

## Book review

Before writing *Bessarabia – German Settlers of the Black Sea*, Ute Schmidt had to work for a long time to produce a standard reference about the region between the Danube Delta and Odessa. Richly supported by resources and fluently written, shrewdly and richly illustrated, the book explains how Germans reclaimed the widths of Bessarabia, populated it, let it flourish and gave it a place in world history.

The author vividly describes the peculiar mix of archaic religiousness and commercial modernity held by these pioneers and places it in the context of other nationalities, such as Moldavians, Ukrainians, Russians, Lipovans, Jews, Bulgarians, Gagauz, Gypsies and Armenians. Again and again stories are told which throw light on the bigger picture. For example, during the First World War, Russia was hit by a wave of espionage, at a time of extensive immigration to Bessarabia from a variety of different countries. An officer is looking for a victim and a Russian maidservant tells him that her German landlord is visited every night by a German airship. No-one believes this story but the man is, nonetheless, sent to Siberia, to return three full years later. Similar happenings, but of much greater complexity, did indeed take place during the most intense phase of Stalin's dictatorship. Stalinism hence emerges as a severely extreme form of tsarism.

*Ukraine – from the Red to the Orange Revolution*, by Katrin Boeck and Ekkehard Vökl, is an informative book about the biggest country contained entirely within Europe. It refrains from analysis, but the reader is brought closer to understanding the important facts and strands in its development. It covers the pre-history (Kiewer Rus, Polish-Lithuanian descent) concerning the establishment of the Ukrainian nation state in 1917 which perished in the flurry of the civil war; the enormous catastrophes which the inhabitants of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic suffered (three large famines in 1921, 1932/33 and 1946, with millions of dead; the German invasion and tough battles; persecution during the great terror of 1937 and after 1945); right through to the upheaval resulting in an independent Ukraine from 1991. From a clearly external perspective, the authors also uncover contemporary Ukrainian urban myths, including the one that the Ukrainians were victims of the Soviet Union, or the Bolsheviks or the Russians. In reality, the Ukraine had the Soviet system

Not simply imposed on them, but rather they had supported it. The Ukraine was an important basis of power for the Soviet Union.

Juri Andruchowytsh, a renowned Ukrainian writer, shares insights from the 'inside' that are worthy of consideration. In his essay, he explains that his country is only ever seen as part of the provinces:

Despite the fact that the geographical centre of Europe lies in the Carpathians... in European consciousness this formation has only ever been understood as the border, fringe or province

of various empires (the Romanian, Ottoman, Habsburg, Russian and Soviet), a periphery of culture and civilisation.

Readers of his text can not only rationally comprehend the fear of Russia that so many in eastern Europe could literally fear in their bones, but can feel it too. The animosity between Russia and the Ukraine is, after all, so entrenched that we see it in scenes from popular films where, for example, the Russian hero kills a Ukrainian in a public toilet with the words, 'That's for Sevastopol!' Such a scene would make no sense to a western European audience. Only intellectuals would understand that Sevastopol, on the Crimean peninsula, should, as far as the majority of Russians are concerned, not belong to the Ukraine.

Many questions remain unanswered: what will be the historical significance of Russia's quest for expansion (combined with the related fears of eastern – and central – Europe); whether the Russians will further exploit the split in the European Union sufficiently to break it up; and whether Russia can ever be an empire, rather than simply a country (Andruchowytsh's question). Within the essay lies the hope that:

Within the highly explosive mix of despotism and anarchy which is Russia, Russian anarchy will be victorious over Russian despotism.

Anarchy indeed lasts only a short while and so his homeland will remain for him:

A place where the formation of the state changes frequently, an earthquake-susceptible transitional region between various empires.

It is in the same vein that Mykola Rjabtschuk, a well-known journalist in the Ukraine, writes his essay *The Real and the Imagined Ukraine*. It is incidentally he who discovered Andruchowytsh. For him, however, there is little difference between:

A Bolshevik clique and a faction of oligarchs.

In this book, one can recognise how hate turns even a good writer blind. Most likely for this reason, the publishers (Suhrkamp) considered it necessary to include an afterword in which the role-model function of the noble Polish-Lithuanian republic is put into modern-day Ukrainian perspective.

In contrast to the Ukraine, Romania or Russia, Moldova in 2003 was marginalised and rarely taken seriously. It was forced to rouse an EU rhetoric that unveiled a certain standardising effect even though it was difficult to evaluate the short- and medium-term agenda of European implementation. Corinna Reinhardt analyses the relationship between Moldova and the EU, better described as 'EU foreign policy towards Moldova since 1991'. She criticises the approach of the EU in its current general appendages, like the European Neighbourhood Policy. The evaluations presented in the book are, however, mostly based on matter-of-fact strategic analyses. Reinhardt points out the multiple over-estimation of civil society in the form of NGOs by the EU administration.

Reinhardt's study can be used as a history of the development of EU strategies concerning Moldova (and partly for other similar east European non-member states). It is a reference work that well describes the relationship between the EU and Moldova.

We began with a work that explained the history of the entire region through the example of the German people and we finish this review with a book covering the whole region. The compendium *Grey Danube, Black Sea*, edited by Christian Reder and Erich Klein, is a project by the Vienna University of Applied Arts and the Centre of Knowledge Transfer. It encompasses studies and logs, drawings and conversations, photos and art events. There are interviews with authors like Dragan Velikic, historical critiques concerning Odessa, a Balkan diary from one of the editors, a survey of the flow of population down the Potemkin Steppe, potamic odes and much more. This is currently one of the best books about the region. Indeed, it evokes the *Prelude to the Theatre* from Goethe's *Faust*:

He who brings much, brings something for many;  
And everyone leaves the house content.

## References

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- Bernd Adamek-Schyma (2007) *Angels and Demons of the Periphery* essays, 217pp, Frankfurt-am-Main.
- Mykola Rjabtschuk (2005) *The Real and the Imagined Ukraine* essay, 176pp, Frankfurt-am-Main.
- Christian Reder and Erich Klein (Eds.) (2008) *Grey Danube, Black Sea – Vienna, Sulina, Odessa, Jalta, Istanbul* 575pp, Vienna.
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