David Saunders, *The Ukrainian Impact on Russian Culture, 1750–1850* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1985).

14 Willard Sunderland, *The Baron's Cloak: A History of the Russian Empire in War and Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

Army.¹⁵ These studies bring us nicely back to the question that Yoko posed about how, as historians, we can incorporate different peoples and perspectives into our narrative of Russian imperial history and what methodological and rhetorical tools we have available to us to tell alternative stories about the empire.

Yoko Aoshima: Adding to my previous questions, I'd like to ask Anton a question from Catherine. She wrote in advance to me that we could have a question on how various historiographical approaches have drawn the geographies, the boundaries of the post-imperial and post-Soviet spaces. For instance, Finland is rarely mentioned in discussions of the post-imperial spaces even though it was part of the Russian Empire, while the history of countries like Estonia and Kazakhstan are often taught together through the paradigm of a wider post-Soviet space. How relevant is this area studies approach to understanding these regions today? In other words, do you think the strength of Russian influence differs by region or nation, or is it just the degree to which we think the influence is different?

Anton Kotenko: Some time ago, I submitted an article for a publication. The text dealt with the question of Russification of the southwest of the empire, and I tried to argue that my story was very much connected to a similar policy, which was currently undertaken in the northwestern provinces; for this, I stressed that, for instance, governors-general in Kyiv were regularly in touch with the governors-general in Vilnius. Both undoubtedly influenced each other at the same time remaining in touch with St. Petersburg. One of the reviewers did not like the idea and suggested that instead of linking the events on the Right Bank of the Dnipro River to those taking place in the northwestern provinces—contemporary Belarus and Lithuania—as I did, I should have thought of them in connection to events taking place on the Left Bank of the Dnipro—Kharkiv and Poltava Provinces, i.e., the rest of the territory of contemporary Ukraine. This seemed to me a nice example of methodological nationalism, which apparently not all of us manage to avoid in our studies. Nevertheless, I do think that regions will definitely remain a framework for studying Russian imperial history because this is how it functioned—it was an empire of regions. If you take the Ukrainian case again, the idea that the majority of the inhabitants of the nine provinces of the empire have some common national—Ukrainian—identity, which breaks the existing administrative boundaries, spread very gradually only in the second half of the long nineteenth century. This idea is a given for us today but it was not the case for that time and thus should not guide our studies if we want to remain historians.

Andrei Cușco: I completely agree with Anton. This phenomenon of teleology, a spatially based teleology for the most part, is quite widespread, for a number of reasons. One of them, the less ideologically laden one, is disciplinary inertia. Simply put, area studies have been constructed in such a way that it is very difficult, for those who manage them institutionally, to take into account the momentous shifts that have occurred since 1991. It does not make sense at all to bring together Turkmenistan and

15 Ēriks Jēkabsons, *Latviešu virsnieki Krievijas impērijas armijā. 19.gadsimta otrā puse – 1914.gads* (Rīga: Latvijas Universitāte, 2022).

Estonia, for instance, just because they happen to be a part of the so-called post-Soviet space. My opinion is that the category of post-Soviet space is completely irrelevant, and even pernicious, at this point. It simply no longer has any heuristic or analytical value.

If we are talking about the Russian Empire as it existed historically, of course, we should take into account the regional divisions, the local variations, and the regionally inspired logic of that empire, as a research object; we should not superimpose our own symbolic geographies, our own spatial mental maps onto a completely different spatial logic followed at the time. This concerns, for example, the role of Finland and Poland in understanding Russian imperial policies and structures. Mainstream historiography (during the Soviet era and in post-1991 Russia) excluded these territories from the narrative relating to the imperial era. It is true that, recently, much has been done to correct this absence and imbalance. Russian academia, at its best, most analytically sophisticated, level rediscovered Poland as a central factor in Russian empire-building. However, at the level of basic school education in Russia, at the level of inculcating essential historical consciousness into the citizenry, Poland is either not present at all or it is depicted, rather crudely and distortedly, as an “eternal” historical foe of the Russian people. The situation regarding Finland and its place in the empire is similar, in this respect. Central Asia, although it is, certainly, a very different story, is not really present in these mainstream Russian historical narratives, either. The basic problem that beset the historiography of the Russian Empire for a long time was how to define the Russian core. This issue persisted not only in terms of the historiography, it was also present in both contemporary debates and in discussions arising throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Where was the Russian core? How was it to be defined territorially? The answer to this question was (and still is) elusive.

Teleology should thus be avoided at all costs. To come back to Yoko’s question about the national historiographies, I think that the struggle aimed at disentangling historical analysis from contemporary perceptions of space is still ongoing. It is still, mostly, a losing battle, although much has been achieved in the last thirty years to correct and balance the general picture.

Catherine Gibson: I very much agree with what my fellow panellists have said. I can add an anecdote from my own research experience. In the course of my research on Baltic history, I visited the National Historical Archives of Belarus in Minsk to access sources related to the history of today’s Latgale region in eastern Latvia. In the nineteenth century, this territory was part of Vitebsk Province. The archives pertaining to this region, however, due to their geographical location, have been underutilized by historians of Latvia. As a result, the nineteenth-century history of today’s Latvia has largely been written on the basis of the experiences of Livland and Kurland Provinces. Moreover, the tendency to treat the three Baltic provinces as exceptional within the empire has also precluded the boundary-crossing perspectives needed to interrogate the links between the Baltic provinces and other imperial regions, such as the neighbouring North-Western Territory (Severo-Zapadnyi Krai).

I think that the tendency to define the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union based on the Russian “centre” has been particularly harmful for the study of border regions, especially as so much of their history is entangled and overlaps with other areas studies fields. Innovative work comparing and connecting spaces usually addressed in isolation, such as James H. Meyer’s *Turks Across Empires*, Eileen Kane’s *Russian Hajj*,

or Trond O. Tøllefsen's and James M. White's work on the Swedish-speaking islanders of Estland Province, are really important in this regard.¹⁶ I think that opportunities for stimulating dialogue between various sub-fields of area studies are one of the most exciting emerging directions in our field.

Yoko Aoshima: Now I would like to move to another set of questions about historiography and sources. How can we find reliable sources to conduct historical research now that access to archives in Russia and Ukraine has become difficult due to the ongoing war? Will the shift in the field of archival research towards the former periphery of the empires reshape new future historical discussions and interpretations? If so, to what extent? Andrei actually posed this question in our correspondence. What kind of theme or topic should we choose to see new relationships and new historical perspectives? I think this is related to the question of what kind of materials to use. As Catherine mentioned, what kind of theme could be possible to look at new connections other than the connections only with the Russian Empire or the centre of the empires?

Anton Kotenko: The problem of accessibility or inaccessibility of primary sources, the possibility or impossibility of travelling to the archives is today less acute than it was even ten years ago for the simple reason that a huge number of unpublished and published sources have been digitized by numerous institutions which study the region; first of all, of course, these are periodicals—both journals and newspapers—in many languages of the empire. In my experience, most of them are not yet optically recognized, but these already are good news.

In addition to that, I think that the problem of accessibility of sources can push us to explore some new methodological directions. I can single out two of them. First, we can concentrate more on studying the archival collections of the former borderlands of the empire, which it seems have not been that actively used by scholars before. Hence, I imagine that, for instance, Estonia, Finland, Kazakhstan, or Poland can become centres of production of knowledge about the empire in the next few years.

The second opportunity, which is more important, and which goes hand in glove with current discussions between historians in general, is to study the global history of the Russian Empire based on foreign archives—German, Austrian, Japanese, to name a few. Dozens of books on Russian Germans were written relying on the materials of the Russian archives, but what about the same topic written on the basis of the German archives? To give an example of my current research: the first two directors of St. Petersburg Zoo arrived in the empire from Prussia, and both of them passed away in Berlin. Perhaps some of their archives are still there? Another person who interests me a lot these days is Roderick Erckert, the author of the 1863 *Ethnographic Atlas of the Western Provinces of the Empire* about whom and whose atlas we do not know much. Meanwhile, after a stint in Russia, Erckert left for Germany and passed away in

16 James H. Meyer, *Turks Across Empires: Marketing Muslim Identity in the Russian-Ottoman Borderlands, 1856–1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Eileen Kane, *Russian Hajj: Empire and the Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); Trond O. Tøllefsen and James M. White, "Navigating an Orthodox Conversion: Community, Environment, and Religion on the Island of Ruhnu, 1866–7," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 46:5 (2021), 642–664.

Berlin in 1900, which makes me curious again about whether any archive of his can be found there. And these are not just German archives which I mean; I am sure it can be possible to uncover completely unknown histories of the Romanov Empire relying, for instance, on the Japanese archives. An example of such a book that very much inspired my thinking about it is Sho Konishi's *Anarchist Modernity*—an account of connections between Japanese and Russian intellectuals of the late nineteenth century, which, it seemed to me, is largely based precisely on the Japanese sources.¹⁷

Catherine Gibson: I completely agree with Anton. In Tartu, I teach on an Erasmus Mundus International Master's in Central, East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (IMCEERES), where the students study at the University of Tartu (Estonia) and the University of Glasgow (UK) in the first year of the programme. Then, for the second academic year, they choose one of the partner universities in the consortium (currently, we have partners in Kazakhstan, Georgia, Hungary, Poland, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and an associate partner in Ukraine) to take classes to develop further regional specializations, learn additional languages, and conduct fieldwork for their master's thesis. It is really exciting to see students pursue research on topics related to Russia, the Soviet Union, or the Russian Empire from these various vantage points and use sources in different languages. I'm hoping that for future generations of students and scholars this kind of pathway will be a much more common entry point into our field of area studies.

The other point I want to raise here is about language skills. So far, for most historians of the Russian Empire not originally from the region, Russian was the main language you were expected to master and this was often assumed to be all that you needed to access the most important sources. Now, the shifting focus towards "peripheries" has drawn attention to the importance of acquiring additional language competencies, besides Russian. Hopefully, the expectations of the academic field and of the job market will also begin to reflect this decentred approach and recognize how incorporating a plurality of sources in different languages can enrich our understanding of the region's imperial past.

Andrei Cușco: I do agree with Anton and Catherine. I think that is definitely the direction that we should move towards. Regarding the practical consequences of the closure of the Russian archives, as Anton has already mentioned, I also imagine and anticipate that the former peripheries will come to centre stage during the next years. I am thinking, in particular, about the Baltic states, Georgia, and Moldova. By the way, a close friend, Igor Cașu, became director of the archives in Moldova in May 2022. Due to his open access policy, many American and West European historians suddenly discovered Moldova as an alternative and attractive destination. This example shows that there are loopholes that historians interested in the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union can use if they are unwelcome in the Russian archives.

In terms of potential topics, I completely agree with Anton that many sources have been digitized, particularly press recordings. This is not so much the case with archival sources, where digitization could have been done on a wider scale. One

17 Sho Konishi, *Anarchist Modernity: Cooperatism and Japanese-Russian Intellectual Relations in Modern Japan* (Boston: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013).

can use the press, for instance, for all kinds of intellectual history projects; while intellectual history itself is not, admittedly, in its prime at present, we can still tackle, for example, nationalism from below by using the press as a primary source. Speaking about nationalism, I think that a promising direction in this regard is the use of locally generated sources. It is of course difficult to recover and reconstruct the voices “from below,” especially the peasants’ perspective, given that the possibilities of replacing and complementing written sources with other kinds of materials—e.g., oral interviews, artifacts, visual evidence, or anthropological and ethnographic data—are often limited. In this sense, James Scott’s suggestion to rely on *metis*—local or tacit knowledge—is both exciting and not always applicable.¹⁸ However, combining historical and anthropological methods seems a rather promising research avenue. And, of course, one should not dismiss the global scale of analysis. Global entanglements, inter-imperial exchanges and interactions, mutual perceptions, mutual transfers, not confined only to ideological transfers, but also involving people, cadres, practices, models, are fascinating research subjects. This research agenda is still at an incipient stage, and much remains to be done.

Yoko Aoshima: The last question I would like to raise here is about the relationship between historical study and current politics. Putin’s government abused the historical interpretation to justify the invasion. How do we think professional historians should respond to this situation? As Andrei wrote to me in advance, how dangerous the escalation and weaponization of historical politics in Russia is, for historical scholarship and academic freedom, regionally or globally. What solutions or alternatives can be identified for preserving scholarly connections and a platform for meaningful dialogue despite political pressure and disruption or institutional cooperation? Do we need to rethink approaches to history according to the political situation? Or should we confine ourselves to empirical research? I’m wondering if this is possible in the first place or not.

Anton Kotenko: There are three points that I can make here. First, I very much hope that none of the serious institutions which are funding studies of Russia’s empires will close their programmes. These empires have been an important part of the world history and they cannot be crossed out because of Russia’s history in the twenty-first century.

Second, as a historian of Ukraine and as I have already mentioned, I hope that there will be more studies of Ukrainians in the Russian Empire and their place in this empire. To give one more example: recently, a prominent Russian journalist Leonid Parfyonov made a series of films about some of the empire’s Jews and Georgians, who decided to change their identification into Russians; he also plans to continue them with a film about Russian Germans.¹⁹ His film on Georgians nicely begins in the famous Military Gallery of the Winter Palace with the author’s presentation of

18 James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), especially chapter 9 (pp. 309–341).

19 All of them are accessible on Parfyonov’s YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/@parfenon>.

portraits of generals of the Russian Army of Georgian descent; the most well-known of them, of course, was Prince Bagrationi.²⁰ I would be curious and it seems to me a fascinating topic to think about other generals from the very same gallery—people like Vasyl Kostenetsky, Ivan Paskevych, and Andriy Hudovych, to name just a few—all of those empire builders who have been hitherto unproblematically considered “Russians.” Similarly, I will be fascinated to read a good scholarly biography of the “Russian doctor” Mykola Hamaliia,²¹ whose memoirs published in the Stalinist period nevertheless begin from the author’s statement that “our family is of Ukrainian origin; one of my ancestors was a hetman, to whom Shevchenko’s poem *Hamaliia* is dedicated.”²² Surely, these studies should be done not in order to “reclaim” some great figure for one’s national history; maybe, most of such figures indeed were “ardent patriotic Great Russians.”²³ But they can definitely at least make one wonder whether it was possible to be a supporter of the empire and at the same time identify oneself as a Ukrainian, and whether Ukrainians could remain “rossiiane” and not necessarily turn into “russkie.”

Finally, I think that good books are a proper response of scholars to the world around us. My desire as a historian has always been to contribute to a project that will not promote any national essentialism or ideas of eternal values, goodness, or violence of some group. As I have already mentioned, one way to do so is to present the history of the Russian Empire as part of the history of the global world of the time. Convincing narratives of the global history of Russia will be a great academic response to bad politics. In particular, such a project will not conceive of “Europe” and “Russia” as two antagonistic entities—the way they are presented at the moment—but will present them as my heroes of the nineteenth century did—as “Western Europe” and “Russia,” meaning that Russia was part of “Europe.”

Catherine Gibson: I would like to raise two additional points. First, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has been accompanied by widespread disinformation and the weaponization of history, has brought into the spotlight the importance and relevance today of humanities in a world in which funding for the arts and humanities is being cut. The overt politicization of history that we are confronted with each day reaffirms the importance of our profession in the public sphere as expert commentators and our role as teachers in nurturing critical thinking among students to help equip them with skills to counter disinformation. This is at the heart of the work of humanities scholars and humanities education. I think this is something that needs to be loudly defended today.

20 On his Russian identity, see Sean Pollock, “‘As One Russian to Another’: Prince Petr Ivanovich Bagration’s Assimilation of Russian Ways,” *Ab Imperio* 4 (2010), pp. 113–142.

21 Contributors to Wikimedia projects (22 February, 2023). Гамалея, Николай Фёдорович. https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%93%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B5%D1%8F_%D0%9D%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B9_%D0%A4%D1%91%D0%B4%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%87.

22 Nikolai Gamaleia, *Vospominaniia*, vol. 1 (Leningrad: AN SSSR, 1947), p. 5.

23 This is what Mark Liubomudrov called Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, who was born in 1858 in Kutaisi Province in what might be called today an Armenian-Ukrainian family. Mark Liubomudrov, “Vse dolzhno idti ot zhizni,” in Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, *Rozhdenie teatra: vospominaniia, stat'i, zametki, pis'ma* (Moskva: Pravda, 1989), p. 6.

My second point related to the politics of history comes from a broader European perspective: who are the leaders shaping debates and policy at the European level and whose voices get to be heard? Since February 2022, the leaders of all three Baltic states have been very vocal in their advocacy for Ukraine and in speaking out to shape the EU's stance towards Russia. Again, this is another way in which Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine has created a turning point in terms of international recognition of the Baltic perspective on current events. I would say that this is something positive to have emerged from this otherwise terrible situation we are in. There has been, to some extent, a levelling and a gravitational shift in the geographical centres of expertise in Europe towards the east. There is a growing recognition among politicians in the West that the East European perspective is valuable and, indeed, crucial for understanding these times we are living in.

Andrei Cușco: To further build on Catherine's point, I believe we still do not realize how profound this shift is. In fact, many of us (I mean here historians who deal with Russia) would have been surprised, not so long ago, by the voices that have now become mainstream. I am not talking about historians and public figures such as Timothy Snyder and Anne Applebaum, although even they seemed extreme, up to a point, especially for those historians who were not necessarily Russophile, but perhaps more inclined to listen to the Russian position before the start of the war.²⁴ This more nuanced approach is increasingly problematic. What Catherine has just mentioned is a positive development, in the sense that the East European position has been vindicated, to a certain extent, and that these ideas are now taken seriously. The problem is that they have a background and a history, that is, an ugly history of memory wars between Russia and its East European neighbours, including the Baltic states. What I am concerned about is that this ongoing shift would lead to an escalation on both fronts, and one can never know how it would end. This is definitely a danger for practising historians. Again, I am totally in favour of the multiplicity of voices that finally emerged: the Russians no longer have a monopoly (or a hegemony) on interpreting their past. But this could lead to an unending 'culture war' in the sphere of discourse, which would perhaps be not as harmful as the real war, but no less dangerous in the long run.

The final point I would raise here is how difficult it is for professional historians to talk to, or even to deal with, political leaders who, like Putin, weaponize history. This is so different a plane of ideological language that, even if we try, as historians, to engage with it, to show how unfounded it is, they (and the state as such) do not listen and do not care. Who should care about this? The wider community, perhaps. I am reminded of the utopian impulse of the so-called Blois Manifesto, or Appel de Blois, which was an appeal signed by French historians led by Pierre Nora, one of the most important

24 This is a contentious point, insofar as one can speak about a sort of continuum ranging from avowed *Putinverstehers* (such as the late Stephen F. Cohen) or "realists" like John Mearsheimer to the squarely anti-Kremlin stance relentlessly pursued by Snyder, Applebaum, and a number of East European (mainly Polish and Baltic) historians. Among historians displaying a more balanced approach to the Russian imperial experience while taking into account the comparative and geopolitical dimensions of Russian empire building, I would mention Alfred J. Rieber and Dominic Lieven, among others.

French practitioners of history, in 2008. This appeal reacted against French memory laws drafted at the time, rather vehemently opposing any claim of any state authority to impose laws concerning historical truth. This impassioned call for the autonomy of the profession seemed like a welcome and feasible solution at the time, but in the last fifteen years the memory wars and the ensuing politicization of history writing have escalated—especially in Eastern and Central Europe—to an unprecedented extent, making such a plea for professional independence and neutrality all but illusory. The war will undoubtedly (and perhaps understandably) exacerbate this trend, while the manipulation of history has seemingly reached new lows after February 2022. Despite all that, I think that historians should do their utmost to remain professionals, first and foremost, and to show—here, I agree with Anton—that history can (and should) be written from different perspectives, and definitely not be subordinated to political interests.

Yoko Aoshima: Now I would like to open up discussions to the floor.

Tomohiko Uyama (SRC): I agree with many of your points. I think Yoko mostly posed questions whose answers are self-evident. Of course, we do not have to revive nationalist historiography. Of course, we must not weaponize history. But we have to be conscious that, first, nothing in society, in social life, including the work of historians can exist in isolation from politics. Second, those professional historians who prefer transnational points of view of history are a minority, an absolute minority, in the field of historical discourse.

I want to pay attention to the fact that current historical studies of empires derive from the intellectual atmosphere of the 1980s and 1990s, when prominent scholars like Benedict Anderson, Pierre Nora, and Eric Hobsbawm wrote classical works on nationalism. Many people politicized nationalism, since many people thought that the nation-state system had many shortcomings. In response, empire was perceived as a kind of alternative to nation-state. At the same time, of course, many historians traditionally wrote about empires from a political point of view. But especially in the case of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, euphoria after the collapse of the Soviet Union shaped historians' viewpoints. Consciously or unconsciously, some positive views on the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union determined our understanding of the states. The time has become totally different now. I don't want to say that we have to make our viewpoints in response to Putin and some others. We have to be conscious that our understanding of empires has been based on the political context of twenty to forty years before.

Second, in many countries, nationalist or imperialist historians have great influence especially on historical education in schools. Politicians also prefer to read nationalist or imperialist historical books. We prefer to study transnational history or entangled history. But usually, our work and their work exist totally separately, and there is no dialogue. I think this is not correct. I have always tried to study those subjects and topics that are studied by nationalistic historians in Kazakhstan. I myself study them from a non-nationalist point of view, and I have tried to make dialogues with nationalist historians. Of course, this is very difficult, and I cannot say that I have exerted a serious impact on Kazakhstani historiography. Still, I feel that young Kazakhstani students and historians are reading my works. I also want to say that there

are both nationalist and imperialist scholars studying these topics, but I have been trying to be mutual. Earlier, my position was somewhat closer to imperialist historians, that is, Russian historians who study this theme. However, once I realized this was because I read mostly Russian sources in the archives, I studied more deeply the Kazakh-language sources.

Recently, we discovered Japanese-language sources to find that in some cases the views of nationalist historians are closer to historical facts, although these scholars didn't know the sources. This again proves that we have to be conscious about our own bias. Of course, I don't say that nationalist historians are mostly right. No, they often write distorted history, but sometimes we have to recognize that even some elements in nationalist or even imperialist historical writings contain some truth. We have to conduct a dialogue, not from the standpoint of some teachers, but try to find some common ground with those with whom we don't agree at all.

David Moon (University College London): I found the discussion very stimulating, and also very refreshing. I agree with the need to avoid national and spatial teleologies. My comment is about the issue of discontinuity and continuity between the Muscovite, Russian, and Soviet states. I spent a couple of years working at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan. Some of my colleagues, who are mostly international, found it frustrating that students struggled to distinguish between the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. I commented that this was a discussion amongst faculty, and that, from the point of view of the Kazakhs, there wasn't much difference. It's still the colonial power. Other students would comment—most of the students were ethnic Kazakhs, but there were representatives of other nationalities—that they didn't really distinguish between the representatives of the Russian, Ukrainian, and even Polish and German minorities in Kazakhstan, as, together with the Kazakhstani Koreans, their first language was Russian. From the perspective of Kazakhstan, these questions look quite different. Also, from my own research in environmental history, these distinctions blur, and environmental history has to be transnational. So, I find myself moving backwards and forwards across the 1917 border. Things are different, of course, but not necessarily for political reasons. It depends on your perspective, where you're looking at these questions from, and also the type of history that you do.

Norihiro Naganawa (SRC): Following Professor Moon's lead, I'm also thinking of periodization depending on what angle to see from. Very few people write the whole history of Russia or Eurasia. Of course, teaching is perhaps another case where you must think of coherence, rupture, or continuity. But when it comes to concrete studies, we should take particular periodization into account. In your case studies, how does different periodization work in your works?

I know that Professor Uyama is very critical about the current shift to transnational history, but I agree with the panellists, and I believe this is one of the ways to go. It is intriguing that Anderson, the author of *Imagined Communities*, later wrote a book about a global circulation of anarchism.²⁵ By doing so, he depicts empire as a booster of transnational connectivity and a provider of contexts and infrastructure where all

25 Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (London: Verso, 2005).

the insurgents travelled around. I do not think that transnational history precludes dialogue with local historians. To practice it, we should engage with a variety of regional histories and even overseas countries and regions. These studies could enrich our own regional focus. After all, Professor Uyama's new Japanese sources also bring a new light to the Kazakhstani nationalist history writing. So, I would expect more mutually productive interactions between transnational history and regional histories.

Catherine Gibson: I would like to pick up briefly on the question of periodization. It brings us back to the issue raised earlier of how to write some sort of overarching integrated history of the region, and whether this is even desirable. For instance, one of the specificities of the historiographical narrative and periodization in the case of the Baltic is that the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were independent during the interwar period, before being occupied by the Soviet Union. So, for them, 1991 marks the year of regaining their independence. In the three Baltic national historiographies, there is a strong idea of state continuity that links the years before and after the Soviet era. I agree with Professor Moon that the kind of history we write very much depends on our vantage point. These regional specificities are a strong argument against painting an overly simplistic and generalizing portrait of the whole region in broad brush strokes.

Andrei Cușco: I will also start with the question of periodization. My own case study has a chronological trajectory similar to that of the Baltic region, as 1917–1918 was the actual turning point in the (post)imperial history of Bessarabia. It became part of the Romanian nation state from 1918 to 1940. Then, in 1940, together with the Baltic states, it was annexed by the Soviet Union. It temporarily returned to Romanian control (being in fact under German and Romanian occupation) from 1941 to 1944, under completely different circumstances. Then, in 1944, it was reintegrated into the Soviet Union.

I did not reflect too much on the issue of periodization, as the temporal landmarks and turning points were apparently clear. Rather, I was interested in the complex processes of radical transformation of the nature of politics in the early twentieth century, for instance, with respect to mass politics and the mobilization of ethnicity. Peter Holquist's argument emphasizing Russia's continuum of crisis from 1905 to 1921 is quite useful for my own approach.²⁶ It underscores how things accelerated and how temporalities shifted after 1905, but especially due to the Great War, as processes of change were catapulted into action. This is also a matter of analytical scale. For instance, if one focuses exclusively on one's own narrow territorial framework, on one's own small region, one can barely understand how these incremental processes of change operated. Holquist's explanatory scheme only works on a macro scale, with regional case studies (including Bessarabia) serving as revealing illustrations of the unfolding (and overlapping) crises. Thus, an alternating *jeu d'échelles* (shifting between the macro, meso, and micro scales) seems to be the best analytical strategy.

Let me briefly respond to Professor Uyama's thought-provoking remarks. Indeed, in a way, every history is a history of the present. Our concerns as historians are

26 Peter Holquist, "Violent Russia, Deadly Marxism? Russia in the Epoch of Violence, 1905–21," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 4:3 (2003), pp. 627–652.

structured by what we live through, by our lived experience. I do agree completely with him that one should engage in dialogue with nationalist historians. It is never a real solution to just sit in one's ivory tower, in isolation, and write the lofty history of transnational global connections (for instance). There should be a response from the other side as well. But there are limits to this dialogue. There are even limits to the language itself, to creating a common language that we can use and articulate to build such a dialogue. In my own case, in Moldova and in Romania, I had some success in engaging with a number of good and serious historians, even if some of them displayed nationalist tendencies. However, they are not in the majority even in their own camp. Most nationalist historians are either not interested in this kind of dialogue, because they write with a clear political agenda in mind, or simply not qualified to go beyond the narrow confines of simplistic source criticism. They hardly rise above a crude level of intuitive empiricism—sometimes reduced even to a literal and uncritical reproduction of archival documents—and lack any advanced analytical skills. This situation does not provide a sound basis for a meaningful dialogue.

I now turn very briefly to Professor Moon's comment. Indeed, the scale and the vantage point are very important in the debate concerning discontinuity and rupture. Although I am not at all familiar with the Kazakh case, I can refer to some parallels in terms of the twentieth-century famines that not only included the Holodomor, but also the post-war famine in Soviet Moldavia in 1946 and 1947. Many works on the subject mention and emphasize the parallels with Kazakhstan. Proportionally, the famine's impact was even more devastating in Kazakhstan. However, the Kazakhs did not engage in large-scale public debates on the topic, at least not to the extent that the Ukrainians or even the Moldovans did. There is still a clear reluctance on the part of the Kazakh historians to engage with their Russian counterparts regarding certain traumatic and 'sore' points of their common history. This is also my reaction to Professor Uyama's comment. While the colonial dimension is indeed crucial, to what extent are these local communities of historians ready to engage in painful dialogues with their counterparts across the border? The grounds for optimism in this respect are modest, at best.

Anton Kotenko: I agree that discontinuity depends on the type of history you do. Of course, historians tend to use big calendar dates as bookends—1868, 1914, 1917, etc. This is why we often divide the history of the Russian Empire according to the dates of rule of particular emperors. But in some cases, this periodization does not make sense from the point of view of particular institutions. For instance, I am currently working on an article about censorship of drama literature in Ukrainian. Initially, I wanted to write about censorship under Alexander III, from 1881 until 1894. But then I decided to stop on the period of 1881–1896 because it was only in 1896 that Evgeny Feoktistov, who was the head of the Main Department for Press from 1883, resigned from his position. This means that 1894—the date of accession of a new emperor—did not change much in the way that censorship functioned; a real discontinuity in that policy began not with the accession of a new emperor but with a new head of this institution.

As for the limitations of global history—sure, it has many, and its practitioners are quite open about them. One definitely does not need to think of a global context of a

history of a village, whose inhabitants perhaps never travelled anywhere, the way one does for the history of Genoa.²⁷ Some people indeed never travelled and were never influenced by a butterfly on the other side of the world. But the closer we come to modern history, the more interconnected our world becomes, and it makes huge sense to take this context into our account of its past.

As for our possible impact on current politics, I am sure that some politicians do recognize the existence of historians who write good histories, so I guess the better and more interesting the narratives we produce, the more of them will be read by people of influence.

Yoko Aoshima: Through today's discussion, I found numerous new perspectives and new questions that we must think about more. The ongoing war has daunted us so much, physically and psychologically. We are also suffering from difficulties in access to historical sources and divided scholarly connections. Confronting this situation, we must maintain a sound academic and educational environment and scrutinize various historiographical traditions, which allows us to critically tackle heavily politicised history from a professional point of view. At the same time, we are obliged to look squarely at the ongoing situation and adopt novel angles to history writing so that we better capture current reality and embrace sober perspectives. In this sense, the border regions of Russia's empires will be a significant testing ground for historians' renewed explorations. Students of the imperial borderlands need to seriously reassess the gaze from the centres of empires prone to find their domains' stable working, as well as the source base by which they have corroborated it. By doing so, we will uncover new networks and connections that straddled both sides of imperial borders and brought local populations into contact with the broader world. Only then will we detect those possibilities, values, and knowledge that emanated from the liminal areas of empires and consequently subverted the imperial order.

27 On the limitations of global history, see Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 223–230.