

## FORUM

In the three essays of the newly established JECES “forum” in issue 2/2018, three colleagues posit contemporary East Central Europe as “interwar period 2.0” and emphasize the significance of references to interwar history in contemporary memory politics.<sup>1</sup> Their contributions point out the importance of these historical references for nation and state building after 1989/90 and for contemporary national identities. Building on this diagnosis, we would like to propose a methodological framework that looks at state-building in East Central Europe from a different perspective: by taking as an object of study the broad range of different—and often negative—views on the performance and capabilities of the states of East Central Europe from the nineteenth century until today. We argue that if we want to understand the various conflicts that affected—and continue to affect—the development of states in this region, we need to understand how views on states shape activities towards states. If we achieve this, we can challenge deeply entrenched narratives—both popular and historiographical—that center around the idea of the inevitable collapse of states in East Central Europe, be they the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Habsburg and Romanov Empires, the interwar states or the states of the Warsaw Pact.

### Too Small to Succeed?

#### East Central Europe and the Historical Study of State Assessment

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Whenever the existence of the interwar Estonian state became a subject of debate, interwar British and German experts were in rare agreement: In their eyes, Estonia was too small to survive. It was only a matter of time before its inevitable absorption into a revitalized Russian (or German) state. This was not necessarily revisionist thinking, but represented a broad consensus that transcended political fault lines. It was neither informed by revanchism nor hatred for Estonians, but mostly by a very specific, allegedly rational scepti-

<sup>1</sup> ANNA VERONIKA WENDLAND: History as a Resource in European Conflicts of Interest around Diversity and Integration: An Introduction to the Debate, in: *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung / Journal of East Central European Studies* 67 (2018), pp. 225–231; MACIEJ GÓRNY: Secondary Shocks: Poland’s Two Transformations, *ibidem*, pp. 231–238; GERHARD SEEWANN: Hungary: History as a Legitimizing Precedent—“Illiberal Democracy,” *ibidem*, pp. 239–249.

<sup>2</sup> The considerations presented here reflect insights gained at the conference “Methods of State Assessment from the Late 19th Century to Today; Central Europe, Eastern Europe and Beyond,” hosted by the University of Birmingham and the Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe—Institute of the Leibniz Association (Marburg) on 3–5 July 2019 and generously funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) as part of the project “Hinterlands and Hypertrophies: Assessments of the Viability of Empires and Nation-States in Central and Eastern Europe, 1900–1930s.” Further aspects result from discussions held in the Collaborative Research Cluster 138 “Dynamics of security” (DFG) and by the Hessian Loewe research cluster “Regions of Conflict in Eastern Europe.”

cism towards any state considered “small” and, as a consequence, as “unviable” (*nicht lebensfähig*).<sup>3</sup>

Yet, of course, the objectivity of this view is more than dubious. Even Poland, one of interwar Europe’s largest states, was considered too small to survive, its ethnically Polish core seemingly too small to hold together its large multi-ethnic territory. But what does “smallness” really mean? The Polish state’s destruction was a consequence of Nazi and Soviet invasion, not of its own internal contradictions. The Estonian state did not “fail,” but was demolished in one of the most brutal military conflicts in history. Austria, the prototypical “unviable” state of the interwar period, was a fully functional state at the time of its annexation to Nazi Germany. All these examples show that different assumptions and discourses on the viability of states were rooted in diverse problems, prejudices and stereotypes, which were shaped by their geographical and chronological contexts. These negative conceptions were seemingly confirmed by the system change from democracy to authoritarian regimes, by political divisions, minority conflicts and failure to stabilize national economies.<sup>4</sup> Not least, the pessimism concerning the “viability” of “small” states was rooted in the experience of the disintegration of the Central and Eastern European empires, of economic collapse and of de-globalization. Today, as economic growth, legal security, transparency, education and social coherence have replaced territorial size as indicators of successful statehood, several of Europe’s smaller states (including Estonia) are regarded as rather successful, and a loss of their independence no longer seems a likely possibility. Small post-Habsburg Austria, regarded as a languishing homunculus in the interwar period, today stands as a prosperous and stable state in the heart of Europe.

Such subjective views on the prospects of states, be they informed by normative views on territory, on population or on economic growth, are not merely a matter of discourse. Through science, expertise and journalism, they shape policymaking, foreign investment and international relations. While branding a state as “unviable,” “weak” or even “failed” is not always a self-fulfilling prophecy, it does undermine and erode trust in its long-term existence, thus forcing this state to the margins of international politics and

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the most famous example of the debate around Austria’s “viability”, see KURT W. ROTHSCILD: Staatengröße und Lebensfähigkeit: Das österreichische Beispiel, in: Zeitschrift für Nationalökonomie 19 (1959), 3, pp. 302–314. For a broader reconstruction of the “viability” debate around interwar East Central European states see KLAUS RICHTER: Fragmentation in East Central Europe: Poland and the Baltics, 1915–1929, Oxford 2020, pp. 143–149.

<sup>4</sup> A historiographical overview on the history of democracy in East Central Europe: AGNES LABA, MARIA WOJTCZAK: “Aufbruch zur Demokratie?” Aspekte einer Demokratiegeschichte Ostmitteleuropas (1918–1919), in: Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung 64 (2015), special issue “Aufbruch zur Demokratie?” Aspekte einer Demokratiegeschichte Ostmitteleuropas (1918–1919), pp. 159–173.

global economy.<sup>5</sup> In the worst case, it can become a pretext for outside intervention, for radically misguided policies of internal development or for a complete stop of international lending or investment due to a lack of trust (see, for instance, the role of rating agencies in today's international financial system).<sup>6</sup> If we understand better how the way we view states influences individual, social and institutional behavior, we will thus also improve our understanding of why some states thrive in certain international systems in history while others do not. Whereas historians usually attribute economic instability to historically-rooted "backwardness," political instability to social fragmentation and international aggression to political conflicts, looking at how historical actors assess states shows that they are also critically impacted by decision-making based on pessimistic, normative interpretative frameworks.

To examine these practices of assessing states, we propose a two-step methodology guided by the following fundamental questions: How were interpretative frameworks for the assessment of states constructed? How did these assessments influence political or economic decisions, both domestically and internationally (or, indeed, decisions made in any other sphere of human activity)?

As we use the term here, "state assessment" refers to the historical practice of appraising a state's future prospects. It is not an analytical term, but a concept with a highly ideologized content. While those who "assessed" states claimed objectivity, we argue that these assessments were undertaken on the basis of highly subjective and context-bound criteria. To render this concept fruitful for historical research, we thus propose as a working definition: "State assessment" concerns the external, but also internal evaluation of the inner workings of a state by national and international historical actors. It is fundamentally guided by these actors and their specific interests, which transcend the limitations of everyday politics and challenge the very foundations of states and societies. These assessments provide the basis for teleological narratives of certain states as lacking future prospects and as bound to fail. State assessment as a perspective hence focuses on historical attitudes towards states. Through this lens it becomes clearer why certain states (and societies) were perceived by contemporaries as lacking "viability." Hence, state assessment typically entails negative perceptions of certain states, resulting in pessimistic views towards their future development and fundamentally calling their viability into question. These assessments typically argued in favor of

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<sup>5</sup> On the role of trust for cross-border investments see SHU YU, SJOERD BEUGELSDIJK, JAKOB DE HAAN: Trade, Trust and the Rule of Law, in: *European Journal of Political Economy* 37 (2015), pp. 102–115; FRANK A. G. DEN BUTTER, ROBERT H. J. MOSCH: Trade, Trust and Transaction Costs, in: Tinbergen Institute Working Paper 82 (2003), 3, pp. 1–28.

<sup>6</sup> LAWRENCE J. WHITE: The Credit Rating Agencies and the Subprime Debacle, in: *Critical Review* 21 (2009), 2–3, pp. 389–399; ADAM TOOZE: *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World*, London 2018.

policies that would lead to the marginalization, isolation or even destruction of these states, arguing that any efforts to sustain their existence would represent “artificial,” futile attempts to evade their inevitable, pre-determined collapse.

### Staking out the Field: State Assessment, Late Nineteenth to Early Twenty-first Century

It is surprising that a comprehensive, comparative and critical study of state assessment has not been written yet, even if some scholars have made the case for historiography as the discipline with the greatest potential to succeed with such an endeavor. In 2014, André Liebich claimed modern historians had largely succeeded in critically reviewing their key methodologies, whereas political scientists had failed to do so.<sup>7</sup> Despite a certain tradition of deconstructing the ideological undercurrent of core methodological frameworks, this continues to be a fairly accurate statement (although political scientists have subjected discrete notions such as the concept organismic states to critical analysis).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it can be easily extended to other disciplines that specialize in assessing the structures, institutions, stability and future prospects of states, such as economics and political geography. For historians, this means there is a strong case for interdisciplinary collaboration when investigating historical methods of state assessment, but also a plethora of primary source material. By putting the lens on the changing nature of historical concepts, discursive relations and political practices, historians can stimulate disciplinary reforms and assist the critical innovation of other disciplines by subjecting key disciplinary writings to historical analysis.<sup>9</sup>

This scholarly literature provides an ideal point of departure for investigations into state assessment. The work of geographer Isaiah Bowman, which was deeply influential for the creation of the interwar order, is characterized by a high degree of normativity regarding the capabilities of the newly created states in Europe. Studies of economists during the Reagan/Thatcher era, who wielded decisive influence in the building of post-Communist states in Eastern Europe, are deeply imbued by neo-liberal thought enshrined in the

<sup>7</sup> ANDRÉ LIEBICH: *History and Politics: Happy Marriage, Unhappy Divorce*, in: JACI EISENBERG, DAVIDE RODOGNO (eds.): *Ideas and Identities: A Festschrift for André Liebich*, Bern 2014, pp. 253–262.

<sup>8</sup> FRANCIS COKER: *Organismic Theories of the State: Nineteenth Century Interpretations of the State as Organism or as Person*, London 1910; H. J. MCCLOSKEY: *The State as an Organism, as a Person, and as an End in Itself*, in: *The Philosophical Review* 72 (1963), 3, pp. 306–326.

<sup>9</sup> The modes in which historians use and adapt concepts of other disciplines has been part of historiographical debates, see e.g. RÜDIGER GRAF, KIM CHRISTIAN PRIEMEL: *Zeitgeschichte in der Welt der Sozialwissenschaften: Legitimität und Originalität einer Disziplin*, in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 59 (2011), 4, pp. 479–508.

Washington Consensus. A broad array of methodologies is available that can be used to critique this literature, much of which applies post-modern, deconstructionist concepts of the “gaze”—i.e. the process of situating perceptions within a context characterized by power asymmetry—to these scholarly frameworks.<sup>10</sup> Studies that have emerged in the 2000s in particular have increasingly shifted the focus from the construction of a “gaze” to how this “gaze” structures policymaking, international relations and everyday life.

Anthropologist James C. Scott thus examines how the twentieth century state “gazed” at its territory (and at itself), and subsequently broke down the insights gathered into generalizing observations, which were in turn used to devise policies—which, in their vast majority, failed catastrophically.<sup>11</sup> Other historians identify a “statistical gaze” that emerged with the professionalization of statistics in the late nineteenth century, which, in turn, branched out into a “demographic gaze” based on highly normative views of allegedly healthy patterns of population growth, distribution and movement.<sup>12</sup> Finally, not least due to the recent financial and economic crisis, the “gaze” of economics has attracted attention, be it in the form of a critique of normative concepts that underlie development policies in the “Third World,” the broad acceptance of GDP and economic growth as indicators of successful statehood, or the ideological construction of the Gold Standard.<sup>13</sup> Last but not least, the assessment of “failed states” has by now been firmly situated within its political context of the post-Cold War period and the “War on Terror.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> E.g. MICHEL FOUCAULT: *Discipline and Punish*, London 1977.

<sup>11</sup> JAMES C. SCOTT: *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven 1998.

<sup>12</sup> ALISON BASHFORD: *Global Population: History, Geopolitics, and Life on Earth*, New York 2016; JULIETTE CADIOT: *Searching for Nationality: Statistics and National Categories at the End of the Russian Empire (1897–1917)*, in: *The Russian Review* 64 (2005), 3, pp. 440–455; THEODORE M. PORTER: *The Rise of Statistical Thinking, 1820–1900*, Princeton 1986; MARIA DÖRNEMANN: *Seeing Population as a Problem: Influences of the Construction of Population Knowledge on Kenyan Politics (1940s to 1980s)*, in: HEINRICH HARTMANN, CORINNA R. UNGER (eds.): *In A World of Populations: Transnational Perspectives on Demography in the Twentieth Century*, New York 2014; JIMM DESHIELDS, M. ZAIMARAN: *The Third World Concept: Revisited*, in: *Negro Educational Review* 37 (1986), 2, pp. 71–80.

<sup>13</sup> WILLIAM EASTERLEY: *The Elusive Quest for Growth: Economists’ Adventures and Misadventures in the Tropics*, Cambridge 2001; IDEM: *The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done so Much Ill and so Little Good*, Oxford 2007; DANIEL SPEICH CHASSÉ: *Die “Dritte Welt” als Theorieeffekt: Ökonomisches Wissen und globale Differenz*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 41 (2015), 4, pp. 580–612; IDEM: *Die Erfindung des Bruttosozialprodukts: Globale Ungleichheit in der Wissensgeschichte der Ökonomie*, Göttingen 2013; LIAQUAT AHAMED: *Lords of Finance: 1929. The Great Depression, and the Bankers Who Broke the World*, London 2010.

<sup>14</sup> PINAR BILGIN, ADAM DAVID MORTON: *Historicising Representations of “Failed States.” Beyond the Cold-war Annexation of the Social Sciences?*, in: *Third World Quarterly* 23 (2002), pp. 55–80; NICOLAS LEMAY-HÉBERT: *The OECD’s Discourse on*

An examination of the “gaze” deployed by geopolitics and international relations, finally, provides us with insights to understand how the assessment of states contributed to the construction and consolidation of durable hierarchies of states, and how these hierarchies changed at the same time as markers of successful statehood changed. This is particularly apparent in the case of territorial sovereignty and the capability of states to rationally “engineer” their territories, which gained ascendancy across the nineteenth and twentieth century. The most successful states were those with the most efficient railway networks, the most rational configuration of industries, the most ambitious policies of “inner colonization” and with the best prospects for self-sufficiency.<sup>15</sup>

Not least, the recognition of states itself is in practice based on highly normative and context-dependent views on statehood.<sup>16</sup> International Relations theorists have emphasized both structural and imagined hierarchies to counter dominant narratives of anarchical state systems.<sup>17</sup> Hierarchies are maintained because of a certain degree of compliance by those states that are conceived of as low in the ranks. A “hierarchical gaze” can thus place “failed states” at the bottom of an imagined hierarchy by placing a constructed idea of “competent statecraft” at its center.<sup>18</sup> Hierarchical orders “rely on political language and processes that keep hierarchy alive as a social fact”—i.e. on constructs, methods and practices of state assessment.<sup>19</sup>

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Fragile States: Expertise and the Normalisation of Knowledge Production, *ibidem* 35 (2014), pp. 232–252; ISABEL ROCHA DE SIQUEIRA: Symbolic Power in Development Politics: Can “Fragile States” Fight with Numbers?, in: *Global Governance* 23 (2017), pp. 43–55.

<sup>15</sup> GEARÓID O’TUATHAIL: *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space*, Minneapolis 1996; CHARLES S. MAIER: *Once Within Borders: Territories of Power, Wealth, and Belonging since 1500*, Cambridge 2016; GERRY KEARNS: *Geography, Geopolitics and Empire*, in: *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35 (2010), pp. 187–203; LUCIAN M. ASHWORTH: *Realism and the Spirit of 1919: Halford Mackinder, Geopolitics and the Reality of the League of Nations*, in: *European Journal of International Relations* 17 (2010), pp. 279–301; LUCIAN M. ASHWORTH: *Mapping a New World: Geography and the Interwar Study of International Relations*, in: *International Studies Quarterly* 57 (2013), pp. 138–149; LAURA BENTON: *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900*, Cambridge 2009.

<sup>16</sup> BARRY BARTMANN: *Political Realities and Legal Anomalies: Revisiting the Politics of International Recognition*, in: TOZUN BAHCHELI, IDEM et al. (eds.): *In De Facto States: The Quest for Sovereignty*, London 2004, pp. 12–31.

<sup>17</sup> PAUL K. MACDONALD, DAVID A. LAKE: *The Role of Hierarchy in International Politics*, in: *International Security* 32 (2008), 4, pp. 171–180.

<sup>18</sup> DAVID A. LAKE: *Hierarchy in International Relations*, Ithaca 2009; ALEX JEFFREY: *Containers of Fate: Problematic States and Paradoxical Sovereignty*, in: ALAN INGRAM, KLAUS DODDS (eds.): *Spaces of Security and Insecurity: Geographies of the War on Terror*, London 2009, pp. 43–64, here p. 61.

<sup>19</sup> SEO HYUN-PARK: *Sovereignty and Status in East Asian International Relations: Imagined Hierarchies*, Cambridge 2019, p. 6.

However, two crucial desiderata remain that impede our understanding of both the historically constructed nature of state assessment and of its role as interpretative framework that guided decision-making: a *longue-durée* synthesis that brings these disparate studies together under a common set of research questions and an approach that is both actor- and institution-focused and helps us reconstruct how concepts translated into practice.<sup>20</sup> A recent historiographical approach focuses on phantom borders, which are established as a “heuristic metaphor” in order to develop new perspectives on the “construction and reproduction processes of regional differences.”<sup>21</sup> By interpreting geographical spaces as a sort of palimpsest, which is characterized by different layers of borderlines, this approach focuses on former political borders and/or territorial structures which continue to structure a territory even after their political elimination.<sup>22</sup> They hence retain a sustainable impact on states, territories and societies and may re-emerge in particular situations. However, this approach is largely driven by efforts to identify different layers of historical development *ex post*. It reconstructs historical developments towards clearly defined, contemporary vanishing points, which means it has considerable value for certain research questions, but can be overly deterministic for others. Looking at “state assessment,” on the other hand, means putting an actor-centric focus on the evaluation of states at a specific point in time and following this through history as actors, agendas and assessment criteria change, adapt, or, potentially, vanish. We would like to illustrate how this can be done, using the example of East Central Europe.

### State Assessment and East Central European History

Throughout the twentieth century, East Central Europe was repeatedly subjected to political, economic, social and territorial transformations unlike any other European region. At the same time, other European powers were deeply involved in both the dismantling and building of states in the region. Both factors make the region a highly promising test case for the study of state assessment from a historical perspective.

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<sup>20</sup> BÉATRICE VON HIRSCHHAUSEN, HANNES GRANDITS, CLAUDIA KRAFT, DIETMAR MÜLLER, THOMAS SERRIER: Phantom Borders in Eastern Europe: A New Concept for Regional Research, in: *Slavic Review* 78 (2019), 2, pp. 368–389. The approach of “phantom borders” seems herewith not to sufficiently explain the challenges the states had cope with.

<sup>21</sup> Both quotes in IDEM: *Phantomgrenzen im östlichen Europa: Eine wissenschaftliche Positionierung*, in: IDEM: *Phantomgrenzen: Räume und Akteure in der Zeit neu denken*, Göttingen 2015, pp. 13–56, here p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8. See also MICHAEL G. MÜLLER, KAI STRUVE: *Einleitung*, in: IDEM (eds.): *Fragmentierte Republik? Das politische Erbe der Teilungszeit in Polen 1918–1919*, Göttingen 2017, pp. 9–38, here p. 10. The authors emphasize the sustained impact of “phantom borders,” i.e. of former territorial structures, on societies.

Aggressors have frequently legitimized the destruction of states in East Central Europe by referring to their inherent weakness, instability and lack of future prospects. The Romanov, Habsburg and Hohenzollern Empires had based the dismantling of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the late eighteenth century on grounds of its alleged degeneration and lack of viability. Roughly a century later, the first two of these powers became subjected to highly pessimistic assessments of their viability themselves, and when the Romanov and Habsburg empires collapsed as a consequence of the First World War, expert commissions were established to assess the viability of the various state formations that emerged from their former territories. The most famous of these commissions—Woodrow Wilson’s “Inquiry”—was crucial in informing the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. Interwar German politicians based revisionist aggression against these successor states (especially Poland, Czechoslovakia and the Baltic States) on claims made by experts in geography, law, economics and other disciplines that these states did not adhere to European norms of statehood and were indeed of a transitory nature only (*Saisonstaaten*)—a strategy pioneered by pre-war Habsburg propaganda against Serbia.<sup>23</sup> Revisionist endeavors based on territorial loss or unfulfilled expectations of territorial gain produced new political actors whose prestige increased with the same speed as the acceptance of the post-war order dwindled. Their reputation did not only surge within their political camps, but also across political fault lines and even across national borders.

Since the states in East Central Europe were highly multi-ethnic and formed the scene of nationalities conflicts that had emerged with the rise of national movements in the latter half of the nineteenth century, some historians consider them—almost teleologically—as regions of conflict *per se*.<sup>24</sup> Other historians interpret them as “ground zero of the new international order,” i.e. as a testing ground for new forms of statehood that were emphatically subjected to new forms of international law and governance, based on worries about the stability of these new states.<sup>25</sup> The internal relations between the state (or, indeed, its political elites) and its minorities were not only shaped by the domestic context, but specifically by the intervention of the minorities’ alleged “homelands” abroad. Rogers Brubaker characterizes this as a “triadic nexus”<sup>26</sup> that was experienced and perceived as a real threat to the nation state: The state (and its strength) was assessed as endangered and

<sup>23</sup> JONATHAN GUMZ: *The Resurrection and Collapse of Empire in Habsburg Serbia, 1914–1918*, Cambridge 2009.

<sup>24</sup> TIMOTHY SNYDER: *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, New York 2010; FELIX SCHNELL: *Räume des Schreckens: Gewalt und Gruppenmilitanz in der Ukraine 1905–1933*, Hamburg 2012.

<sup>25</sup> NATASHA WHEATLEY: *Central Europe as Ground Zero of the New International Order*, in: *Slavic Review* 78 (2019), 4, pp. 900–911.

<sup>26</sup> ROGERS BRUBAKER: *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge 1996.



had to be securitized. Not merely its external, but also its internal assessment depended on several, often self-contradictory factors: the overcoming of the challenges of “double transformation,”<sup>27</sup> i.e. the imbuing of the state-building process with both a democratizing and a nationalizing thrust, while at the same time modernizing and reconfiguring society and economy. Hence, “self-conceptualization” (*Selbstthematisierung*)<sup>28</sup> became a central tool of increasing the viability of a state by discursively consolidating and legitimizing social and ethnic structures. At the same time, processes of “self-conceptualization” overemphasized issues of national belonging up to the point of “dramatizing” them. Thus, ethnic belonging superseded political and constitutional configurations, becoming the central indicator for internal processes of state assessment.

Yet the impact of state assessment must be examined beyond the confines of domestic and international politics. It played a decisive role in several fields traditionally neglected by historians, including commercial relations, financial activities and economic planning. Deciphering them thus promises to improve our understanding of the inequality of trade relations and of the root causes for protracted economic crises and instability. The notorious extent of tax evasion in interwar East Central Europe may have reflected a skepticism towards state authorities, but almost certainly also betrayed a pessimism towards the state’s capabilities and future prospects. Interwar decision-making concerning the granting of international loans to the newly established states is a prime example, both as part of bilateral relations and of the League of Nation’s work on financial reconstruction in states such as Estonia, Austria and the Free City of Danzig. The same is true for the work of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and of the International Monetary Fund in East Central Europe after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. Foreign investment is not only tied to a promise of substantial returns, but fundamentally to the prospects of a state to survive in the long term.<sup>29</sup>

Assessments of states thus played a decisive role in both legitimizing and shaping politics at the most crucial junctures in East Central Europe’s modern history, yet we need to interrogate these junctures across time through a single lens in order for us to understand better how criteria for successful and

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<sup>27</sup> HEIDI HEIN-KIRCHER, STEFFEN KAILITZ: Special section “Double Transformations:” Nation Formation and Democratization in Interwar East Central Europe, in: *Nationalities Papers* 46 (2018), 5.

<sup>28</sup> ULRICH BIELEFELD: *Nation und Gesellschaft: Selbstthematisierungen in Frankreich und Deutschland*, Hamburg 2003, p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> PATRICIA CLAVIN: *Securing the World Economy: The Reinvention of the League of Nations, 1920–1946*, Oxford 2013; NATHAN MARCUS: *Austrian Reconstruction and the Collapse of Global Finance, 1921–1931*, Cambridge 2018; JUSTIN YIFU LIN: *The Washington Consensus Revisited: A New Structural Economics Perspective*, in: *Journal of Economic Policy Reform* 18 (2015), 2, pp. 96–113.

weak states were constructed, changed and applied. Ultimately, if we understand how the assessment of states directly impacts decision-making, we will better understand the nature of ideological constructs and deeply entrenched beliefs in the stability of political and economic concepts.

This means we do not have to start from scratch. Rather, what is required is a synthesis of existing studies and a perspective on broader timeframes that bridges the familiar ruptures of 1918, 1945 and 1991. We need to deploy a rigorous methodological framework that focuses on agency and subjectivity to tie a rich, but disparate field together. Historians know already how allegations of “unviable” statehood and concepts of hierarchically organized states have informed concepts of regional blocs or confederations, as, for instance, in the case of the *Mitteleuropa* scheme.<sup>30</sup> We are aware of the traction that the narrative of nation states as the almost “natural” ideal of statehood has gained over the course of the twentieth century.<sup>31</sup> Historians have painstakingly reconstructed the entrenchment (and instrumentalization) of the concept of national self-determination as a pathway to statehood that some nations are worthy of and some are not. We know how the ideal of ethnic homogeneity as indicator of “stable” states in East Central Europe has evolved from the early twentieth century and how it has impacted Western policy in the region.<sup>32</sup> When war broke out in Eastern Ukraine, former German chancellor Helmut Schmidt openly doubted both Ukraine’s legitimacy and future prospects by referring to its alleged lack of character as a nation state.<sup>33</sup> Bosnia-Herzegovina is frequently painted as Europe’s least “viable” state due to its multi-ethnic population and internal territorial fragmentation. Similar assessments of the viability of the post-Soviet Republics, especially in Central Asia as well as in the Caucasus, focus on the lack of territorial cohesion, of ethnic homogeneity and of meaningful borders.

We have a plethora of literature that focus on the assessment of states and perceived nations from the outside—mostly from the perspective of German military, statesmen and national activists, but also from the perspective of

<sup>30</sup> BO STRÄTH: *Mitteleuropa* from List to Naumann, in: *European Journal of Social Theory* 11 (2008), 2, pp. 171–182.

<sup>31</sup> ANDRÉ LIEBICH: Must Nations become States?, in: *Nationalities Papers* 31 (2003), 4, pp. 453–469.

<sup>32</sup> EREZ MANEL: *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and in the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, Oxford 2007; BORISLAV CHERNEV: *The Brest-Litovsk Moment: Self-Determination Discourse in Eastern Europe before Wilsonianism*, in: *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 22 (2011), 3, pp. 369–387; SOFIA CAVANDOLI: *The Unresolved Dilemma of Self-determination: Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk*, in: *The International Journal of Human Rights* 20 (2016), 7, pp. 875–892.

<sup>33</sup> Interview MATTHIAS NASS with HELMUT SCHMIDT: *Putins Vorgehen ist verständlich*, in: *Die Zeit* (2014), 14, p. 9. For a similar argument see JÖRG BABEROWSKI: *Zwischen den Imperien*, in: *Die Zeit* (2014), 12, p. 52. For an analytical overview over these debates see ANNA VERONIKA WENDLAND: *Hilflos im Dunkeln*, in: *Osteuropa* (2014), 9–10, pp. 13–34.

travellers from farther abroad.<sup>34</sup> Historians have uncovered deeply entrenched (negative) stereotypes harbored by leading politicians against the states of East Central Europe.<sup>35</sup> The significance of imagined racial hierarchies for Nazi planning of future states in East Central Europe during the Second World War has long been a field that attracts considerable attention.<sup>36</sup> Both the “cartographic gaze” and the “demographic gaze” have been explored as normative frameworks that have informed statecraft.<sup>37</sup> The project of integrating the East Central European states into the democratic/capitalist post-Cold War order is another prime example. Political scientists and economists of the 1990s invested so heavily in the deterministic framework of post-Communist transformation and democratization, that it took more than two decades for a new scholarly consensus to emerge: The belief that the collapse of the Eastern Bloc had put its former member states on a natural and inevitable trajectory towards what was imagined as “prototypical Western statehood” had proven to be a delusion.<sup>38</sup>

### Towards an Inquiry into State Assessment

Which fundamental questions can we address as historians to bring these discrete and chronologically wildly different cases together? The first set per-

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<sup>34</sup> VEJAS GABRIEL LIULEVICIUS: *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I*, Cambridge 2000; LARRY WOLFF: *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford 1994; JESSE KAUFFMAN: *Elusive Alliance: The German Occupation of Poland in World War I*, Cambridge 2015.

<sup>35</sup> LARRY WOLFF: *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, Stanford 2020.

<sup>36</sup> FRANK GOLCZEWSKI: *Civil War in Occupied Territories: The Polish-Ukrainian Conflict during the Interwar Years and the Second World War*, in: MARINA CATTARUZZA, STEFAN DYROFF et al. (eds.): *Territorial Revisionism and the Allies of Germany in the Second World War*, New York 2013, pp. 141–160; HOLLY CASE: *Between States: The Transylvanian Question and the European Idea During World War II*, Stanford 2009.

<sup>37</sup> MORGANE LABBÉ: “Reproduction” as a New Demographic Issue in Interwar Poland, in: HARTMANN/UNGER (as in footnote 12), pp. 36–57; EADEM: *Eugene Romer’s 1916 Atlas of Poland: Creating a New Nation State*, in: *Imago Mundi* 70 (2018), pp. 94–113; MACIEJ GÓRNY: *Kreślarze ojczyzn: Geografowie i granice międzywojennej Europy* [Designers of Fatherlands: Geographers and Borders in Interwar Europe], Warszawa 2017; STEVEN SEEGEL: *Map Men: Transnational Lives and Deaths of Geographers in the Making of East Central Europe*, Chicago—London 2018; PETER HASLINGER, VADIM OSWALT (eds.): *Kampf der Karten: Propaganda- und Geschichtskarten als politische Instrumente und Identitätstexte*, Marburg 2012.

<sup>38</sup> IVAN T. BEREND, BOJAN BUGARIC: *Unfinished Europe: Transition from Communism to Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe*, in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 50 (2015), pp. 768–785; FRANCIS FUKUYAMA: *The End of History*, in: *The National Interest* 16 (1989), pp. 3–18; ARCHIE BROWN: *From Democratization to “Guided Democracy,”* in: *Journal of Democracy* 12 (2001), 4, pp. 35–41.

tains to the reconstruction of historical methodologies of state assessment. We need to bear in mind that coherent, self-conscious frameworks of state assessment have rarely existed in history (with notable exceptions, such as cybernetics and Soviet forecasting).<sup>39</sup> We thus have to identify criteria of successful statehood in various sources across specific chronological contexts. They need to take all hierarchical levels of the state into account, ranging from central government across regions to counties, cities and districts. This multi-level perspective allows for deeper insights not only into the functionalities of the states, its administrative percolation, its economic configuration, etc., but also into its acceptance among the population.

As the example of territorial size and economic growth cited at the beginning of the article shows, these criteria can be defined within very different disciplines at different points in time (political geography in the first case, economics in the second). Which indicators dominate state assessment at certain moments in time, which disciplines produce them, and how do these disciplines gain or lose hegemony? Which actors undertake and dominate state assessment and which fundamental tools do they use? Why do they prefer specific case studies over others? Moreover, we need to ask which historical spaces and moments (e.g. peace conferences, military planning, think tanks, minority conflicts, etc.) act as incubators for the development, practice and transformation of state assessment. These have to be interrogated through the lens of conceptual history, accounting for the significance of the context-boundedness of core concepts of state assessment, such as loyalty, sovereignty, security, conflict, stability, modernity, rationality, efficiency, minorities and majorities, etc. Due to the central role of projected future trajectories in the assessment of states, we need to bear in mind the role of individual and collective historical experience for highly subjective—and potentially highly emotional—expectations towards future developments.<sup>40</sup> What is the role of the experience of territorial loss, of economic crisis, of violent conflict or of nostalgia for both the form and agenda of state assessment? Related to this, a question arises as to how far teleological concepts of history, myths or meta-narratives inform the assessments of a states future.

The second set of questions pertains to the impact these frameworks have on political or economic decision-making, thus establishing state assessment not merely as a discursive practice, but as a genuine historical force. Apart

<sup>39</sup> EĞLÉ RINDZEVIČIŪTĒ: A Struggle for the Soviet Future: The Birth of Scientific Forecasting in the Soviet Union, in: *Slavic Review* 75 (2016), pp. 52–76; STANLEY A. FEDER: Forecasting for Policy Making in the Post-Cold War Period, in: *Annual Review of Political Science* 5 (2002), pp. 111–126.

<sup>40</sup> REINHART KOSELLECK: *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Frankfurt am Main 1995; SASCHA O. BECKER, KATRIN BOECKH, CHRISTA HAINZ, LUDGER WÖSSMANN: The Empire Is Dead, Long Live the Empire! Long-Run Persistence of Trust and Corruption in the Bureaucracy, in: *The Economic Journal* 126 (2016), 590, pp. 40–74.

from the identification of such decisions and of the acts, policies or transactions flowing from them, this requires the reconstruction of mechanisms through which institutions arrive at decisions. This, in turn, varies significantly across different historical contexts. How and to what ends do actors and institutions deploy state assessment? How critical are they in their use? Are they aware of their specific context-bound nature? How close to power are actors and institutions of state assessment, and do their assessments compete with rivaling political or economic interests in driving political or economic activities? Are state assessments re-evaluated in retrospect and do inaccuracies and—potentially disastrous—consequences flowing from them lead to radical revisions of their underlying interpretative frameworks? This raises the fundamental question: Do actors who carry out state assessment intend these to guide specific processes of decision making at all, or is the assessment an autonomous (albeit inherently political) act that is largely disconnected from its instrumentalization?

Returning to our introductory case study of Estonia, this would entail not only asking why practitioners of state assessment regarded the country as “too small to succeed,” but also what they actually meant by small: Was this really about territorial size, or did “smallness” rather refer to a function (or lack thereof) that Estonia played in a specific international system? How far was the selection of evidence provided to assert Estonia’s alleged lack of viability grounded in the historical experience of the collapsed international system of the pre-war period, in which ever-expanding empires competed for territorial gain? But also: Did Estonia’s politicians adopt the charge of “smallness” to deploy targeted policies and thus make Estonia more viable? Did the dominant pessimistic assessments of interwar Estonia’s viability result in a smooth transition towards acceptance of Estonia into the “large” Soviet Union in 1940/41? And how far did the experience and re-evaluation of the collapse of the Estonian state under Soviet oppression inform both internal and international assessments of today’s Estonian state? These questions need to be interrogated also with regards to their inflection across all levels of state and society: How far were (and are) doubts concerning Estonia’s future development shared between central governments and local administrations, between political elites and “common people?” Answering these questions promises to fundamentally reshape our understanding not only of how states and societies conceived of themselves and how they are conceived of by others, but also of how these conceptions shape their respective futures—be it in the form of self-fulfilling prophecies, of self-defeating prophecies, or of entirely unpredictable outcomes.

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