The idea of European history, which is closely tied up with the notoriously elusive concept of Europe, has meant and continues to mean different things to different groups and individuals, including historians, in different times and different places in Europe. As an historian from the Czech Republic and someone whose work focuses on the history of East Central Europe and the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, I approach European history from the perspective of these regions and reflect especially on the place the margins of Europe occupy in European history. Here I use the term margins in a geographical sense as areas on the edge of an ill-defined continent, but also to refer to what is left ‘outside the main body’ of European history.

Hierarchies

Viewed from Europe’s margins, European history is markedly hierarchical. Some events, figures, topics, and national histories are deemed to be worth historians’ attention more than others and serve as a basis against which other events, national histories, and topics
are written about and evaluated. Not surprising, the same hierarchical approach has characterized analyses of Europe's relations with the non-European world. Europe’s margins tend to be underrepresented in international research and publishing on European history, although clearly more so when it comes to some periods and topics of research than others. Ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, for example, have received substantial attention in recent decades and have given rise to remarkable works.1 But despite their potential to serve as prisms through which to approach European history (because they are related to national legislation and frameworks and totally ignore and transcend national borders at the same time), Europe's regions are quite unevenly represented in the works dealing with these topics.2

Geographically, the uneven representation of various parts of Europe in European history is not limited to a single region (a conference focusing on 20th-century marriage patterns in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Latvia would not be considered to cover the history of Europe any more than a book on Polish, Hungarian, Slovak, and Czech women's movements would, while works limited to several West European countries might still be perceived as representing European history). Nor is this a one-sided process. It concerns both the ‘core’ and the ‘margins.’ Perhaps we should speak of various regions and themes being unevenly integrated into European history rather than being underrepresented.

On the one hand, it is hard to deny that most highly praised works on European history have been produced in Western European academia. It is nevertheless striking that even some excellent European history books published in Western Europe explicitly state that Eastern Europe lies outside their scope.3 ‘Eastern Europe’ is, furthermore, sometimes still depicted as an undifferentiated block or as a whole that can easily be represented by just one of its parts. Such perceptions, on the other hand, affect the way in which different historians and other people interested in history in Eastern Europe relate to Europe and see, or do not see, themselves as a part of European history. This is coupled with the legacy of the communist period. The consequences of the isolation from and rejection of foreign phenomena in official historical institutions throughout the region during the communist period can still occasionally be felt in the attitude that the mainstream historical establishment and historians have to ‘European’ trends, though this attitude varies in intensity between different countries and generations within these countries and from one historian to the next.

The political transformations and Euro-optimism of the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium seemed to modify how European history was viewed in East Central Europe. Historical arguments began to be used to redefine the region’s relations with
Europe. Respected Czech historians, for example, would emphasize how the Czechs had always been a part, or even at the vanguard, of European history and would argue that they therefore belong in Europe. The need to stress how integrated Czechs are into European history has, however, gradually diminished. The emphasis on Czechs' Europeanness was clearly pragmatic and was happening at a time when Czechs and Slovaks, as well as other Central Europeans, were striving to join the European Union, while now they take their Europeanness for granted. But this does not mean that the decreasing emphasis on the European dimensions of East Central Europe's past does not also reflect the current state of European history.

Inclusion

While nobody denies that the margins of Europe are a part of Europe, whether the two large empires that existed on Europe's (south) eastern borders, the Ottoman Empire and Russia, are treated as parts of European history is a subject of debate. In both instances, however, European history can be made more inclusive not by adding another imperial, national, or regional tradition to what has become the standard perspective on European history, but by shifting the perspective and asking what European history or some aspects of it look like from the position of Europe's margins, from Kiev or from Istanbul. Let's take, for example, class, an undoubtedly important category of historical analysis. What class has meant in British history, leaving aside how this concept has changed even within British historiography, differs quite substantially from the understandings of class in communist and post-communist Eastern Europe or in the late Ottoman Empire. It is often assumed, nevertheless, that class has the same Western European-based meaning whenever it is used.

The Ottoman Empire is increasingly being considered a part of European history but its inclusion is occurring somewhat asymmetrically; it is happening in Ottoman studies more than in European history. There is no need to show here all the many ways in which the Ottoman Empire was entangled with Europe or to prove that the processes under way in the early modern and modern Ottoman Empire resembled those that were taking place in Europe at that time, although it might be useful for many historians of Europe to know about these parallels. Particularly worth noting is the fact that Pascal W. Firges and Tobias P. Graf refer to in their introduction to Well-Connected Domains: Towards an Entangled Ottoman History. They write that the Ottoman Empire was 'not exclusively a European, but also a world empire, which had political, economic, and religious interests well beyond its
borders in the West, North, South, and East. In other words, Ottoman history can be seen as a link between European history and world history. Similarly, the Russian Empire was both inside and outside Europe. In the 19th century Russia was turning its attention eastward and swallowing vast Asian areas inhabited by Muslim populations thus connecting European history with Asian history. The inclusion of two world empires on the margins of Europe, therefore, naturally integrates European history into world history more broadly without necessarily ‘provincializing’ it in the process.

Of course, even leaving aside the Ottoman and Russian Empires, Europe is and has always been connected to world or global history in myriad ways. For many, however, this connection means in the first place either modernization or colonialism together with the processes that led to it and that followed de-colonization. In other words, the very connection between Europe and the world around it embodies hierarchy, one in which Europe has tended to be the benchmark against which comparisons and evaluations are made.

Comparative History

Nevertheless, I believe that comparative history is one way to make European history less hierarchical. This may not seem immediately obvious because one of the main criticisms of comparative history is that it generates hierarchies and creates standards against which others are evaluated, such as the ranking implied in modernization theory. Comparative history has been criticized also for resting on national history, for comparing national cases and thus essentializing nations and confirming the divisions between them. Comparative history has, as a result, been all but supplanted by various forms of transnational history, histoire croisée and Transfergeschichte, which have yielded new approaches and often noteworthy results.

While the criticism is valid and reflects the problems of many comparative works, the more recent and successful examples of comparative history have overcome these limitations. They show that it is not necessary to compare national units and that the focus can instead be on subnational objects of comparison or on supranational ones, such as empires or global interconnections. For instance, a comparison that was made of how representatives of three ethnic groups and two generations in a small Romanian village remember two distinct events in the 1940s highlighted the discrepancy that exists between the local population’s understanding of events and the way they are interpreted by national
Focusing on how intimate life – sex, sentiment, and childrearing – figured in imperial rule enabled Ann Stoler to compare the North American experience with European colonial empires. These types of comparisons have little to do with the tradition of comparative history that produces models and typologies, an approach that is perhaps closer to the hearts of historical sociologists, but that sometimes seems too reductionist to historians with leanings towards cultural history or literary studies. Less rigid ‘soft comparisons’ could serve as an inspiration for a new concept of comparative studies in European history.

Comparative history of this kind can offer European history a tool with which to solve at least some of its current problems. First, when a comparison sets out from the presumption of equality between the compared cases, instead of comparing a ‘model’ case with others that are expected to have followed the same path or pattern, then it becomes possible to include regional, national, or subnational areas and themes into European history on an equal footing. Philippa Levine has, in this context, spoken about comparisons ‘of’ instead of comparison ‘to’, the latter implying a hierarchy among the compared cases. Second, it can overcome the biases of national historiographies and their master narratives for the very reason that a comparison with other national traditions exposes their prejudices. It has been argued that historians are too affected by their historical upbringing and the closeness of their own national history to be impartial towards other cases. Leaving aside the increasing number of studies that do not compare national histories, however, it is possible, even if not very common, to compare two cases where neither one is the historian’s own national history, or to do joint comparative research projects. Historians are becoming less resistant to joining forces with their colleagues from other countries to write articles and books, and comparative history is one of the most important areas in which such collaboration is not only fruitful but often indispensable. Thomas Welskopp notes that comparative history requires the historian to do archival research – or work with primary sources – for every case that the historian plans to include in his or her comparison, which limits the number of cases that can be compared. However, whether comparing national master narratives or villages in different cultural-linguistic areas, working with an international team means that even larger comparative projects can be carried out. Third, comparative history, for a long time associated with research based on the nation as the unit of analysis, can in fact work against this focus. It has the potential to challenge borders and highlight not just the ways in which national histories are distinct but also how they are interconnected. At the same time, since national histories continue to play an important role across Europe, they cannot be excluded from comparisons. Comparative history can deconstruct the idea of uniqueness and Sonderweg showing that some phenomena are regional or even broader, rather than specific to one nation. Finally,
comparative history can learn from postcolonial studies, which use comparative methods to analyze the functioning of imperial structures. While this type of research has been conducted on the imperial networks of Europe’s colonial powers, the parts of Europe that were not directly engaged in the colonial enterprise should also be included in this framework. This has already been suggested, for instance, in studies of colonialism without colonies and postcolonial comparative history could inspire the study of empires in Europe as well. Comparative history in itself does not automatically ‘do’ any of this work, but it can be put at the service of European history.

There can never be a perfect European history. But there are ways to improve how European history is practiced so that it can speak to more people inside and outside Europe than it does at present and it can help find answers to some of their questions, while at the same time inspiring new questions.

Cite this article as:


Download as PDF

1. This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund project “Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World” (reg. no.: CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734). Among the numerous examples see, e.g. Margaret R. Hunt, Women in Eighteenth-Century Europe, Harlow 2010; Luisa Passerini, Love and the Idea of Europe, New York, Oxford 2009.

2. I have argued elsewhere that comprehensive works on European history include either Eastern Europe (and sometimes the Ottoman Empire) or a gender perspective, but seldom both, resulting in a history of a rather ‘small Europe’. Jitka Malečková, Gender, History and ‘Small Europe’, in: European History Quarterly 40.4 (2010), pp. 685–700.


6. On the processes and practices of comparing see Angelika Epple / Walter Erhart / Johannes Grave (eds.), Practices of Comparing: Towards a New Understanding of a Fundamental Human Practice, Bielefeld 2020,


11. See Rogers Brubaker / Margit Feischmidt / Jon Fox / Liana Gранcea, Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town, Princeton 2008. Although Brubaker is not a historian, the volume can serve as an example of these points.

