



Jan Fellerer, Robert Pyrah, and
Marius Turda, eds.

*Identities In-Between in
East-Central Europe*

New York; Abingdon:
Routledge, 2020. 306 pp.
ISBN 978-0-367-24465-1

Reviewed by Dmytro Yesypenko

A goodly number of researchers of European history demonstrate their constant interest in the studies of minorities and ethnicities. Recent and current events prove that these studies with a special focus on identity can be of particular importance not only from a retrospective point of view. Identity issues still greatly influence and determine both the cultural landscape and the policy of many countries in the region that is referred to as Central and Eastern Europe. The presence of the groups of “our others,” those different from the majority of a country’s population, can become a great advantage in today’s multi-faceted Europe (e. g. a bright tourist attraction), or, conversely, might cause internal tensions and conflicts, be used as a tool for destabilization from the outside.

The collection in question appeared as a result of a four-year research project based at the University of Oxford and Oxford Brookes University, sponsored by the United Kingdom Arts and Humanities Research Council and UK Centre for East European Language-Based Area Studies. The title of the project informs that its focus lies in considering “sub-cultures as integrative forces in East-Central Europe, 1900-present” and therefore it deals with “either historic or present-day, residual hybridity, beyond the normative, linear definitions of cultural identity offered by such standard categories as ‘National,’ ‘ethnic’ or ‘minority/majority.’”¹ The project participants researched the role of subcultures in shaping multi-layered identities (linguistic, religious, cultural, political) in order to reveal and introduce the diversity of the East-Central European region. The diversity that has been changing during the last years, decades, and centuries. The diversity which often does not exist now.

1 Rober Pyrah and Jan Fellerer, “Redefining ‘Sub-Culture’: A New Lens for Understanding Hybrid Cultural Identities in East-Central Europe With a case Study From Early 20th Century L’viv-Lwów-Lemberg,” *Nations and Nationalism* 21 (2015): 702.

A concept of “subculture” appears in the title of the project in its bold and unusual meaning, e. g. without straight relation to youth or subaltern groups. Surprisingly, the term was not included in the title of the book; there is a descriptive equivalent, “identity in-between,” instead. As a result, the link between the project and the collection seems to be not that obvious for uninformed readers. The authors of thirteen chapters of the volume represent the academic environments of various European countries: Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Latvia, Lithuania, and Ukraine. The content of the book reveals a rather tangible predominance of articles about the (sub)cultures of one of the countries, namely Romania. The historical contexts of the German-speaking communities in different countries have a strong presence in the collection too.

The book opens with an introduction of its editors and coordinators of the research project, Jan Fellerer, Robert Pyrah, and Marius Turda. In an exhaustive and comprehensive manner, they define the purpose and content of the edition, as well as the very concept of subculture in relation to hybridity and identity. The first article of the book has a broad theoretical insight. Its author, Tomasz Kamusella, traces the history of defining a nation and identifying it with identity. He also talks about the changing markers of a nation from religion to language. Kamusella raises the problem of monopolization, the “right to historical truth,” and questions the thesis that the nation is the only and “the most natural” form of grouping people.

Almost all subsequent papers speak about particular subcultures, consisting of a few/tens/hundreds of thousands of representatives. For instance, Steliu Lambru talks about the history of the Aromanians (Vlachs) in the 19th and early 20th centuries, emphasizing the fact that the linguistic criterion played a decisive role in preserving their separateness in the state body of Romania. Zsuzsa Bokor illustrates the importance of gender issues by discussing activities of the Hungarian women’s associations in Transylvania in the 1920s-1930s. Among others, the author notes the lack of solidarity and understanding of the problems of women from minorities by the key Romanian feminist organization, the National Council of Romanian Women.

“Subculture, destroyed by history, eventually loses its geography.” Oana Soare proves her statement while talking about Jews in pre-war Romania and Bucharest in particular. She emphasizes the different strategies of Jews living in different parts of the country, such as assimilation, Zionism, and preservation of distinctive identity. The author also outlines the phenomenon of “strangers among their own,” Romanian Jewish authors, alienated and hardly recognized by the whole community of the country. A great deal of collection articles place a special emphasis on terminology, considering how one or another subculture was defined “from the outside” and self-identified by its representatives. This can be illustrated by the name “csango,” which was an exonym before becoming an ethnonym. R. Chris Davis’s article deals with these Romanian and Hungarian-speaking Catholics, residents of eastern Romania. Csango identity neatly fits into the definition of “identity in-between” as the question of their belonging either to Romanians or Hungarians remains open. Actually, the Davis text gives reasons to infer that csangos have found a beneficial strategy of alternating and situationally self-positioning themselves as “reliable and loyal Romanians” or “Hungarians abroad.”

The group of “Romania-related” articles closes with a text by James Koranyi on the Romanian Germans and their role in World War II. Most of them left for Germany in the 1970s. The author notes that in the new environment one can hear their “cacophony of voices” on the pages of periodicals as the discussions still continue, pursuing the goal of understanding their own political identity.

The well-known example of Adam Mickiewicz and his invocation “Litwo! Ojczyzna moja!” (Lithuania! My homeland!) illustrates the complexity of identity issues in the vastness of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as detailed in Simon Lewis’s paper. Lewis addresses such supra-national structures as *nasz naród*, which includes Poles, Ukrainian, and Belarusians as well as the concept of a common homeland, *kraj*. According to the author, the case of Polish-Lithuanian cosmopolitanism proves that subcultures can be an intellectual construct. In some sense, Wiktor Marzec continues his predecessor’s narrative talking about a part of the same area (Russian Poland) and the “class subculture” of Social Democracy of the Polish Kingdom and Lithuania Party. This far-left party, founded in the late 19th century as a Polish analog of Bolshevism, became the second-largest socialist party in the early 20th century. Marzec uses the autobiographies of the activists to show the various models and trajectories of party careers. A common feature for the authors of these autobiographical texts is their self-awareness, namely that they do not consider themselves in national and religious categories.

The next article moves readers’ attention further to the east. Unlike other authors, Olha Poliukhovych considers not a community or a group, but a specific person, prominent Ukrainian filmmaker Oleksandr Dovzhenko (1894–1956). She raises the question of the coexistence in one country of the winners and losers of the Ukrainian War of Independence (1917–1921). Dovzhenko had to play a public role as a Soviet artist, loyal to the regime, while in his diary he constantly turns to the past, comprehends Ukrainian national history, and his own place in it. The author of the article calls Dovzhenko’s identity “palimpsestual,” one holding a “perpetual presence of the past.”

Two articles of the collection address the history of Germans in the Baltic countries. Pauls Daija and Benedikts Kalnačs talk about “Small” (lower class) Germans and “Half” -Germans (Germanized Latvians). The authors define them as subcultures of the premodern period, which completed their formation already in modern times. Both “Small” Germans and “Half” -Germans are better known from the stereotypical “external” views by the German political and cultural elite (*Kulturnation*), and by Latvians who mostly had the lower status of peasants. In his turn, Vasilijus Safronovas refers to the Memel Territory (Memelland, Klaipėda Region) inhabited by Germans, Lithuanians, and the Memellanders. The latter predominantly identified themselves as Prussian--Germans, members of one German cultural community. The researcher focuses on the veterans of World War I who regularly received external financial support to strengthen their “German spirit” while living in Lithuania. Memorial practices receive special emphasis in the article. In particular, it considers a vivid example of a memorial to “to the Memellanders who fell for the German fatherland and the Memel homeland” (*das deutsche Vaterland* and *die memelländische Heimat*).

The final articles of the collection discuss the entangled intricacies of two branches of a Germanic ethnic group, namely the East and North Frisians. Temmo Bosse informs readers about the people of East Frisia (in its narrow and wide territorial sense) and raises the question of the basis of their identity. He stresses the difference between self-identification and external perception. In his review of the history of the Northern Frisians, Nils Langer stresses a point common to most of the subcultures mentioned in the collection. Namely, he highlights that the issues of subcultures have almost always remained in the shadow of relations and problems existing between neighboring nations. For instance, the question of the Northern Frisians and the Frisian language received much less attention than tensions between the Germans and the Danes during the 19th century.

The collection *Identities In-Between in East-Central Europe* includes articles written in various styles and narrative manner, which can be explained by the authors' different academic backgrounds. However, all the texts have in common the undoubted competence of their authors, based on a vast range of sources including periodicals and dictionaries. The authors have also actively used such subjective and "live" documents as autobiographies and diaries. The polyphony of the "subcultures' voices" is expectedly dominated by their most active figures. Sometimes that might give a wrong impression about the direction of the general mood and common intentions of these groups.

The peculiarities of territorial representation and diversity in the representation of subcultures from different countries of Central and Eastern Europe look a bit puzzling. For example, more than one article considers the Frisians, inhabitants of the northwestern part of Europe. Nevertheless, the collection with an "East-Central European" focus in its title does not present subcultures of either former or current residents of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and the Balkan countries (the Ukrainian subcultures are hardly covered too).

The collection is focused on the historical aspect mostly of the 19th and 20th centuries. However, it can serve as a good launchpad and solid basis for further research focused on topical and urgent issues, including the formation of the institutions representing particular groups (minorities/ethnic groups/subcultures); the dissonance of intra-national and common EU practices in treating these groups; the delicate question of the formalization national belonging of these groups, *inter alia* by the issuance of a second/third passports; the impact of migration processes on the formation of new identities and blurring the borders between "old" subcultures.

The book undoubtedly will bring new useful knowledge and experiences to its readers. It raises important questions regarding identity issues and encourages to formulate new ones. Just the way a good intellectual exercise supposes to do.