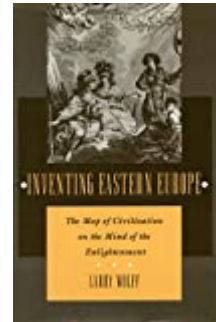


**Larry Wolff.** *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment.* Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994. xiv + 419 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-2314-5.



**Reviewed by** Thomas J. Hegarty (University of Tampa)

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## The Great Unwashed

In a book based on an extraordinarily rich array of fascinating sources, including eighteenth-century Western European travelers' accounts of trips to Eastern Europe, maps and atlases drawn at the time, and letters and literature of the Enlightenment about Eastern Europe (ranging from personal accounts, to philosophical treatments, to pure fantasy), Larry Wolff has written a delightful, erudite, and useful work of intellectual history in which he sketches implications for later European political and social history. He has traced how Western Europeans came to view the continent of Europe as sharply divided into a Western and Eastern half, and to conceive of the latter as backward and uncivilized.

The concept of the underdeveloped East came into vogue just as travel to Eastern Europe was on the increase. Though the line of demarcation between East and West on the continent might vary with the individual and his or her grasp of geography or truth, wherever it fell in the mind of the writer or traveler, a great chasm opened and "Europe" ended. The boundary between the Europes was, of course, changeable: sometimes it was at the Don River, at other times further east at the Volga, and at other

times, it was (as now) at the Urals.

Moreover, Wolff shows that the distinction between East and West did not arise by chance, but came about as the result of an intellectual agenda, related both to Western European ideological self-interest and to scholars' and writers' self-promotion. The invention of an Eastern Europe that was found to be seriously wanting had a great deal to do with the emergence of the concept of civilization and the reinvention of a "civilized" Western Europe that would suit—and be worthy of?—the aspirations and tastes of the Enlightenment.

The East-West distinction was, Wolff points out, new. As late as the Renaissance, the division of Europe that dominated thought and thinkers was still that between the North and the South. "Just as a new center of the Enlightenment superseded the old centers of the Renaissance, the old lands of barbarism and backwardness in the north were ... displaced to the east. East and west were suddenly defined by 'opposition and adjacency'." A straight line connected Paris to Poltava.

It was only in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment

that the *philosophes* and others interested in affirming the superiority of Western Europe created a sense of difference from, and prejudices toward, Eastern Europe. This, Wolff opines, was later updated to accommodate new circumstances and reinforced the West's decision to fight the Crimean War, the Germans' and Austrians' steady *Drang nach Osten*, the eastern campaigns of Nazi Germany, and the Iron Curtain of the Cold War. Even today, as the former Soviet satellites and Newly Independent States move toward the West and work to emulate aspects of Western capitalist development, the "scratches on our mind" (to use a wonderful phrase that Harold Isaac applied to Westerners' views of China), stemming from an old tradition of East-West cultural separation, still subtly govern our perspectives.

In emphasizing the false similarities, the *philosophes* judged the western part of Europe to be superior according to the then evolving notion of "civilization." The process of invention consisted not just of endowing real countries with mythic attributes, though much of that happened; the greater work of invention lay in a "synthetic association" of peoples that drew on both fact and fiction to produce "a general rubric of eastern Europe..." Wolff describes Eastern Europe as a "cultural construction ... of the Enlightenment."

In point of fact, Eastern Europe was never a fictitious place. Both the countries and people on the eastern end of the European land mass were real and were worthy of visits and study. The journeys, however, seldom opened the minds of the travelers and study failed to reveal more than prejudices. The result of both was generally an attitude toward, and concept of, Eastern Europe that tied together very different countries and peoples through invented and generally unflattering similarities. Western writers concocted and presented to others as fact false linkages that turned Russia, Poland, Hungary, and the lands emerging out of the steadily shrinking Ottoman Empire—countries with very great differences of wealth, culture, language, religion, and history—into a single new entity characterized by a degree of barbarism. The invention gave the West its first model of underdevelopment. But there was hope! Eastern Europe was generally not seen as totally lost to culture for all time but was low on the developmental scale and susceptible to improvement at the hands of the West.

The author shows how the ideological relation of the two Europes paralleled to a large degree the relationship between the Occident and the Orient, though in the case of Asia some writers professed to find, besides barbarism,

sophisticated cultural and intellectual traits from which Western Europeans could benefit. Remoteness seemed to breed on occasion a kind of enchantment, but poor Eastern Europe suffered from its greater degree of proximity, accessibility and similarity to Western Europe. Western Europe was more comfortable with, and kinder to, East Asia and the Middle East which were harder to visit than to Eastern Europe, which many more travelers saw and experienced. Of course, one did not need to travel to be an expert. Voltaire, for example, never went to the Russia for which he had such hopes as a result of the reign of Catherine II. But he wrote on Peter the Great and helped to form many important people's view of Russia. Diderot did visit St. Petersburg in 1773 and failed to get the reception for his ideas for improving the country that he had hoped. And perhaps more typical of the travelers of the time, a not at all young, upper middle class Parisian hostess of a well-attended salon, Mme. Geoffrin, went to Poland in 1766 to be the guest of the king, who had regularly come to her "at homes" while he was in Paris.

The book presents fascinating treatments of both travelers and armchair voyagers. It begins with the Count de Segur, a hero of the American Revolution, traveling across eastern Europe in 1784-85 to serve as the French ambassador to the court of St. Petersburg. Having left Prussia and entered Poland, he declared in a statement characteristic of his contemporaries, that "he had moved back ten centuries" and had "left Europe entirely." The book ends with an American adventurer, John Ledyard, who had traveled with Captain Cook and in 1788 was returning—east to west—from a solitary expedition to Siberia. He reported that he had not reached Europe until he was in Prussia.

But the chapters of the work best suggest the dimensions of the study. Chapter 1, "Entering Eastern Europe; Eighteenth-Century Travelers on the Frontier," features the travels of the Count de Segur, mentioned above, William Coxe, who traveled in 1778-79, and the Lady Mary Montagu. Eastern Europe was in effect discovered on the road to St. Petersburg or Constantinople. Chapter 2, "Possessing Eastern Europe: Sexuality, Slavery and Corporal Punishment," presents the travels of Casanova, Baron Francois de Tott, Joseph Marshall, and William Richardson. Chapter 3, "Imagining Eastern Europe: Fiction, Fantasy and Vicarious Voyages," focuses on non-travelers such as Voltaire, Lessing, Marat (who unlike his peers uses a Polish nobleman to exemplify good), "Baron Munchausen," the creation of Raspe, and the travelers Mozart (on a concert tour), the Count d'Hauterive, Lady Elizabeth Craven, and the Prince de Ligne, who was

privileged to journey with Catherine II of Russia on her inspection tour of the Crimea.

Chapter 4, “Mapping Eastern Europe: Political Geography and Cultural Cartography,” shows that map making was often used as a vehicle for introducing information (or prejudices) and for annotating one’s observations. Geographical uncertainty fed the invention of Eastern Europe as the articles of the *Encyclopedie* demonstrate. And there were objective reasons for the uncertainty beyond subjectivity toward and ignorance of what was: Hungary was in the period reclaimed as a nation from the Turks; Poland suffered three partitions, ultimately disappearing; the Russian Empire grew; and the Ottoman Empire steadily shrank. Geographical exploration was going on, fed by the interest of monarchs to know their own realms as well as those of neighbors.

Chapter 5, “Addressing Eastern Europe, Part I: Voltaire’s Russia,” is a demonstration of the power of mental mapping. Chapter 6, “Addressing Eastern Europe, Part II: Rousseau’s Poland,” presents, *inter alia*, the account of the journey of Mme. Geoffrin, the house guest from hell of the last king of Poland. Chapter 7, “Peopling Eastern Europe, Part I: Barbarians in Ancient History and Modern Anthropology” and chapter 8, “Peopling Eastern Europe, Part II: The Evidence of Manners and the Measurements of Race,” discuss in part the fascination of Western Europeans at showing the Scythian or Tatar roots of Eastern European peoples, false ethnic and linguistic connections, and an inventiveness regarding everyone’s past. Gibbon’s low regard for eastern Europe is balanced by the kinder attitude of Herder, who saw Slavs as an underdeveloped, but “victimized people of peace and freedom.” The conclusion is an exciting piece that works to a large degree to tie together the various sections of the book.

As with many other good works of intellectual history, the reader is at all times intrigued by the connections that are made between and among thinkers of the period under study and later events. Still, an element of doubt has to be allowed to creep in. What comes later, after all, does not always depend on what happened earlier. And what develops as the *idee fixe* of one period may be an outmoded notion at another, while earlier ideas may recur. Three questions immediately come to mind regarding the influence of the invention of Eastern Europe on recent history:

(1) Was the earlier North-South dichotomy entirely

lost after the Enlightenment? Or, did it continue and co-exist with the newer East-West division of Europe? It is very arguable that strong divisions between northern and southern Europeans exist today and that, regrettably, there are strong northern prejudices against “mythic” characteristics of the mezzogiorno or south of Spain. Are they survivals from a time earlier than the Enlightenment?

(2) Did the survival of negative Western attitudes toward Eastern European countries and peoples really have much to do with the expansionism of the Nazis? After all, the goal of the Nazis was the conquest of all of Europe—and more. The East was one of the directions of march. Similarly, did the invention of an Eastern Europe so long ago in the age of the Enlightenment really affect the descent of the Iron Curtain? Was this the reason that the West was unwilling to fight again, so shortly after a ruinous and exhausting war, to protect the Eastern European states from Stalin? [I venture to suggest that, with similar plausibility, one could construct a case that the attraction the West held for Russians from the time of Ivan the Terrible or Peter the Great was an influence on Stalin’s effort to keep moving his empire westward.]

(3) Did not the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century “rehabilitate” Eastern European peoples, whose distinctive cultures, languages, and history suddenly became topics of study and interest in the West? In many of the typologies of the nineteenth century, Eastern European peoples were the very ones about whom it was said that their finest hour was yet to come, while the West—like an overripe plant—had already had its day.

(4) From where did the now prevalent idea of one Europe emerge? Could it have arisen without the weakening long ago of the Enlightenment view of the eastern half of the continent?

Whatever the answers to these questions, Larry Wolff has written a fascinating book that helps us to understand that the eighteenth-century concepts of humanity and brotherhood—the concepts that most of us were taught as characteristic of the age—had definite limitations. They stopped, for example, at that point where, in the mind of the visitor, writer or thinker, Eastern Europe began.

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