Book Review

Sabine von Löwis, ed. 2019. *Umstrittene Räume in der Ukraine. Politische Diskurse, literarische Repräsentationen und kartographische Visualisierungen*, Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag (Phantomgrenzen im östlichen Europa 8), 160 pp., ISBN: 978-3-8353-3345-1, € 22.00

Reviewed by **Matthias Schwartz**, Leibniz Center for Literary and Cultural Research (ZfL), Berlin, Germany. E-mail: schwartz@zfL-berlin.org

<https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2021-0009>

Research into the spatial dimension of history and culture has, to a certain extent, boomed in cultural and historical studies in recent decades. Research interests have been directed not only at infrastructures, buildings, and territories of domination, but also at imaginary belonging, mental landscapes, and artistic representations with all the regional, transnational, and global interdependencies and transcending of borders associated with such issues. Particularly with regard to Eastern Europe and the former state socialist dominion, the aim has been to expose, beneath the surface of a political space previously often perceived as uniform, the local human geography, spatial discourses, and symbolic articulations of supposedly buried or newly invented spatial semantics. Such “sense of place” (Doreen Massey) has been explored from a cultural-historical, Slavic studies and political science perspective, often with an emphasis on peripheries and border areas whose regional “geopoetics” and hybrid identity designs contrasted with hegemonic, imperial spatial concepts. Postcolonial studies, in particular, have introduced a widely used theoretical approach to conceptualise the Soviet Union as an expansive colonial-like empire, against which any regional deviation was presented as an emancipatory project. The multidisciplinary research network “Phantom Borders in East Central Europe” was established in this context. It was coordinated at the Centre Marc Bloch in Berlin and funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research between 2011 and 2016. Its aim was, in a few words, to critically review the persistent social and imaginary power of territorial borders that have long ceased to exist.

The collective volume under review came about in the context of this research network. “Controversial Spaces in Ukraine” aims to counter the often schematic depiction of Ukraine reproduced in Western media as well as by local actors. The “phantom border” here denotes the alleged partition of the country into a progressive, western-oriented, predominantly Ukrainian-speaking population in the former dominions of Poland-Lithuania and Habsburg-Hungary, and an authoritarian, eastern-oriented one in the southeast, which mainly speaks Russian and

allegedly has remained strongly influenced by the Tsarist and Soviet empires as well as by Tartar-Ottoman rule.

Particularly during and after the “revolution of dignity” of 2013–14 and in view of the Russian intervention in the east of the country, this narrative has been updated in several ways. As *Sabine von Löwis* outlines in her excellent introduction, there have been three levels to this process. First, in the political arena, “patterns of geopolitical discourse that had been believed to be a thing of the past” reappeared in relation to the European Union and Russia (12). Second, in literary representations, “the older colonists (Austria-Hungary)” were often given priority as “vehicles of culture” (*Kulturträger*) over the “younger colonists (Soviet Union)” rather than “developing a post-colonial or decolonised identity” (19). Third, in cartographic visualisations, “simplifying and generalising maps, which often suggest a division of the country into two parts, have continued to dominate” (25).

The five studies in this volume, three of which are written in English and two in German, deal with how these ready-made “mental maps” have been updated and instrumentalised by various actors. *Tatiana Zhurzhenko*, writing on the “proliferation of borders in the post-Soviet space”, provides a solid overview of the official positions in the conflict between the Ukraine and Russia. She sees Russia’s behaviour as a threat to the European Union’s Eastern Partnership Policy, yet does not problematise the latter’s discourses of enlargement and demarcation in any in-depth way.

The volume’s core comprises two contributions by *Ievgeniia Voloshchuk* and *Tatjana Hofmann*, written in German, on spaces in literature. The two authors elaborate on von Löwis’ considerations presented in the introduction. In “The Ukraine as Palimpsest: Imperial Phantom Borders of the Ukraine from the Perspective of Ukrainian and German-Language Literature after 1989/1991”, Voloshchuk analyses in depth how “scenarios for the potential division of the country along its imperial phantom borders” were developed in literature long before the political-military conflict arose (78). In German as well as Ukrainian literature, the role of “frontier of Europe” to be defended against the Asian-Soviet east was repeatedly ascribed to Ukraine. The author uses the term “palimpsest” as an analytical metaphor to show how literary works have merged various historical spatial models to build a new national narrative. However, her examples reveal that the instrumentalised interpretations of past territorial orders have hardly ever been combined to form an ambiguous or multilayered text. Rather, most authors have been concerned with creating new demarcations and “delimitations within the Ukrainian space”, preventing rather than serving to integrate plural spatial layers (95).

Conversely, Hofmann, in her study on “Odessa Poetics as an Identity Resource in Times of Upheaval. From Isaak Babel to Boris Khersonsky”, demonstrates how

reference to previous literary and cultural spatial models can indeed develop integrative power. The myth of the port city on the Black Sea, founded in 1794 by Catherine the Great, is most famously shaped in Isaak Babel's "Odessa Tales" that describe the city's particular "life, language and writing style" and the "synthesis of differences, the diversity of cultures and languages" as "filled with Jewish customs, eroticism, violence and cosmopolitanism" (120). Hofmann illustrates how these "urban poetics" have been used by very different authors over the last hundred years, especially in times of crisis and upheaval, to create a "positive, inclusive self-image" and to facilitate "intercultural understanding" (120).

The last two contributions, written in English, are dedicated to cartographic imaginings of Ukraine. *Steven Seegel* takes a look at the English-language press to illustrate how political maps have simplified complex issues for their target audience by means of reductionist classifications and emotional colouring, for example by dividing the Ukrainian population into the highly problematic ethnolinguistic categories of "Russian" and "Ukrainian". Concluding the volume, *Ulrich Schmid* presents chorological maps and heat maps in 3D, which avoid blanket ascriptions but, as he admits, may not be readily intelligible.

The volume demonstrates in an exemplary manner how research interest in spatial representations has changed. While in the early 2000s the "spatial turn" seemed to offer a new heuristic paradigm for better understanding and describing historical and cultural spatial correlations, the contributions in this volume convincingly argue that spatial categories can lead to extremely problematic attributions which might be instrumentalised in various political and symbolic ways.