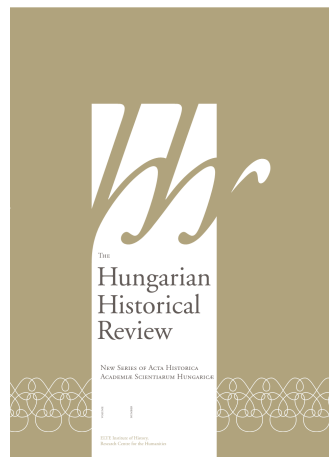


Zitierhinweis

Davis, R. Chris: review of: Simon Schlegel, *Making Ethnicity in Southern Bessarabia. Tracing the Histories of an Ambiguous Concept in a Contested Land*, Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2019, in: *Hungarian Historical Review*, 2020, 1, p. 165-167, DOI: 10.15463/rec.652266676



copyright

Dieser Beitrag kann vom Nutzer zu eigenen nicht-kommerziellen Zwecken heruntergeladen und/oder ausgedruckt werden. Darüber hinausgehende Nutzungen sind ohne weitere Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber nur im Rahmen der gesetzlichen Schrankenbestimmungen (§§ 44a-63a UrhG) zulässig.

Making Ethnicity in Southern Bessarabia: Tracing the Histories of an Ambiguous Concept in a Contested Land. By Simon Schlegel. Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2019. 276 pp.

Simon Schlegel's *Making Ethnicity in Southern Bessarabia* poses a series of interrelated questions about the growth of ethnic boundaries and the rising importance of ethnicity in southern Bessarabia over the last two centuries. The region has proven a well-suited ethno-geographical laboratory or “nook” for researching how individuals and communities can “belong” to an ethnic minority (or majority). The book is structured chronologically, albeit with several theoretical or thematic interludes, offering a survey of state policies and actors that ruled Bessarabia beginning in early nineteenth-century Tsarist Russia and ending with the Maidan protest movement in early twenty-first-century Ukraine. The first part describes how ethnic categories superseded religious categories in the tsarist state's synoptic view of its inhabitants. A chapter on Romanian Bessarabia during the interwar period and World War II showcases important new primary sources on the inscription of ethno-national identities through state-mandated but locally issued identity certificates. The following chapter, intended as a “theoretical insertion” or “interruption,” appraises diverging concepts of ethnicity and the ascription of identities and borders so as to better contextualize the previous chapters and set up the next. The book also covers the forty-seven years of Soviet rule in Bessarabia, showing how the shifting concept of ethnicity and language use became preconditions for social mobility; it then details the years since Ukrainian independence, which have been marked by the recurrence of ethnic rhetoric, entrepreneurs, and associations within a system of political clientelism. Schlegel concludes with two more theoretical chapters that function as a kind of coda, meditating on the ways that religion, memory, narrative, and folklore serve as “techniques” or “tools” to delimit ethnic groups and maintain ethnic boundaries. The book highlights the congruence of ethnic boundaries with fluid social boundaries created by local and regional politics, including corruption, clientelism, mismanagement, and economic hardship. Schlegel argues convincingly that putative ethnic differences or boundaries, as well as language barriers and disputes over history, are frequently epifocal to internecine conflicts.

Methodologically, the book is perhaps most at home in the genre of historical anthropology, “in which the readers start out with a tour through local history and then, as the account moves closer to the present find gradually more

ethnographic insight, until they find themselves reading an ethnography” (p.31). Drawing on Fredrik Barth, James C. Scott, and the usual suspects in the literature on nationalism and ethnicity, with a passing nod to the Italian microhistorians, Schlegel weaves his social-anthropological case study into a much broader historical examination about the ways present-day ethnic boundaries and understandings of ethnicity are firmly, if not inextricably, rooted in the past. But the book is ever mindful that history, society, and identity oscillate through time and space, in a multiplicity of contexts, continually informing one another.

Most of Schlegel’s fieldwork and archival research was undertaken in the Odessa oblast, not far from the city-municipality of Izmail in southwestern Ukraine, from mid 2012 through 2013. Although the four villages selected for interviews were chosen for their collective ethnic diversity (Ukrainian, Moldovan or Romanian, Gagauz, and Bulgarian), all interviews were conducted in Russian. The archival research was also based solely on the Izmail State Archive. The book contains a handful of maps and images, the latter of which date from the author’s fieldwork in the area. Considering the book’s sweeping chronological scope and historical treatment of four successive regimes, the two-page index of subjects and names is inadequate. And while generally well written—Schlegel is dutiful in his role as a narrator of his own story—the book could have benefited from additional copyediting for punctuation. But these are minor imperfections in a worthy contribution to the scholarship on the region. That the author completed this in under three hundred pages is no small feat.

Self-reflective and both microhistorical and macrohistorical in scope, *Making Ethnicity in Southern Bessarabia* focuses not so much on ethnic boundaries as actual dividing lines or demarcations but rather on the actors and motivations that create ethnic boundaries. Moreover, it spotlights the techniques used to maintain these boundaries across space and time, from one regime to the next. While historians of the Soviet Union, Ukraine, Moldova, and Romania might gloss over some (if not much) of Schlegel’s wider historical narratives on various states and regimes, they should find fruitful analyses of these topics in the embedded anthropological framing of competing ethnicizing and territorializing paradigms. Experts on Russia and Ukraine might also find rich comparative material in the chapter on Romanian rule, as might scholars on Romania in the chapters on Russian, Soviet, and Ukrainian rule, which comprise the bulk of the story. Likewise, anthropologists and social scientists researching this area will benefit from the book’s insistence on situating niche fieldwork and locales in the *longue durée*. The author’s social-anthropological approach to a historical

subject therefore improves what would otherwise be a typical if also peripheral history, while the sweeping historical framework broadens the relevance of what would otherwise be a typical if also peripheral anthropological case study. In this respect, it brings to mind the pathbreaking books by Katherine Verdery and Kate Brown. Schlegel's contribution is an adroit scholarly treatment of ethnicity and ethnic boundaries in the social, political, and historical palimpsest that is Southern Bessarabia.

R. Chris Davis  
Lone Star College, Kingwood