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Marek Tamm

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Writing Histories, Making Nations: A Review Essay

MAREK TAMM

Tallinn University, School of Humanities

Since the 1990s we have seen an increasing number of studies in the history of national history writing, in the ways in which peoples construct nations through the production of historiography. But a major breakthrough was made with a five-year ESF Scientific Programme “Representations of the Past: The Writing of National Histories in Europe (2003–2008), resulting in a eight-volume book series “Writing the Nation” published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2008–2015. This review essay delineates, first, the general architectonics of the series, to give an overview of its main results and findings. Then, secondly, some critical-methodological points are raised and some perspectives for future research suggested.

The book series “Writing the Nation”

published by Palgrave Macmillan

- I. Porciani I., Raphael L. (eds.) 2010, *Atlas of European Historiography: The Making of a Profession, 1800–2005*, XIX–187.
- II. Porciani I., Tollebeek J. (eds.) 2012, *Setting the Standards: Institutions, Networks and Communities of National Historiography*, XVI–436.
- III. Berger S., Lorenz C. (eds.) 2008, *The Contested Nation: Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories*, XXII–634.

- IV. Middell M., Roura Aulinas L. (eds.) 2013, *Transnational Challenges to National History Writing*, XIII-533.
- V. Frank T., Hadler F. (eds.) 2011, *Disputed Territories and Shared Pasts: Overlapping National Histories in Modern Europe*, XIV-430.
- VI. Berger S., Lorenz C. (eds.) 2010, *Nationalizing the Past: Historians as Nation Builders in Modern Europe*, XVI-529.
- VII. Evans R. J. W., Marchal G. P. (eds.) 2011, *The Uses of the Middle Ages in Modern European States: History, Nationhood and the Search for Origins*, VIII-296.
- VIII. Berger S., Conrad C. (eds.) 2015, *The Past as History: National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Modern Europe*, XIII-570.

Introduction

Over the last few decades, historians have realized better than ever that the way we understand the past as history changes over time. Change affects how we know about the past, what we know about the past, and what we consider to be important about the past [Berkhofer 2008, IX].¹ Therefore, it is crucial for historical understanding to explore how people (including historians) construct and interpret their collective representations of the past. A particularly important field of study is the history of national history writing – the specific form of historical representation that accompanies the formation of a nation-state. It is by now common knowledge that nation building and history writing go hand in hand, that nationalism has been one of the main factors to generate a new interest in history and that history has been a main element with which to build nations and national identity. Stefan Berger writes aptly:

Nation-builders everywhere agreed: their nation had to have a history – the longer and the prouder the better. Creating national historical

¹ The writing of this review article was supported financially by the Estonian Research Council grant IUT18-8.

consciousness was widely seen as the most important precondition for engendering true national feeling in the wider population, as both the ethnicisation of the nation and its sacralisation only took shape against the background of history and heritage [Berger 2007, 1].

National history writing was «part of the great nineteenth-century process of the nationalisation of the European mental landscape», as Joep Leerssen argues [Leerssen 2008, 85]. One could provide a great number of eloquent examples of the intertwining of history writing and nation building over a couple of last centuries. I will limit myself to Gabriel Monod, the leading French historian of the second half of the nineteenth century, founder of the first academic history journal in France, the *Revue historique*: «The study of France's past, which shall be our principal task, is today of national importance. We can give to our country the unity and moral strength it needs by revealing its historical traditions and, at the same time, the transformations that these traditions have undergone».²

While it is easy to notice the intimate relationship between the writing of history and the construction of national identity, it is more difficult to define and delimit "national history" and to explain its dominance and persistence in Europe and elsewhere over the course of a relatively long period of time. One can only agree with Stefan Berger and Christoph Conrad that "national history" is a complex and polysemantic concept. They propose to distinguish three connected meanings of "national history". First, it refers to the "great works" on the national past of a territory, a state or a people. Secondly, on a more abstract level, it refers to a broad genre of historical representations in which the "national" is taken to be the most important dimension of history writing and differentiated from other spatial (local, regional, European

² Quoted by Moller Jorgensen 2012, 71. More than half a century later, he is seconded by a young Estonian historian Otto Liiv: «Estonian history is first and foremost the history of the Estonian nation and its living space», and should «serve Estonian interests»: Liiv 1938, 300–303.

and global) histories. And thirdly, “national history” can be understood as the master narrative of historical writing, i.e. the underlying script of historical culture at a given time in a given country [Berger, Conrad 2015, 1-2].

Matthias Middell and Lluís Roura offer an interesting discussion on the perseverance of national history during the last 150 years. They put forward three elements of explanation as to why national history writing was able either to incorporate or marginalize all challenges to its dominance. First, they underline the importance of the national in ensuring sovereignty and democratic participation, which explains why it was almost natural that historians could not extract themselves from the development, anchoring and defence of the national. Second, they argue that nation-state has been a potential and most effective reaction to the new global condition and national history writing can be interpreted therefore as part of much broader regulatory regimes that need orientational knowledge and legitimation. And finally, they point out that the adherence of many historians to the idea of nation involved an advantageous deal: historians benefited from the national funding of teaching chairs, archives, libraries, journals, and professional associations [Middell, Roura 2012, 15-21].

In methodological terms, national history writing is one of the manifestations of “methodological nationalism”, of the approach that naturalizes the nation-state and follows the implicit conviction «that a particular nation would provide the constant unit of observation through all historical transformations, the “thing” whose change history was supposed to describe» [Wimmer, Glick Schiller 2002, 305]. It should be emphasized that methodological nationalism doesn’t characterize only those studies which have the nation-state as the central actor, but it also «encompasses all those studies which understand the nation-state or the nationalizing society as the focal point of all historical events and consider it a quasi-natural framework for historical actions» [Middell, Roura 2012, 9].

Since the 1990s we have seen an increasing number of studies in the

history of national history writing, in the ways in which peoples construct nations through the production of historiography as well as historical images and narratives in other media, such as novels, paintings and films. But a major breakthrough was made with a five-year ESF Scientific Programme "Representations of the Past: The Writing of National Histories in Europe (NHIST) (2003–2008)". The programme was a collaborative effort of more than 200 scholars from more than 20 European countries. It produced a great number of scholarly events and all in all some 15 books and special issues of journals. The project was not born from scratch, but is rooted in some important initiatives at the end of the 1990s. For instance, in 1996 a conference, entitled "Apologias for the Nation-State", was organized by Stefan Berger and his colleagues at the University of Wales, Cardiff, resulting in a collective monograph *Writing National Histories* three years later [Berger, Donovan, Passmore 1999]. In 1999 another conference on comparative history of national historiography was arranged by Christoph Conrad and Sebastian Conrad in Berlin, which resulted in the volume *Die Nation Schreiben. Geschichtswissenschaft im internationalen Vergleich* [Conrad C., Conrad S. 2002]. But the trigger event for the NHIST was the ESF-funded workshop "Construction and Deconstruction of National Histories" hosted by Guy Marchal in Luzern in November 1999.

The NHIST worked in four closely connected teams: the first team focused on national historical institutions, networks and communities, the second team on master narratives of national histories, the third team on national histories and its interrelations with regional, European and world histories, and the fourth team on overlapping national histories. In temporal terms, NHIST was interested first and foremost in the modern and contemporary period (1750–2000), and in geographic terms the focus was on Europe (explained by the very fact that the project was financed by European Science Foundation).³

³ Unfortunately the webpage of the NHIST (<http://www.uni-leipzig.de/zhsesf/>) is

Among a number of publications, pride of place should be given to the eight volume series *Writing the Nation* published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2008–2015. This series comprises six anthologies, one historical atlas and one monograph; in total almost 4000 pages of erudite scholarly prose. The six anthologies contain 106 chapters, written by 128 authors; while the *Atlas of European Historiography* alone engaged 58 contributors from about 30 countries.

Taking into account the range of the series and its gargantuan dimensions, there is no hope to offer in this review essay a comprehensive discussion of the whole enterprise. The intellectual digestion of this major achievement will take years of collective labour. To my knowledge and



Serio-Comic War Map for the year 1877, by Frederick W. Rose, London, 1877 (from the cover of "The Contested Nation", *Writing the Nation* III)

regret, not too many reviews of the *Writing the Nation* series have been published so far, but there are some early examples written by Scandinavian scholars and some others in progress.⁴ My aim in this essay will be twofold. First, I will try to delineate the general architectonics of the project, to give

not available any more, but one can find more information about the project's initial aims and later progress from two newsletters, published respectively in July 2004 and September 2006. See http://www.archive.esf.org/fileadmin/Public_documents/Publications/Newsletter_N_1.pdf and http://www.archive.esf.org/fileadmin/Public_documents/Publications/The_Writing_of_National_Histories_in_Nineteenth_and_Twentieth-Century_Europe_NHIST_.pdf (16 October 2016).

⁴ See Norring 2015; Eriksson et al. 2016; Svendsen, Jalava, Stråth 2016; Weichlein 2016.

an overview of its main results and findings. Thereafter, in the second stage, I would like to engage in a dialogue with the project, to raise some critical points and suggest some perspectives for future research.

Overview: Architectonics of Writing the Nation

While at first sight the *Writing the Nation* series strikes by its great array of approaches and themes, on closer inspection one can rather easily identify a general structure that holds the project together. It is based on the initial division of labour in four research foci, as explained above. Therefore, I will attempt to delineate the architectonics of the series by focusing alternately on its four main themes: (a) national historical infrastructure, (b) non-spatial "others" in national histories, (c) spatial "others" in national histories, (d) overlapping national histories. This will also mean that I won't dwell on topics which diverge from the main structure (like volume 7 of the series, *The Uses of the Middle Ages in Modern European States*).

National historical infrastructure

The first two volumes of the series lay the grounds for the rest of the enterprise, offering a cartographically and critically comprehensive overview of the formation of national historical infrastructure over the last two centuries in Europe. Jürgen Osterhammel has aptly characterized the nineteenth century as «an era of organized memory, and also of increased self-observation» [Osterhammel 2014, 4]. The period from early nineteenth century onwards also saw the beginning of the professionalisation and institutionalisation of historical writing in Europe and the first infrastructures for historians appeared during this stage. This novel historical infrastructure consisted of learned societies and academies, historical chairs and institutes, congresses and seminars, book series and journals, libraries, museums and archives. Tom Verschaffel

justly states that «these were not only means to facilitate and realise efforts; they were also symbols of the nation's historical identity, expressing the fact that it had a history “of its own”, that it “owned” a history» [Verschaffel 2012, 29]. In other words, these historical institutions and professional networks of sociability and communication formed an integral part of the nation building process, or in Joep Leerssen's wording, «the institutionalisation and professionalisation of history was, above all, a nationalisation of history» [Leerssen 2008, 86].

The making of the historian's profession, the creating of new institutions and the shaping of a well-structured discipline is the main subject in the opening volume of the series, *Atlas of European Historiography*, edited by Ilaria Porciani and Lutz Raphael. This is an unparalleled attempt to «translate the history-producing institutions into cartographic images» and to «use them as references with which to organize a comparative study on this subject» [Porciani, Raphael 2010, IX]. Inspired by Franco Moretti's *Atlas of the European Novel* [Moretti 1998],⁵ locations of universities and other research institutions teaching history, national archives, and major museums for national history. Short essays, illustrating and explaining the various aspects of historical studies and their development, complement and expand the maps. The second part of the book comprises 42 entries on the individual countries of Europe, from Iceland to Ireland, including Russia, Turkey and Ukraine, supplied with various maps and graphs, explaining the development of historical studies in each country. We learn the demographics of historical profession, changes in the gender division and the expansion of history teaching at universities and research institutes as well as the growth of historical museums and archives.⁶

⁵ Moretti's example is mentioned by Porciani 2006, 32.

⁶ As with every project based on wide-ranging data collecting, the value and reliability of the *Atlas* depends on the information provided by the contributors. I have to admit that not all data presented in the book seem to be solid, like for instance, the graphs representing the number of historians in Estonia and Latvia (81-82): it is very

Needless to say, printed maps allow only a very limited and static use of all the data collected during the project. Therefore it is very welcome that on the initiative of Lutz Raphael there is a plan to produce a digital version of the *Atlas* that will contain all the information already collected as well as some new data. Most importantly, in a digital format it will be possible to demonstrate the dynamics of the historical studies in Europe, the networks, relations and interconnections that characterize the profession of history in the making.⁷

The cartographic and encyclopaedic information offered in the *Atlas* is developed into full-size scholarly articles in the second volume of the series, entitled *Setting the Standards: Institutions, Networks and Communities of National Historiography* and edited by Ilaria Porciani and Jo Tollebeek. This volume discusses how the institutionalisation and professionalisation of history shaped different national historiographies, how the historical institutions, networks and communities "standardized" the historical discipline, and how, under what conditions and through which actors a national framework for the researching and writing of history was envisaged and produced. In nineteen chapters an almost exhaustive critical survey of the historical institutions, networks and communities in Europe over the last couple of centuries is given, including discussions of national archives, source publication for the nation, national historical journals, biographical collections, syntheses of national history, history museums, learned societies, research institutes and national academies, the extra-university research institutions for historical studies and national associations of historians. This

hard to believe that there were in 2005 only 4 women historians in Estonia (I could easily list at least a dozen) or that there were in 1980 61 women historians in Latvia, almost as many as their male colleagues. But Ilaria Porciani had answered wittily to all the future critics of the *Atlas*, explaining her aims in poetic terms: «To take my cue from the title of a book of poetry, I should like this *Atlas* to be, not a chart of positivistic certainties, but in some ways an atlas of perplexity»: Porciani 2006, 39.

⁷ See <http://leibniz-forschergruppen.uni-trier.de/de/projekte-und-themen/projekte/digital-atlas-european-historiography-1800> (16 October 2016).

survey is followed by some more thematic chapters, examining, for instance, the relations between the clergy, the nobility, and the writing of national history. A fundamental issue, discussed in a separate chapter, is also the role of women in the historical profession.⁸

Special attention is paid to the important and intimate relationship between the institutionalisation and nationalisation of the history writing in late modern Europe. «There was no deterministic relationship between these two developments», the editors of the volume argue, «but they did reinforce each other:



Paul Delaroche, The Execution of Lady Jane Grey, Oil on canvas, 246 cm × 297 cm, National Gallery, London (from the cover of "Nationalizing the Past", Writing the Nation VI)

the national impulse stimulated the historians to organise themselves in order to study their country's past in all kinds of institutions, networks and communities, while these scientific and professional communities in turn gave the historians the authority to pronounce on national affairs» [Porciani, Tollebeek 2012, 14]. Or in a succinct phrasing of Jan Eivind Myhre: «Professional history arose as both the child and tutor of the national sate» [Myhre 2012, 26].

⁸ This topic received a more thorough discussion in a special issue: Porciani, O'Dowd 2004. The importance of the topic is revealed for instance by this memorable line that Johann Georg Haman (1730–1788) wrote to Herder: «My coarse imagination has never been able to imagine a creative genius without genitals». Quoted by Berger, Conrad 2015, 128.

Non-spatial "others" in national histories

The kernel of the *Writing the Nation* is the three-volume analysis of national historical (master) narratives in their relations to other competing narrative strategies. The first two volumes, *The Contested Nation* and *Nationalizing the Past*, both edited by Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz, focus on the so-called non-spatial "others", i.e. religion, class, ethnicity/race and gender as alternatives to the nation, and the third one, *Transnational Challenges to National History Writing*, edited by Matthias Middell and Lluís Roura, deals with regions, empires and the world as spatial alternative categories or "others" to the nation. Together these three volumes represent a genuinely comparative and truly wide-ranging study of national histories in late modern Europe.

The Contested Nation is divided into two parts. While the first seven chapters discuss the conceptual matters and general relations between nation and "non-spatial others", the rest of the volume consists of specific country comparisons all over Europe. Each chapter (there are eleven, in all) examines in comparative perspective how origins, foundational events and personalities are narrated in particular national (master) narratives, which "others" were excluded and how such exclusions were dealt with in narrative terms, how and to what extent was the nation gendered and sacralised in historical narratives. In more general terms, the read thread of the volume is to investigate where and under what conditions did the categories of ethnicity, class, religion and gender have the power to develop into transnational rivals of nation, and where and under what conditions they were subsumed and integrated into national narratives.

While *The Contested Nation* adopted a macrohistorical approach, with a focus on national master narratives, the scope of the second part of the diptych, *Nationalizing the Past*, is microhistorical, scrutinizing the work of some of the most important national historians and of particular "schools" of national history in Europe from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. As in the previous volume, nearly all chapters

(twenty-two, in all) are of comparative setup and follow broadly the same agenda of the role of non-spatial “others” in national histories. The range of case studies include examples from Germany and France, Britain and Belgium, Greece and Spain, Estonia and Ireland, Norway and Finland, Hungary and Italy. The editors list a series of questions that the contributions were asked to seek the answer to, including, for instance, such questions as which narrative strategies contributed to the success of national histories?, what was the relationship between national and religious, ethnic, class and gender master narratives in national histories?, or how did myths contribute to the construction of European historical narratives?

Lacking the opportunity to do justice to all contributions, I will jump straight away to some of the main conclusions of the two volumes. The chief lesson we learn is that national (master) narratives enjoyed in European historical writing an unequalled success and were able to subsume its potential “non-spatial others” over the last two centuries. While alternatives to national master narratives can be observed time and again, no genuine substitute could be identified. «The merging of social, cultural, religious, and gender history within the national framework remained constant and this amalgamation came to be perceived as quasi-natural», as Middell and Roura summarize happily the work of their colleagues [Middell, Roura 2013, 9]. Very intriguing are the relations between religion and nation. From a national perspective, the religious narrative represents a “partisan” approach, while the national narrative is considered as being “objective”. Berger and Lorenz conclude to the point: «Thus when religion and nation “overlap”, religion as a “code of difference” remains what we could call “submerged”. Hence religion is taken for granted in those national histories rather than problematised» [Berger, Lorenz 2008, 535]. The same applies to the relations between nation and class: class history was nationalised in a rather early stage, meaning that, «the nation became the frame for most European histories of class» [Berger, Conrad 2015, 225].

Secondly we learn from this collective study about the great similarity of the main narrative patterns in various national histories. The authors of the chapter on Nordic national histories recognize to their surprise that the «emerging national narratives [in Nordic countries – M.T.] show striking similarities in spite of countries' highly different origins, a fact that raises the question of power of narrative strategies in relation to history proper» [Aronsson et al. 2008, 256]. They show, for instance, that in all the Nordic countries the myth of a golden age of peasant freedom and equality played a crucial role and that in all the Nordic countries the teleological master narrative went through a reformulation during the course of the nineteenth century. A prominent characteristic of national historiography was also the strong gendering of national narratives. We can notice in various countries the narrative strategies to feminise national enemies, lament the rape of one's own nation by others and celebrate the nation as family. Finally another common pattern emerges from different chapters of the volumes, the tendency to ignore or suppress in national master narratives the role of ethnic minorities.

Spatial "others" in national histories

The fifth volume in the series, *Transnational Challenges to National History Writing*, reminds us that history has not been written in Europe only on the national, but also on the sub- and transnational levels. In other words, the volume examines the spatial alternatives to national history writing which have been tried out since 1800 and in part were brought into play in opposition to the national (master) narratives. Without aiming to provide a comprehensive list of every contribution to the "spatial other" in each European nation, the volume discusses in thirteen chapters the developments and perspectives of regional, area, imperial, colonial, universal and émigré history. The focus is on Western and Southern Europe, but some examples from Central and Northern Europe as well as from Russia are offered too. A particularly

interesting case is Belgium, described both as a “contested nation” and as a “miniature Europe”. Maarten Van Ginderachter and Geneviève Warland offer in their contribution an instructive discussion of the interplay between the subnational, national, and transnational levels in Belgian historiography. Although most suitable both for regional and transnational (including postcolonial) history, Belgian historiography has been steadily written predominantly within the national paradigm [Van Ginderachter, Warland 2013, 404–422].

Reading the volume, one can notice that with some regularity historians dissatisfied with the limited explanatory potential of national history have developed new proposals on how these limitations could be overcome, «various forms of transcending the horizon of national history», to quote the title of the introductory chapter, but without lasting success. To follow the argument of Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann, «So long as elites associated with the nation-state and were able to keep all other spatial relationships (from the local subsistence economy to the international network) under their control, the heroes of national hi-

story writing succeeded in controlling historical scholarship» [Middell, Neumann 2013, 438]. Similarly to non-spatial alternatives, also the spatial alternatives were in most cases subsumed by a powerful national narrative framework, «the dominance of national history has been uninterrupted since the mid-nineteenth century» [Middell, Roura 2013, 10].



The statue of Duke Svatopluk in unveiled in front of the castle of Bratislava on 6 June 2010 (from the cover of “The Uses of the Middle Ages in Modern European States”, Writing the Nation VII)

However, as the editors and some contributors notice, there have been in recent years tendencies to liberate historiography «from the clutches of national history writing by entering into different coalitions» [10]. At least in the academic world we have been witnessing “transnational” and “global” turns in history writing, an increasing number of attempts to overcome methodological nationalism, to move beyond the concepts of discrete nations and of teleological master narratives. Middell and Naumann conclude in the last chapter of the volume with certain optimism, that «there can be no other conclusion, except that in the 1990s the challenge of national history writing reached a point where its dominance collapsed and a new consensus in the study of history emerged» [Middell, Neumann 2013, 437].

Overlapping national histories

The final key-theme of the *Writing the Nation* series is dedicated to the national histories of common pasts in shared territories. The respective volume, entitled *Disputed Territories and Shared Pasts* and edited by Tibor Frank and Frank Hadler, consists of fifteen chapters. The book distinguishes three types of historiographical overlaps and includes about twenty regions. First, overlaps alongside state borders: Sweden/Norway, Austria/Hungary, Austria/Germany, Germany/Poland, Poland/Russia, The Netherlands/Belgium. Second, overlaps in historical regions between states: Karelia between Finland and Russia, Schleswig-Holstein between Denmark and Germany, Alsace-Lorraine between France and Germany, Transylvania between Hungary and Romania. And finally, overlaps of ethnic, national and religious groups within states: the British and the Irish in Ireland, Czechs and Germans in the Bohemian Lands/Czechoslovakia, Catalans, Basques and Galicians in Spain, Croats, Serbs and Muslims in Bosnia, Jews, Palestinians, Christians in Israel.

The editors identify an important double process driving the national historiography since the nineteenth century that they call «the territorialisation of nations and the nationalization of territories» [Frank, Hadler

2001, 2]. These processes have had contradictory effects on European history writing, they have contributed both to writing common or shared histories as well as to accentuating differences, bringing up old disputes, and constructing new borders between nations. Although national narratives have produced not only negative images of neighbours, the volume focuses first and foremost on traumatic aspects of overlapping national histories, it investigates «the joint, shared and overlapping traumas of national histories, with particular reference to collective suffering and its inscription in national memory» [3]. Chrestomatic examples, discussed in the volume, are for instance, the historiographic battles over Karelia between Russia and Finland and over Alsace-Lorraine between France and Germany [Liikanen 2011; Fischer 2011].

Reading through a great range of case studies, one can notice to what extent the contemporary historical profession in Europe is the outcome of the multiple history battles fought within or between the nations over the last couple of centuries. But also «how an imagined European memory landscape has been moulded through diverse attempts to integrate conflicting national interpretations», as the editors put it [Frank, Hadler 2011, 3]. And we learn also that in many cases the historians from third countries, most notably those of the United States, have played a crucial role in helping to transcend the historiographic dichotomies, constructed by militant national history writing.

Discussion: Comments on the margins of Writing the Nation

Writing the Nation is a towering monument, easily intimidating to every potential reviewer. True enough, in such an ambitious and wide-ranging enterprise it is quite easy to point out some mistakes, lacunae, shortcomings or inconsistencies, as some reviewers of individual volumes have done previously. But my goal in the following is not to look for eventual empirical errors, but to raise some more general, mostly

methodological and theoretical issues, hoping to draw attention to a few opportunities for further research. I don't claim that these issues are all unknown to the editors and authors of the series, I know that some of those were discarded deliberately, while others are discussed in complementary publications of the project.⁹ However, I still believe that these are worthy of reflection. For the sake of symmetry, I will limit myself to four main themes.

Scales of analysis

For obvious reasons, *Writing the Nation* is focussed on the national level of history writing. As mentioned above, an entire volume, *Transnational Challenges to National History Writing*, was dedicated to the discussion of spatial alternatives to national representations, too. However, it seems to me that the isolation of a national scale of analysis brings along some methodological problems that would need a further consideration. By conceptualizing regional or transnational histories as alternatives or challenges to national history writing, we distinguish rather artificially phenomena that are entangled by nature. In other words, instead of opposing different levels, it would be more interesting to analyse the interplay between those levels. Jacques Revel invited two decades ago historians to play with the scales of analysis, to look into the same phenomena on different scales [Revel 1996], and I believe that this invitation is also most valuable in the study of national history writing.

A recent volume edited by Stefan Berger and Alexei Miller, *Nationalizing Empires*, reminds us of the fact that it would be almost impossible to understand nationalism (and national histories) outside of the imperial framework. In their introduction to the volume, Berger and Miller

⁹ The most detailed explanation of the aims and limits of NHIST programme is offered by Berger and Conrad in the introduction to the concluding volume of the *Writing the Nation* series; see Berger, Conrad 2015, 1-27.

summarize the main conclusions of this collaborative project, stating also that «nation-building cannot be understood without its imperial context» and that «nation building and empire were very much entangled process». And in connection with history writing: «Nationalist historical narratives were constructed in order to “prove” conclusively the belonging of certain imperial spaces to “national territory”» [Berger, Miller 2015, 26-30]. In the future, the history of national history writing would definitely need a multilevel analysis, paying attention to the various entanglements and interplays between subnational, national and transnational levels in historiography.

Another step would be to widen the scope from Europe to the rest of the world, to investigate national histories on the global scale. Again, the first move in this direction was made already within the NHIST programme, a collective volume *Writing the Nation: A Global Perspective*, edited by Stefan Berger [2007]. The book investigates in seven chapters national history writing in Europe, North and South America, Australia, India, the Arabic-speaking world and Africa. One of the lessons we learn from the volume is the crucial importance of a European example in introducing nationalist historiography in different continents; in many respects, we can conclude that national ideology was one of the major export articles of Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁰ But it is also essential to notice the processes of adaptation of European nationalism in various countries, to study the hybrid forms of national historiography all over the world.

Finally it is important to connect the rise of nationalism and national history writing to global trends in late modern world, most notably

¹⁰ We should mention in this context another important initiative, a Review Forum for the *Writing the Nation* Series, organized Prof. Jie-Hyun Lim in Sogang University, Seoul, Korea, April 22-24, 2016. One of the main aims of the forum was to discuss the transnational perspectives of the NHIST programme and the ways how to trespass and unlearn modern national historiography through asymmetric comparisons between Europe and East Asia. See http://cgsl.ac/board/gallery/read_e.html?no=76&board_no=24 (16 October 2016).

to the processes of modernization and global capitalism. This point is made strongly by Christopher Hill in his important comparative study of the rhetoric of national histories in Japan, France and the United States. In Hill's interpretation, national history is an epiphenomenon of the global emergence of a single modernity in late nineteenth century. Nationalism is nothing more than a concerted reaction of sovereign states to compete and flourish in a global context. In other words, national history is not an endogenous phenomenon, «on the contrary, the ubiquity of national history in the late nineteenth century is the consequence of the heterogeneous structure of a single, global modernity that was established as the capitalist market and international state system achieved an effective universality in the world» [Hill 2008, 35].¹¹

Beyond comparison

Writing the Nation is a genuinely comparative-historical project.¹² The comparative take is built into all the volumes and into most of the chapters. And nothing less is to be expected from the project lead by foremost theoreticians of comparative history.¹³ However, recent theoretical discussions have pointed out some important limits and shortcomings of comparative history. Very often comparison is taken to mean a juxtaposition of two or more objects (nations or nation-states, in this context) considered to exist separately from the comparison itself. This

¹¹ See also the short discussion by Berger, Conrad 2015, 4–5 and 369.

¹² Stefan Berger has captured well the deeply comparative nature of NHIST, in explaining in 2004 the aims of the new project: «The four teams of our project will use the comparative method to achieve a variety of different aims and objectives: comparisons of social actors and institutions in historiographies and historical cultures (team 1); comparisons of narrative models (team 2); comparisons of constellations between different historical representations (team 3 and 4); comparisons between the interaction of different paradigms in national histories (team 2 and 3); comparisons between the importance of tendencies of transnationalization for diverse national histories (all teams)»: Berger 2004, 86.

¹³ See, e.g. Lorenz 1999; 2004; Berger 2010.

is a frequent strategy also in various chapters of the *Writing the Nation* series. The problem is that this kind of comparative approach tends to share the basic assumption of methodological nationalism – that nations are some kind of containers, self-evident, if not timeless entities. Christopher Hill, for instance, has proposed a different strategy, instead of simply comparing national histories in Japan, France and the United States, his book «examines the representation of national history in these three places from the point of view of the single modernity of which they were part». He pursues the aim to bring «into view the systems within which nation-states and the populations to which they laid claim existed: global capitalism and the system of sovereign states» [Hill 2008, 9].

Another difficulty with comparative history is that comparisons tend to homogenize the objects under investigation and to ignore internal differences. Sebastian Conrad rightly remarks: «When juxtaposing Chinese and Dutch art, Argentine and Nigerian history writing, or social mobility in Russia and Mexico, the structure of the “experiment” tends to flatten the heterogeneity within each case» [Conrad 2016, 40]. New forms of history writing, like entangled or global history, have shown possible alternatives or additions to comparative history. Instead of taking two or more nations as separate and given items, it is more fruitful to situate them within a systemic context (modernization, colonization, globalization, etc.) to which they relate and respond in different ways. In other words, I believe that next to comparisons, we need to pay more attention to connections, exchanges and entanglements of national histories in European and global contexts.

Geopolitics of history

The *Writing the Nation* series as well as the whole NHIST programme deserves sincere praise for its geographic coverage and especially in bridging the void between western and eastern Europe. As mentioned above, the project benefited from the collaboration of scholars from

more than 20 countries and for once, the peripheral European countries are not overlooked. The programme leaders were also acutely aware of the dangers of Eurocentrism, built into the project by the administrative and financial regulations of ESF. However, there seems to be one missing dimension in the project, namely the geopolitics of knowledge. Eight volumes in the series tackle almost all the European countries, but very seldom can we notice attempts to discuss the hierarchical power relations between regions or countries. *Writing the Nation* represents a kind of Herderian world of self-contained nations, rather than the Marxian world of a struggle for dominion. In the context of literary studies Franco Moretti has convincingly demonstrated that world literature is a system that «is simultaneously one, and unequal: with a core, and a periphery (and a semi-periphery) that are bound together in a relationship of growing inequality» [Moretti 2013, 46]. He is seconded by Pascale Casanova, who argues that «the primary characteristics of this world literary space are hierarchy and inequality» [Casanova 2005, 82]. This doesn't mean that literature (or history, in our case) can be reduced to economic or (geo)political logic, but that in making sense of the international field of literature (or history), we have to take into account the structural inequalities between geographical regions.

I believe that it would be most important to study European national histories also in terms of interconnected power positions, in terms of centres and peripheries, in terms of specific struggles, rivalries and contests over the very meaning and nature of history writing. This would also demand that we analyse national histories from a global perspective, as Casanova explains happily on the example of literature: «Once we adopt this world perspective, we can immediately see that national boundaries, or linguistic ones, simply screen out the real effects of literary domination and inequality» [78]. I would add that an analysis of the *Writing the Nation* series from a geopolitical or world-system perspective would probably also reveal that regardless of all the attempts to take into account various European experiences, the argumentative

patterns and interpretive models of many chapters are still largely based on Western notions of nationalism and historiography.¹⁴

From history writing to historical culture

Writing the Nation states already in its title that the focus of the series is on writing – history writing. This is a reasonable choice, but only rarely explained or discussed. First, how should we understand the idea of writing the nation – can nations be written? The only clue I was able to find is presented by Stefan Berger who asserts in passing: «National history writing resembles a performative act. Writing the nation has meant performing it in a range of different institutional and political contexts» [Berger, Conrad 2015, 26]. This is certainly an interesting and important idea, but the performative dimension of (history) writing would probably have required a more elaborate discussion. But secondly, and above all, how should we understand the concept of “history writing”, used consistently throughout the volumes? Again, this question is hardly ever addressed, except by Berger in the concluding volume of the series. He admits that his book (as well as the whole series, one could add) represents a «top-down perspective on the history of historiography», it deals mostly with institutions, states, leading historians and master narratives [19]. In other words, “history writing” is understood in the series first and foremost as academic historiography produced by professional historians. In view of the temporal and spatial scope of the project, this narrow perspective is well justified, even if it undermines the aim to demonstrate the importance of history writing

¹⁴ One of the reviewers (my colleague at Tallinn University) of the second volume of the series, *Setting the Standards*, points out a similar issue: that regardless of the comprehensive geographical range, the conceptual approach of the book gives an impression that «history as well as historiography still seems to predominantly live in the UK, France and Germany». Next, she makes an important point: «For example, language nationalism as a mode of thinking gets its first of a few fleeting references no sooner than a quarter into the text, albeit it can be seen as the definitive paradigm in some European national historiography traditions»: Merivoo-Parro 2014.

for nation building. There is probably no doubt that the impact of professional historiography on the construction of national identities has been rather limited in comparison to the impact of popular histories (historical novels, speeches, films, textbooks, etc.).

This leads me to the proposition that the second level in studying the role of history in the process of nation building would be to encompass not only academic history writing, but the historical culture as a whole, the entire field of representations and practices of the past in a given society.¹⁵ Again, this approach is nothing new for the authors and editors of the *Writing the Nation* series. In the early descriptions of the NHIST programme we can see that the original plan included the analysis of a wider range of historiographic practices,¹⁶ and Berger comments on this option also in the closing volume of the series, explaining that the historical culture approach was left aside because «it is too complex to be described and studied over a longer period in more than one or two societies» [15]. True enough, Berger, together with Chris Lorenz and Billie Melman published in the framework of the NHIST an important volume, *Popularizing National Pasts*, which discusses some facets of European historical culture, the interconnectedness of popular histories and nationalism since around 1800. The editors argue very much in line with my suggestion: «The discovery, resurrection, and uses of nations past were not limited to History with a capital "H", that is professional history, but thrived outside it in a vibrant historical culture that found expression in a rich grid of forms – literal, visual, and material – in institutions, in the marketplace, and in groups' and individuals' social lives and their imaginary» [Berger, Melman, Lorenz 2012, 2; Berger, Conrad 2015, 20]. As we have learned from recent studies, the borders between academic historiography and historical fiction, between popular and professional

¹⁵ The concept of "historical culture" (*Geschichtskultur*, in German) was introduced by Jörn Rüsen. See e.g., Rüsen 2008, 233–284.

¹⁶ E.g. Berger 2004, 79–83.

histories were rather porous till the end of the nineteenth century and even later, regardless of the proclaimed “scientification” of history writing. A particularly important part in the formation of national historical culture has been played by various visual representations of the past, from paintings to monuments, from book illustrations to photographs, from movies to TV series. The visual dimension of national historiography – or rather, historiophoty, to use Hayden White’s neologism [White 1988] – is surprisingly absent from the *Writing the Nation* series.¹⁷ But as Ann Rigney has demonstrated, historical fiction had also a major role to play in shaping the historical culture of the Romanticism and of later periods.¹⁸

Concluding remarks

The *Writing the Nation* series demonstrates convincingly the importance of national history writing for the formation of national identities in Europe. Although the overall tone of the series is rather critical, the conclusion is not that we need to discard the nation state as a framework for historical studies altogether. Stefan Berger makes an essential remark: «what strikes us as important is not to abandon the nation state as object of analysis but to do away with the methodological nationalism which has come to shape the historical and many neighbouring professions as a result of the predominance of the national framework» [Berger, Conrad 2015, 16].

Reading the eight volumes of the series, but also the other volumes of the NHIST programme, we can deduce the Janus face of national

¹⁷ One could add that the volumes (except the first one, needless to say) contain also a very limited amount of maps and illustrations (if at all), this is particularly striking in the case of volume 5, *Disputed Territories and Shared Pasts*.

¹⁸ See e.g. Rigney 2001; 2012. This point is well taken also by Berger, Conrad 2015, 90.

history: it has been a resource for aggressive nationalism, racism and xenophobia but also a vehicle for ethnic emancipation and national liberation. Berger, once again, has captured well this paradoxical nature of national history in a global scale: «By way of conclusion this volume [*Writing the Nation: A Global Perspective* – M.T.] provides considerable evidence for the liberating and emancipatory potential of national narratives – especially where they were employed in contexts of anti-colonialism, post-colonialism and forms of oppression of national minorities. Yet this evidence is outweighed by the contrary evidence that national narratives time and again led to intolerance, xenophobia, violence, war and genocide» [Berger 2007, 16].

Writing the Nation also contains some important lessons for contemporary Europe. The project had from the beginning in mind the social and political relevance of this historical investigation into European national historiographies.¹⁹ In the final volume, Berger and Conrad propose many recommendations as to how to build an inclusive European historical culture. They argue for a «weak collective European identity» and suggest a «radical individualism combined with the acceptance of solidaristic behaviour to certain ends seems the most promising way of freeing us from the oppressive and destructive consequences of collective identities» [Berger, Conrad 2015, 375–378]. Let me conclude by quoting another passage by the same authors that I consider very much to be one of the main lessons of this major research project: «The aim must be to arrive at polycentric and polyperspectival understandings of the many interconnected histories that form the sum total of human experience. Instead of naturalising nations, transnational approaches have allowed historians to think about the constructedness of national story-lines as well as to consider the history of individual national historiographies in their interaction with others while at the same time highlighting the parallel processes of the transnationalism of historiographies» [17].

¹⁹ See e.g. Berger 2004, 83.

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