Forum

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Mobility, Migration and Networks in Historiographical Research: How Sources Restore Agency to 'Ordinary People'

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Abstract
This forum analyses how a dialogue between methodological approaches in historiographical research across different world regions and time periods can yield new perspectives on migration, mobility, and network research. By applying the postcolonial concept of subaltern groups, the authors discuss ways to let 'ordinary people' speak through unconventional sources.

Keywords
Migration, mobility, network, subaltern

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All too often, historians base their research on people's mobility on official documents, such as border and customs control records, police reports and ship manifests. Engaging with such documents has yielded significant scholarship and insights on global movements and transnational networks. Still, as a form of history from above, it often neglects the experiences of marginalised people who left behind little or no paper trail, such as the illiterate, those from lower strata or underprivileged groups, religious minorities and women – people whom post-colonial theory has called subalterns. We often assume that subalterns lack a voice in history. However, Antonio Gramsci, who coined the term, held that these people do speak all the time; the challenge lies in recognising the forms, languages and communication methods through which these voices and historical experiences become available and legible to us as historians.[1] Still, in recent years, historians of 19th- and 20th-century European and transatlantic history have increasingly focused on sources that better highlight subalterns' agency and make their voices more readable (see interventions by Tahra Zara[2] or Hanna Snellman[3]). However, to fully grasp and appreciate the breadth of potential sources, we find it necessary to consider the combined toolboxes of historians from earlier periods and other world regions, who contended with limited written sources and have thus developed different approaches to tackle this issue. In this regard, it is often helpful to draw on approaches that researchers have developed in postcolonial studies. Designed for researching the postcolonial world, recent studies have discussed the applicability of postcolonial theories to other regions. For example, Eastern Europeanists emphasise that phenomena primarily known from overseas colonial contexts also had their counterparts within the European continental empires, such as those embodied in the gaze of Germany's elites towards its Polish minority populations.[4]

This forum explores different ways to foreground the agency – and its contradictions – of subalterns throughout the early modern, modern and contemporary periods.[5] It analyses how different methodological approaches contribute to new perspectives in migration, mobility, network research and beyond. At first glance, this might appear to be a broad framework. However, what holds our contributions together beyond the general topics is the focus on the role of subalterns in the respective research, the methodological approaches applied, and the sources used to engage with their voices. To enrich this discussion, we paired the contributions to encourage dialogue across approaches, themes and regions. Robert Heinze explores urban transport and the regulation of space in contemporary African cities, usually drawing on networks operating in the so-called informal economy. He discusses his research approach with Anat Vaturi, who is interested in information networks in early modern Poland-Lithuania, established by *shamashim* or Jewish community beadles. Dovilė Čypaitė-Gilė debates her research on Jewish-Lithuanian emigration from the interwar period with Michael Zok, who works on the role of networks and second-tier actors within the

1. R. Heinze, 'Herrschaft anders denken', in: *analyse & kritik* 694 (2023), 12.
2. T. Zahra, *The Great Departure. Mass Migration from Eastern Europe and the Making of the Free World*, New York, London 2016.
3. H. Snellman, 'Cookbooks for Upstairs: Ethnicity, Class and Gender in Perspective', in: M.S. Beaulieu / D. Ratz / R. Harpelle (eds.), *Hard Work Conquers All: The Finnish-Canadian Experience*, Vancouver, Toronto 2017, 185–206.
4. Ch. Kienemann, *Der koloniale Blick gen Osten. Osteuropa im Diskurs des Deutschen Kaiserreichs von 1871,* Paderborn 2018; J. Panagiotidis / H.-Ch. Petersen, *Antiosteuropäischer Rassismus in Deutschland. Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Weinheim 2024; F. Ackermann / A. Pufelska, 'Preußen postkolonial. Ansätze zu einer Geschichte polnisch-preußischer Asymmetrie', in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 4 (2021), 529–533; Ph. Ther, 'Deutsche Geschichte als imperiale Geschichte. Polen, slawophone Minderheiten und das Kaiserreich als kontinentales Empire', in: S. Conrad / J. Osterhammel (eds.), *Das Kaiserreich transnational. Deutschland in der Welt 1871–1914*, Göttingen 2004, 129–148.
5. The authors of the forum gathered at the workshop *Mobility, Migration, and Global Networks* and at the *Network Meeting Polish History* in February and June of 2025 at the German Historical Institute in Warsaw.

Irish and Polish independence movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Lastly, Thục Linh Nguyễn Vũ focuses on the subaltern group of North Vietnamese students in Socialist Poland and how they navigated their place in society. She discusses her approach with Jan Musekamp, whose research focuses on the global migrations of German speakers from 19th-century Ukraine and how they dealt with migration and settlement policies of inclusion and exclusion ('global colour lines').

Robert Heinze, German Historical Institute Paris

Urban Transport and the Regulation of Space in African Cities

In my project, I look at how informal transport networks emerged and developed in African cities in the second half of the 20th century. While state-owned or private bus networks did exist in many places over certain periods, most of the everyday urban mobility in African cities is and has been ensured by small operators with refitted and reconstructed vehicles, on networks that were never planned centrally, but were built up from below, gradually and locally, by subaltern actors. Over time and during periods of economic crises, this sector grew both through passenger demand and labour supply in large-scale urbanisation processes. Passenger transport became a necessity for the majority of African urbanites in cities growing faster than their infrastructure. At the same time, new arrivals in the city often found precarious employment in a growing informal economy, of which public transport was a significant part. Over time, intricate but stable networks developed, while employment in the industry remained extremely unprotected and precarious. My research looks at these networks and how they formed in a conflictual interaction between workers, operators and state institutions.

For the research of informal economies, the question of subalternity is of course extremely pertinent. Most people engaging in 'informal' economic activity are considered subaltern, and rightly so – by definition, the informal economy is the economic sector that integrates all those who are left out by shrinking 'formal' economies. However, as informality becomes increasingly questioned in its neat separation from 'formal' economies, it also becomes clear that powerful economic actors have arisen in the informal economy, particularly the transport industry. Individual entrepreneurs have amassed economic fortunes and political influence. Other operators can be poor themselves, owning one or two small vehicles. Meanwhile, workers in the industry are largely recruited from the urban poor, and the touts and hawkers at bus stations are even more precarious. While all these very different actors are often classed as subaltern, a closer look shows that the industry is shot through with class, race and gender divisions that call into question the usefulness of the notion as a socio-economic category.

The complexity of the informal transport sector makes it imperative to distinguish intra-group divisions and not subsume all actors in the industry under the unduly broad moniker 'subaltern'. It is useful to return here to an originally Gramscian notion of 'subaltern groups' in the plural, which allows for heterogeneity while emphasising the position these groups occupy vis-à-vis the state: the subaltern groups are not 'outside' the state, rather, they are integrated into it in specific ways that exclude them from hegemony/power (and thus enable power to function). There is no single 'subaltern' who needs to be given 'a voice'. Contrary to Gayatri Spivak,[6] Gramsci thought that subaltern groups speak all the time, but they express themselves in ways that are not necessarily readable in a given hegemonic order.[7]

6. G.C. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in: C. Nelson / L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana, Ill. 1988, 271–313.
7. A. Gramsci, *Südfrage und Subalterne*, Hamburg, Berlin 2023; P.D. Thomas, 'We Good Subalterns', in: F. Antonini et al. (eds.), *Revisiting Gramsci's Notebooks*, Leiden 2020, 177–194.

Thus, I am working with interviews with transport workers as well as documents from social scientists and urban planners that integrated fieldwork and interviews in their research to get data on how workers dealt with extreme precarity, poverty and stress, and how they acquired the technical knowledge and skills required to operate on a daily basis. This is particularly visible in their relationship to the technology that they operated on a daily basis, to refitting, repairing, personalising/decorating and operating the vehicles that were the basis of their job.

Anat Vaturi:

What is the core theoretical literature on 'heterogeneity of subaltern groups' (if there is anything more recent than Gramsci)? Could you speak more about the sources you use to recover the voices of your agents?

Robert Heinze:

Because Gramsci's work (especially the Prison Notebooks[8]) was not available in complete, translated editions until the late 1990s, philosophers have only recently started to rediscover the term 'subaltern' in dialogue with and against the Subaltern Studies and Spivak through these editions. I think it is high time for historians to discuss these approaches, especially in microhistory, since Carlo Ginzburg has been interested in writing the history of subaltern groups.[9] African history showed interest, but also took a critical stance towards both contemporary Gramsci readings and Subaltern Studies, by emphasising that subaltern groups were very well organised and developed their own ideologies and critiques of dominant societies.[10] Ginzburg as well as Feierman emphasised that 'the Subaltern' does indeed speak all the time, and it is the historian's challenge to learn how to listen to them. For me, the emphasis of recent readings of Gramsci on the subaltern as not an excluded, but necessarily integrated part of modern, capitalist states and societies helps explain how informal transport is at the same time unregulated and still integrally bound to the way post-colonial African states work – administrations rely on informal transport to provide a necessary public service while at the same time leaving room for police to stop vehicles, threaten fines and take bribes.

It is a difficult and complicated process to access subaltern voices. For this project, in keeping with parts of the historical and interdisciplinary literature, I chose an approach via infrastructure and technology. While the complex and dynamic transport infrastructures reveal the historically changing conflicts and positions between the state and different subaltern groups, I also zoom in to develop microhistories of labour and technology, focusing on how workers refitted, repaired and maintained cars and buses.[11] This unfolds in a subaltern space between resistance and a contradictory reinforcement of the economic pressures under which workers in the industry are subject. I conducted biographical interviews with transport workers, which I contrast and compare with contemporary qualitative research from social scientists and urban planners on how infrastructures were formed, how workers dealt with extreme precarity, poverty and stress, and how they acquired the technical knowledge and skills required to operate on a daily basis. For example, in a group interview with female employees of a mid-sized transport company in Lusaka, Zambia, interviewees explained that the unusual presence of women drivers in the company began when one of them became a mechanic, actively lobbied for more female drivers, and helped her friends to find positions too. Because women were more trusted as drivers, they developed a routine of

8. A. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, New York 1992.
9. C. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, Baltimore 2013.
10. S. Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: History and Anthropology in Tanzania*, Madison, WI 1990.
11. J. Grace, *African Motors: Technology, Gender, and the History of Development*, Durham 2021.

leaving their homes early in the morning to transport the neighbourhood's children to school. This accounted for a substantial amount of their daily earnings. Such a material approach – looking at objects and their role in how workers and operators organise beyond formal institutions, how they operate in the day to day, and how they relate to the hegemonic order – allows us to 'listen' to the specific ways subaltern groups 'speak' and express themselves below and beyond the hegemonic order.

Anat Vaturi, University of Haifa

Breaking News: Transmission of Information to and within Jewish Communities in Early Modern Poland

My project examines a group of beadles, usually lowest-rank communal servants called *shamashim* (servant/attendant in Hebrew), who worked in Jewish communities in early modern Poland. Though marginalised in historical studies, the *shamash* was a 'man of all work' with diverse responsibilities, ranging from liturgical assistance and synagogue maintenance to administrative, financial and even judicial enforcement duties.

With the development of Jewish communities in the 17th and 18th centuries, the function of *shamash* was divided among several people, resulting in professional specialisation and hierarchy, as well as the emergence of networks of *shamashim* and *untershamashim* (who worked in exchange for gifts rather than a regular salary). This network helped transmit information, values, and organisational models to the wider public and across communities.

Among his multiple duties, the *shamash* made announcements in the synagogue and the market, serving as a public crier for lawsuit results, property sales and any other information deemed crucial to public knowledge. Although it was not their formal duty, many *shamashim* actively took it upon themselves to keep written registers of the announcements or to write minute books of important events. Some of them even wrote synagogue minute books or communal registers, often inserting what they deemed important. Though the role of *shamash* varied across communities and periods, his various capacities reveal a crucial role in managing and transmitting information from religious and civic authorities to the wider community. Described as indispensable, *shamashim* were literate in Hebrew, Yiddish and often Polish, familiar with both Jewish and non-Jewish courtroom procedures, and the position was frequently hereditary. Some shamashim preserved notebooks of their predecessors or copied from them material that they had found worthy. Due to these comprehensive duties – including transmitting, adapting, disseminating and preserving information – the *shamash* served as the essential 'voice in the synagogue,' critical for maintaining the fabric of religious and social life and for ensuring daily communal functioning and responses to events in early modern Polish Jewish communities. While not all announcements were registered in community books or officially announced to the public or neighbouring communities, it was often through the agency of *shamashim* that the information was registered, preserved, and transmitted.

The concept of the subaltern can be applied to early modern Jewish history in two major ways. First, in criticising the classic lachrymose conception of Jewish history, which viewed Jewish political, legal, economic and epistemic status as marginalised and emphasised the lack of Jewish agency under constraining circumstances. Second, to focus on Jewish communities from within and examine their social heterogeneity and power dynamics, with emphasis on the usually omitted ordinary people. Historical studies have predominantly characterised Jewish communities as homogeneous units – minority group or subaltern agent operating on the margins of the non-Jewish majority. This project challenges that monolithic view, arguing that the concept of 'subalternity' must be applied not only to the minority–majority dichotomy but, more critically, to the heterogeneity and power dynamics within the Jewish community itself. It is within this second approach that I intend to study the under-researched professional group of *shamashim*. Although

disseminating news was part of their job description, it was their agency that created a human network for the transmission and communication of news. While often omitted in historical overviews and marginalised in studies of Jewish communities, the agency of this group left traces in different types of sources from the 16th to 18th centuries: job descriptions included in oaths of office and communal ordinances or statutes, communal notebooks (*pinkasey hakehila*) and memory books, court records and anecdotal stories. For some early modern Jewish communities, it is possible to recover the names of individual beadles and some biographical information. For example, on 22 April 1641, the Cracow Voivode's Office registered the oath taken by two newly appointed *shamashim* – Jacob Morawczyk and Lewko Markowicz. The document preserved their names, which allowed me to reconstruct some biographical information about these men, their families and cultural networks.[12]

While using the methodology of prosopography, I intend to use the primary sources and any anecdotal information they preserve to create a collective profile of this professional group, track their human network, and examine how this group influenced the communication, transmission, and adaptation of information in order to understand the broader issue of the transmission of information to lower social strata and cultural brokerage in the early modern period.

Robert Heinze:

Your approach is very similar to my own – looking at the people who, through everyday (inter-) action, ensure reliable infrastructure, be it of mobility or information. This infrastructure enables a community to survive and exist as a community, and opens a window into this community, its social structure, and power dynamics.

Anat Vaturi:

We both use a specific profession – one intricately tied to infrastructure necessary for group cohesion and communal life – as a window into analysing how subaltern groups organise community, both in internal and external relations. Following frameworks that identify internal stratification, my research is premised on the existence of multiple, often-neglected subaltern voices within the Jewish community, and reconstructing these diverse perspectives is a primary objective. While communal statutes reveal how Jewish authorities officially envisioned the function of *shamashim*,[13] extant sources rarely provide direct insight into the ideas or approaches of these essential workers themselves.

Robert Heinze:

The *shamashim* as 'the voice in the synagogue' could be a nice play on words when discussing whether the subaltern 'speaks' – of course, subaltern groups speak all the time, the question is: do they talk to us, or rather, can we listen?

Anat Vaturi:

As you rightly point out, the subaltern's voice is often less heard or researched, particularly when addressing the majority. I intend to track this voice and the *shamash*'s agency as expressed in the process of news transmission. By comparing the tools and methods of communication within Jewish communities and across Jewish and non-Jewish bodies, I aim to reveal the approaches and content that differed and were underpinned by subaltern perspectives. By uncovering

12. S. Kutrzeba, *Zbiór aktów do historyi ustroju sądów prawa polskiego i kancelaryj sądowych województwa krakowskiego z wieku XVI–XVIII* 150–151 (1909).
13. For example, A. Jakimyszyn, *The Cracow Jewish Community Charter of 1595 and supplements*, Krakow 2005 [in Yiddish and Polish].

non-formalised and unofficial records preserved in between official communal recordings, I aim to reveal the omitted agency and voice of this group, and portray *shamashim* as crucial mediating agents in the complex flow of information. The way they created and utilised networks of information transmission highlights their agency and reveals their views and voices. Analysing these networks and the material objects involved (e.g. minute books, letters, hammers, shofars, boards, and archival boxes) enables us to understand the subaltern's agency, impact, and views not only on Jewish-Christian relations but, more importantly, on everyday life and power relations inside the socially stratified Jewish community.

Dovilė Čypaitė-Gilė, Vilnius University

Jewish Emigration from Lithuania 1918–1940: Reconstruction of the Process

My research examines the trajectories of Jewish emigrants from interwar Lithuania – a population that, despite holding Lithuanian citizenship during 1918–1940, has often been relegated to a subaltern position in both national and transnational historiography. Migration patterns and daily realities of the Lithuanian Jewish community were shaped by major disruptions: expulsions from Kaunas Governorate during the First World War, a difficult post-war recovery, and economic instability after Lithuania's independence in 1918. A brief period of Jewish cultural autonomy (1920–1925) and initiatives for communal reconstruction and acculturation were soon undermined by political exclusion, the 1926 Land Reform, and rising antisemitism in line with European trends. Together, these factors pushed many Lithuanian Jews to seek opportunities abroad.

Gender and age influenced migration, as social roles shaped available strategies. Based on passport regulations, the study identifies four categories of emigrants: (1) individuals (women or men) travelling alone, (2) families, (3) one parent with children and (4) married couples. Women and children – often facing specific vulnerabilities – were underrepresented in statistics, though orphan migration was notable. Men and women voyaging alone were most often aged 30–36, with women forming a slight majority (52%), a pattern largely explained by the fact that many women travelled to join husbands who had emigrated before 1918 or whose chain migration was interrupted by the war. Many women joined husbands or relatives abroad; others secured visas through strategic marriages. Social status also played a role: solo travellers often had no recorded occupation, while emigrating families more often included skilled members. Lithuanian Jewish emigrants headed to varied destinations – South Africa,[14] Palestine, the United States, Uruguay and the Soviet Union – though most of the historiography has focused on the United States and Palestine.

Michael Zok:

Why was South Africa so prominent as a destination country? At first glance, this is rather unexpected.

Dovilė Čypaitė-Gilė:

There is no clear answer as to why South Africa was particularly popular among Lithuanian Jews. The most probable explanation is that, in the mid-19th century, British steamship lines operating in Lithuania actively promoted their transportation services within Lithuanian territory and even offered free passage to Lithuanian Jews. In the long term, this created strong kinship networks. Legends surrounding Samuel Marks, one of the first Lithuanian Jews to immigrate to South Africa in 1868 and a prominent figure in the diamond industry, attracted Lithuanian Jews to the region. However, this explanation is more common in the realm of public history. Migrants frequently

14. Concerning the South African experience, refer to V. Belling, 'When Rivke Left Home: Women's Journeys from Eastern Europe to South Africa', in: *Jewish Culture and History* 11 (2009) 1–2, 70–84.

altered plans *en route*, reacting to immigration laws, finances or personal changes, with Great Britain serving as a key transit point.

Michael Zok:

When leaving Lithuania, were they familiar with the migration laws in their destination countries? What are the sources that allow you to give the subaltern migrants a voice?

Dovilė Čypaitė-Gilė:

Most emigrants were well informed about immigration laws and obtained the necessary documents. However, there were still many undocumented migrants. Britain had shelters for poor members of the Jewish community, where they could stay for 2 weeks to 2 months.[15] During this time, many people tried to obtain visas to remain in the United Kingdom.

My research addresses the subaltern position of emigrants by reconstructing their voices and lived experiences. Using passport files, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society–Jewish Colonization Association (HIAS)[16] records, and oral histories of those who emigrated, it recovers the agency of individuals excluded from dominant narratives.

From these sources, we can extract information about how the decision to emigrate – or not to emigrate – was made, what personal strategies people developed, what they considered important to pack, and what they already knew about emigration. One example is Mr. Josef Gurwin, who described his emigration in an oral history interview for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.[17] He left Lithuania in 1936, feeling ashamed after failing his Lithuanian language exam in gymnasium at the age of seventeen. He recounted his route from Panevėžys, a town in Lithuania, to Paris and then to the United States, even recalling how he cried throughout the trip because he was leaving his family in Lithuania. Such testimony allows us to reconstruct both the details of the route and the emotional nature of emigration.

On the one hand, it is important to note that oral histories must be interpreted critically, as they reflect personal memory and narratives shaped over a lifetime. On the other hand, such insights cannot be extracted from bureaucratic documents. Mr. Gurwin's testimony also sheds light on those who decided to stay. He recalled that his father, a loyal Jewish citizen of Lithuania, refused to emigrate even after the war began in 1939. With close ties to the Lithuanian government, he never believed he would be abandoned. Yet when the USSR occupied Lithuania in 1940, his business was nationalized, and any possibility of departure disappeared. Thus, a single oral history can reveal a wide range of contextual information about migration in a difficult period.

By combining archival research with microhistorical methods, my study highlights both the personal and collective dimensions of emigration and shows how individual experiences are connected to the broader historical nature of emigration processes.

Michael Zok, German Historical Institute Warsaw

The Backbone of Heroes. Political Networks and Radicalization in the Irish and Polish Independence Movements in Late Imperialism

15. C. Roth, *A History of the Jews in England*, London 1964.
16. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and the Jewish Colonization Association (ICA) partnered in 1927 to form the HIAS-ICA Emigration Association (HICEM) to help European Jews emigrate, especially from Nazi-controlled areas. HIAS primarily assisted Jews immigrating to the United States, while HICEM handled emigration to other parts of the world like South America, and eventually moved its operations to Portugal to facilitate escape through Lisbon during the Second World War.
17. Josef Gurwin, 2006, 2/4, USHMM, inv. nr.: 2006.219 | RG nr. RG-50.030.0508.

In my research, I focus on the so-called second-tier actors, that is, the men and women who worked behind the scenes of the independence movements in Poland and Ireland in the last decades of the 19th century up to the outbreak of the 'Great War'. The basic idea for this project was not to concentrate on well-known 'heroes' of the movements, but to examine their 'grey ranks' and to reconstruct the networks within them. The project's approach is comparative in nature and is based upon historical network analysis using personal correspondence,[18] and it analyses the influence that groups of those 'second-tier actors' had on the movements.

However, it soon became apparent that only a fraction of those who participated in the movements left behind ego documents, although there are some editions of less prominent actors (at least compared to the 'big names') who had contact with other members of the movements and whom historiography often treated marginally. This group of people acted in the background and formed the 'backbone' of the movements. They are the subalterns in my research, since for the overwhelming majority of them, no records representing their perspective exist.

Most of these people are not clearly visible when we look at the front rows of the political movements, where public figures such as journalists, the movements' speakers, etc. dominated. I include them alongside the 'big names' by reconstructing their networks using, for example, diaries of the 'first-tier' actors. Taking this detour, I can visualise the web of contacts, even if the activists in question did not leave any ego-documents. Of course, this approach captures only the names that the diaries' authors mention. Still, I assume that they either knew each other very well – which would be an indicator for the actual 'quality' of the relationship between the actors, or that the second-tier actors would use their real names and not a *nom de guerre*. To complement this, I refer to documents produced by party or activists' meetings. Especially in the case of Polish left-wing groups, it is often the (rudimentary) documentation of meetings that has survived. Thus, I am at least capable of seeing whether, and how many, second-tier actors joined the discussion of more prominent activists in the networks. Finally, regarding the period I am investigating, it is also important to look at photographs, especially group pictures of movement members. During the investigation period, taking a photograph was rare and not as common as it is today; thus, it held significant importance in determining people's connections. The relevance of photographs is underscored by attempts to change interpersonal connections by means of erasing people from party photographs in the Soviet Union.

Dovilė Čypaitė-Gilė:

How will this study broaden knowledge on the topic of political movements more broadly? In my understanding, your research could contribute to the research on very different historical periods and countries.

Michael Zok:

This project will enable us to gain a more comprehensive insight into the Polish and Irish independence movements, as it was the 'backbone' that made them work and contributed to Polish and Irish independence in 1918 and 1922, respectively. It is also connected to the way social movements function in general and could be used, for example, for analysing ecological movements

18. E.g., already edited correspondence, as in the case of Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz: *Listy*, 3 vols., Wrocław 1984. Other materials are stored in the Archive of Modern Records (Archiwum Akt Nowych) in Warsaw as well as in the National Archives Dublin. The latter holds the correspondence (and diary) of Michael Collins who was one of the most prominent leaders of the Irish War of Independence. See M. Collins, *Days in the Life. Reading the Michael Collins Diaries, 1918–1922*, Dublin 2022.

in the 20th century. The question of radicalisation of such movements could be even more extended, for example, to riots and uprisings since the Early Modern period.

Dovilė Čypaitė-Gilė:

I am curious about the material you are using, and about your theoretical and methodological approach. Also, does the age or professional background of your group play a role?

Michael Zok:

The idea is to reconstruct the networks by using a very diverse array of sources. At first, I planned to analyse mainly personal letters, but it became apparent that this approach was too narrow to give an insight into the entire movements. As a result, I decided to include diaries and meeting minutes in those cases where I could not rely on letters to show the connection between the activists. This multi-layered approach gives me a comprehensive insight into the structure of the networks, which I aim to visualise by using network analysis tools like *gephi*,[19] which was originally used in sociological analysis.[20] This allows me to distinguish between different groups ('sub-networks') within the movements and trace their actions. Gephi also enables me to calculate different markers in networks (like the 'weight' of a relationship or its 'centrality'). However, a major challenge is the visualisation of the networks' dynamics: some nodes disappeared over time (e.g. by a person's passing, by them leaving the movements, or by being exiled by the authorities); other branches of the network disconnected because of decisions made out of personal animosities.

Many names appear in the written biographies of the movement's key figures, but this is where their stories often end. One example is activist Kazimierz Ratyński, who is mentioned, for instance, by Andrzej Friszke in his book about the various Polish left-wing groups that existed before the First World War. Although a collection of his papers exists, it seems this collection has not been utilised (at least, I did not find any literature that included it), making him a 'subaltern' in historical research. Here, we are talking about the rare case of a movement member who left a paper trail. Estimates suggest that the Warsaw Branch of the Polish Socialist Party had about 1,500 members. Of these, we only have some knowledge about a portion – roughly 100 members – who came from the intelligentsia and can be assumed to be literate. Still, this represents only a small segment of those involved in the movement. A deeper search in archives is likely to provide more insights into their biographies and the workings of the network.

Speaking of intelligentsia and working class, other important characteristics of the movement's members that I plan to analyse are their social status, education, profession and their specific generational background. The database and the usage of analysis tools, therefore, also aim to structure and typologise the above-mentioned groups and to ask whether their members were connected beyond their political views.

Thục Linh Nguyễn Vũ, Free University Berlin

The Archival Ordinary. Vietnamese Diasporas in Poland

My current research examines the robust Polish-Vietnamese connections from the 1954 Geneva Accords until the unification of Vietnam in 1976, viewed through the prism of broadly defined socialist cultures. Drawing on various archival materials from Poland and Vietnam, the book also examines the Vietnamese presence – both real and mediated – in state socialist Poland. The North Vietnamese, idealised in the media as freedom-fighting postcolonial revolutionaries on the

19. https://gephi.org, last access: 28 October 2025.
20. Ph. Darius, 'Introduction to social network analysis in R and Gephi', on https://data-knowledge-hub.com/docs/data-analysis/04_03_social-network-analysis/, last access: 28 October 2025.

brink of war, and young Vietnamese students in state socialist Poland are the ones who most closely fit the category of 'the subaltern' – taken to be unable to represent themselves and therefore in need of others who speak on their behalf.

The scholarships awarded by the Polish state to Vietnamese students were a direct result of Poland's involvement in postcolonial political tensions, Cold War dynamics in Southeast Asia and global socialism.[21] Nevertheless, the lives of Vietnamese students were not just a function of the vicissitudes of global politics and wartime activities. Although the Vietnamese presence encapsulated one of the key global conflicts of the 1970s, exemplified by Operation Rolling Thunder during the second Indochina War, the Vietnamese students had little political power and led lives full of challenges. For instance, they were unable to become permanent residents of Poland after graduating due to their obligation to return to Vietnam. Ignoring their diverse and often contradictory engagements with Polish society risks reproducing a historical narrative that erases their presence, agency, even if limited, and capacity to represent themselves. Equating the existence and legacy of Vietnamese communities with wartime victimhood and oppression would be a form of epistemic saviourism that ultimately reproduces the epistemic violence tied to the category of the subaltern.[22]

Vietnamese students in Poland occupied a mercurial position – situated outside dominant power structures while simultaneously benefiting from socialist welfare protections and provisions associated with global socialist education and fellowship programmes including housing, healthcare and food support. Can their 'subalterness' – both as a condition and a marker of marginality – be transcended and represented meaningfully through historical research and activism on behalf of their community? I argue that it is both necessary and possible to attempt this. Recovering these histories – embedded in spaces that have been overlooked or undervalued by most of historiography – requires a methodological openness to a diverse range of archival traces. Such sources, often unseen or dismissed as irrelevant, include carefully kept ego-documents, photographs, material objects of daily life and newspaper clippings. These artefacts reveal caretaking practices surrounding diasporic archives scattered across multiple geographies – from Warsaw and Łódź to Hanoi and Vienna.[23] Private photographs depicting everyday life, for example, document interracial love both in private and public spheres. Examining these images prompts critical questions: What does it mean to love an Asian man in a predominantly White and Catholic society in a late socialist country? Addressing these issues involves challenging the neo-extractive dynamics in knowledge production that appropriate minority experiences without appropriate reciprocity, thereby reinforcing epistemic hierarchies. To problematise this, I think it is essential to try to unlearn deeply entrenched mental norms that often still govern scholarship and that centre dominant

21. T.L. Nguyễn Vũ, 'A World of Their Own: Vietnamese Students in Late Socialist Poland', in: M. Colla / P. Betts (eds.), *Rethinking Socialist Spaces in the Twentieth Century*, London 2024, 185–215; on the collaboration between the GDR and Vietnam in the postwar period, see Ch. Schwenkel, *Building Socialism: The Afterlife of East German Architecture in Urban Vietnam,* Durham, NC, 2020.

22. On the construction of the colonial Other and epistemic violence, see G. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' revised edition, from 'History chapter of *Critique of Postcolonial Reason',* in R.C. Morris (ed.), *Can the Subtaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, New York 2010, 35; see also D. Landry / G. Maclean, 'Introduction', in: eadem / G. Maclean (eds.), *The Spivak Reader*, Routledge 1996, 1–15.

23. On the archives of dispossession and the diffusion of Palestinian archives, see Sh. Seikaly, 'How I Met My Great-Grandfather: Archives and the Writing of History', in: *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 38 (2018), 6–20; on Black archive practice, see T. Sutherland / Z. Collier, 'Introduction: The Promise and Possibility of Black Archival Practice', in: *The Black Scholar. Journal of Black Studies and Research* 52 (2022), 1–15.

perspectives. This opening up also means being open to the affective power of sources and their capacity to disturb and move.

Jan Musekamp:

I am impressed by how you managed to access the world of Polish-Vietnamese intimate relationships. I am also working with photographs and ego documents; however, their creators died a long time ago, and thus I do not have a direct personal connection. I am curious about the role of your own family experience in tapping into these sources. Where does it prove helpful, and where might it obstruct the work of the researcher? Also, I am curious to know what a particular photograph can tell you about Polish-Vietnamese relationships. Could you please provide a concrete example?

Thục Linh Nguyễn Vũ:

The topic I'm currently researching – Polish-Vietnamese connections – is at once eerily strange and intimately familiar, to borrow Stuart Hall's phrasing from his biography.[24] My upbringing in a migrant community in Poland has attuned me to these entanglements and allows me to discern relevance while others might not. Partial belonging to the European Vietnamese diaspora carries with it both a sense of responsibility and an attentiveness to the need to meet, yet also move beyond, the expectations of the Polish-Vietnamese community.

Through oral history interviews and images from private archives, I've discovered seemingly innocuous scenes of everyday life that, behind their apparent ordinariness, held importance for the historical actors. For example, a black-and-white photograph from 1986 shows a mixed-race couple, K. and Z., at a party in a private apartment in Cracow, where they were both students. The space seems homey – with flowers, glasses, a fan, and a familiar clutter. The couple and their friends sit closely together on a couch, pressed gently against one another. K. has his eyes closed, while she looks shyly at the camera, smiling. Their hands are intertwined, her other fingers rest around his neck, and his other arm is wrapped around her shoulder. Behind them, a friend embraces the couple with a broad grin. The atmosphere is relaxed and joyful, capturing both the casual gathering of students and the intimacy of a romantic relationship. Similar photos of the couple from the Polish woman's hometown of Nowy Sącz convey their closeness. What these images do not reveal, however, is Z.'s family's strong opposition to her marrying K. – an Asian man; a marriage she chose to pursue despite her family's disapproval. These quiet images from the private sphere – people experiencing closeness and joy, letting loose, simply sharing lives – are so valuable precisely because they reveal historical trajectories, such as the formation of mixed-race families, that were seldom acknowledged or validated by the official public sphere or by peers.[25] Private photographs also gesture towards both similarities and differences between the everyday lives of mixed-heritage couples and those of the broader society. Did the mixed couples spend leisure time in similar public spaces and institutions, or did intimacy and belonging unfold primarily within smaller private circles? Which complicated dynamics around mixed-race love remain unrepresented by these images? Such questions, too, belong to the shared histories and legacies of socialist and 'global Easts' attachments.

At the same time, the example of this particular couple and their private archive illuminates the strong yet complex relationship between voice and agency. Diasporic photographs can serve as

24. For discussions of the ambivalences surrounding positionality statements in scholarship, see J.K. Gani / R.M. Khan, 'Positionality Statements as a Function of Coloniality: Interrogating Reflexive Methodologies', in: *International Studies Quarterly* 68 (2024), 1–13.

25. T.L. Nguyễn Vũ, ''The Children Will Be Unhappy': Racialized Perceptions of Cultural Differences in Late Socialist Poland', in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 50 (2024), 240–264.

powerful sources, revealing the affective and unofficial aspects of everyday life, and offering glimpses into historical agents' self-images, everyday power dynamics, and ideologies that are often absent from official state records and historiography. Yet, like all sources, such images only capture fragments of lived experience and are inherently incomplete. They reflect agency through the actions and choices of historical actors, such as engaging in a mixed-race relationship against prevailing norms, and in the selection and preservation of specific moments from the past. When combined with oral history interviews and memoirs that foreground the voices of these actors, such photographs gain greater depth and resonance, offering a more vivid and multidimensional picture of the past and social relations.

Jan Musekamp, German Historical Institute Warsaw

Navigating Racist Borders and 'Global Color Lines': German Speakers from Ukraine on the Move, 1860–1950

In my research on the global migrations of German-speakers from Ukraine, the subalterns are (a) the migrants and (b) the Indigenous people whom the migrants encountered in their new places of settlement.[26] While both groups have left a sparse paper trail in government documents, these sources do not reveal the agency of the people in question.

The agency of German-speaking migrants is primarily reflected in personal letters exchanged between Canada and Ukraine (then part of the Russian Empire) over a 50-year period, from the 1890s to the 1940s. These letters reveal a tight network of families and neighbours who settled in different parts of the world. While most authors are men, reading between the lines allows us to hear the voices of women and children, even though these are filtered through a patriarchal lens that I need to scrutinise using tools from gender studies. These people were farmers and had no ties to the German national movement, which gained strength in urban areas of the Russian Empire during this period, especially in the Baltic provinces. Their agency was rooted in rational deliberation around land ownership, soil quality and the opportunity to freely practice their religion. While many remained in Ukraine, dealing with Imperial Russian anti-German policies, others migrated to areas like the Baltic provinces, Siberia, Canada, Germany and Brazil.

They were beneficiaries of exclusionary 'global color lines,' established by governments worldwide to favour certain groups of migrants over racialised others, such as Indigenous peoples.[27] In Canada's case, the government assigned land near Edmonton/Alberta to German-speaking settlers on the territory belonging to the Papaschase Cree Indigenous people. During the 1870s, Canadian officials granted them a reserve, only to force them to relinquish their rights about 15 years later. The Papaschase left a paper trail mainly in Canadian newspapers and documents from the local settlement agency, filtered through the widespread racist views of the dominant White male settlers and politicians. To understand their agency, I rely on oral tradition, which has been passed down through several generations to the present day.[28] For example, I had a conversation with Chief Darlene (Pâhpâhtêw Kihîw Iskwêw) Misik of the Papaschase, learning about how this particular First Nation tackles historical injustices through community work. On the settlers' side, I analysed a striking example of a continued cultural genocide. In a memory book from the 1980s, A. F. reports

26. For an overview of the research project and my research approach, please refer to Jan Musekamp, 'Navigating Global Color Lines: Volhynia's German Speakers on the Move', in: A. Flack et al. (eds.), *Russian Germans on Four Continents. Histories of a Global Diaspora*, Lanham/MD et al. 2024, 49–85.
27. On the concept of the 'global color line', refer to W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk. With a Critical Introduction by Patricia H. Hinchey*, Gorham, ME 2018, 17.
28. On how to use oral traditions for historical research, refer to A.E. Roberts, *I've Been Here All the While. Black Freedom on Native Land,* Philadelphia 2021.

on his family's settler past. He describes the desecration of an Indigenous burial ground, where a family member 'took the bones out of the ground […] and drilled holes in each bone so that […] [he] could wire the skeleton together,' subsequently donating it to the University of Edmonton.[29]

Thục Linh Nguyễn Vũ:

It seems that the complexities and dilemmas of agency are central to your research. What, then, constitutes the material reality of the historical agents' agency in your study? As a scholar, what limitations or contradictions do you encounter regarding their historical agency?

Jan Musekamp:

The material reality is key to understanding the subalterns' agency. The German-speaking peasants faced a difficult choice. On the one hand, they could stay in Ukraine without the opportunity to buy more land for their growing families, and with limited options for passing down the leased land to their children. On the other hand, they had the opportunity to buy affordable farmland in Brazil, Canada or Siberia, but at the cost of relocating to the unknown and losing their community ties. Based on the group's personal correspondence and the settlement records (both at the Provincial Archives in Edmonton, Alberta), research can recover their voices and understand the agency they had in pursuing ownership of land in the Edmonton region. However, this approach would obscure the voices of the dispossessed indigenous Papaschase Cree, for whom this very land was also crucial. Tapping into the oral traditions of the Cree is helpful but has its own challenges, that are related to my family heritage.

When doing research abroad, I am perceived as a German scholar (although I consider myself first and foremost a scholar, regardless of nationality). This background and my language expertise help me tap into the network of the descendants of my group of interest, and thus the sources. However, as a White man who might be linked to the past injustices committed against Indigenous people by European settlers, I anticipate issues when talking to descendants of the people deprived of their land.

Conclusion

What do these examples from different world regions and time periods indicate? First, approaches borrowed from postcolonial theory, such as the concept of the subaltern, can be fruitfully applied to research in world regions beyond the Global South.

Second, there is a distinction between agency and the voice of the subaltern – though sometimes it is blurry, as in the case of Lithuanian immigrants to North America. As some postcolonial theorists have demonstrated, emphasising agency can lead to an underestimation of the structures and constraints faced by subaltern groups.[30] Their voice, however, reflects these constraints and their efforts – successful or not – to resist, avoid, or circumvent them.

The second-tier actors in Michael Zok's research were mostly literate and often had income, depending on their education and the general political situation (since those going to the underground did not want to leave a 'paper trail', they were harder to observe). Previous historical research has focused on national heroes, thus it has often either ignored the voices of the actors in the background or has not looked deeper into the documents to find out more about them and to 'let them speak', considering them irrelevant for the independence movements. Consequently,

29. A. F., 'Falkenberg, Frederick and Minnie,' in: Papaschase Historical Society (ed.), *South Edmonton Saga*, Edmonton, Alberta, 1984, 451.

30. M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Princeton 2018, 15.

these second-tier actors fall into the category of subalterns. This also applies to Dovilė Čypaitė-Gilė's research on Lithuanian emigrants: the voices of women emigrating to join other family members in emigration are mostly absent from historical research. Anat Vaturi's example of the *shamashim* is comparable: they were literate and often had a stable income. Still, so far, researchers in Jewish, let alone Polish, history have failed to listen to their marginalised voices and thus have overlooked their agency. Robert Heinze's research on informal transportation networks in Africa also relies on material that is rarely used: in conducting biographical interviews, he literally lets the people at the centre of the network speak. The photographs in Thục Linh Nguyễn Vũ's project serve as a source that, by depicting everyday interactions, reveal previously untold stories. Such photographs embody traces of Vietnamese immigrants' lifeworld and agency that unfolded beyond official state-socialist discourse and against all odds. Again, the same is true for the oral traditions of Papaschase Indigenous people as a counterweight to the racialising success story told by sources of the German-speaking settlers to Canada and their descendants. Discussing our different approaches to how we listen to the voices of subaltern groups in our research projects thus restores agency to 'ordinary people' and enhances our toolbox as historians.

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