

A Journey through Time in Ten Maps: The Wild East of Europe

By Aila de la Rive, © MoneyMuseum

From the 6th century onwards, Slav tribes settled in the lands between the River Elbe and the Adriatic that had been left empty by the migration period. At first, these people were untouched by the heritage of classical civilisation and Christianity – they had no writing, no stone buildings, they minted no coins. Between the 9th and the 11th centuries, large states came into being: Bohemia, Poland, the Kievan Rus and Bulgaria.

How the new "states" of Eastern and Central Europe developed – these maps tell it. However – more about Eastern European coins we will show you in our coin collection. (Maps: www.sibiweb.de)

The devastating Hungarians



The map shows Eastern Europe around the year 1000.

The Hungarians are the only non-Indo-European people in Central Europe – their nearest linguistic relatives live in the northern Urals. That was where the Magyars, as the Hungarians call themselves, set out from on their journey to their present homeland.

Towards the end of the 9th century the Hungarian empire arose, and from here the Hungarian armies moved off on their shaggy little ponies on their feared predatory expeditions in the west. But in the year 955 the German king Otto I defeated the Hungarians so massively that they withdrew into their villages and ceased to be nomadic from then on.

The Mongolian storm



The map shows Eastern Europe around 1280.

As a result of the German expansion towards the east from 1220 onwards, together with various annexations, the regions occupied by the peoples of Eastern Europe changed during the 12th and 13th centuries. Hungary became subject to Croatia, enabling Bosnia to expand its influence.

But it was above all the attacks of the Mongolians in the years from 1221 to 1241 that shook many European countries to their foundations. The so-called Golden Horde even terrified the brave Hungarians. The Mongolian onslaught shattered the formerly powerful Kievan Rus into several independent principalities which owed tribute to the Horde. The Golden city of Kiev likewise fell victim to the Mongolians' power and was rased to the ground.

Eastern Europe at the centre of European history



The map shows Eastern Europe around 1370.

Thus in the 14th century the political centre of gravity in Europe moved eastwards. While the West was experiencing a period of instability, the East experienced the rise and firm establishment of powerful states. Bohemia, Poland and Hungary entered the mainstream of European history for the first time. A cultural symbol of that integration was the foundation of the universities of Prague (1348), Cracow (1364), Vienna (1365) and Pécs (1367).

The power politics of marriage: Poland-Lithuania



The map shows Eastern Europe around 1500.

Almost unnoticed by the contemporary powers that be, the grand duchy of Lithuania had developed into a major power on the ruins of the Kievan Rus. Little by little, it expanded to reach the shores of the Black Sea. But it was watched with envy on all sides. In the west, the Teutonic Order began to exert pressure on the grand duchy, seeking to Christianise the heathen Lithuanians. In the meantime, to the east, Muskovy was waiting for an opportunity to absorb morsels of Lithuania. So the Lithuanian grand duke Jagiello resolved on a bold move: he had himself baptised and married Princess Jadwiga, the heiress to the throne of Poland. This personal union brought the state of Poland-Lithuania into being.

Meanwhile Hungary was being attacked by the Ottoman Turks, and Bohemia was being weakened by a series of social and religious crises, the Hussite Wars.

The rise of the great powers



The map shows Eastern Europe around 1700.

Originally no more than an insignificant principality in western Anatolia, the Ottoman Empire rose from the 13th century onwards to become a world power, which endured till 1924. After conquering the Hungarians, the Ottoman Empire reached its greatest extent in the 1670s following the conquest of the Polish part of the Ukraine.

But Hapsburg Austria likewise rose to the rank of a world power during the 16th century. It was inevitable that these two powerful players on the European stage would collide. But in the siege of Vienna, the Ottoman sultans found they had bitten off more than they could chew. After being defeated in the Great Turkish War from 1683 to 1699, the Ottoman Empire was forced to cede Hungary and the Polish Ukraine to the Hapsburg empire.

A country that disappeared and the "sick man of Europe"



The map shows Eastern Europe around 1850.

In the east, too, the Ottoman Empire acquired a new, powerful opponent: under Catherine II, Russia conquered all the territories to the north of the Black Sea. The tsarina's empire took over from the Turks suzerainty over Moldavia and Wallachia, and from the 1830s onwards cynics began to refer to Turkey as "the sick man of Europe."

By now, though, inner dissension had fatally weakened Poland-Lithuania. In fact it disappeared entirely from the map at the end of the 18th century – divided and swallowed up by its neighbours Prussia, Russia and Austria.

The collapse of the multinational empires



The map shows Eastern Europe around 1920.

The First World War led to a complete reorganisation of the political map of Eastern Europe. All the empires disappeared: the Ottoman Empire followed the Russian and Austrian empires into oblivion, and Russia was pushed far back towards the east. Between the great powers of Russia and Germany there arose the so-called cordon sanitaire, intended to prevent cooperation between Russia and Germany. And any spread of Bolshevism in the Western world was not wanted.

Out of the tsarist empire arose several independent states: Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland. The Hapsburg empire split up into Austria, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Transylvania was incorporated into Romania, while Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro formed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

The Second World War



The map shows Eastern Europe around 1940.

Until the outbreak of the Second World War, the international borders in Europe remained untouched – but they caused conflicts. Many states were not happy with the new European order, above all the great losers of the First World War: Germany, Austria, Hungary and the Soviet Union.

In this map, the year is 1940 – war rages everywhere. Poland has disappeared from the map for the fourth time in its history: in the first few months of the war it was divided up between the Nazi Third Reich and the Soviet Union. Hungary and Romania are allied with Nazi Germany; soon most of continental Europe will be occupied or dominated by Germany.

Eastern Europe behind the Iron Curtain



The map shows Eastern Europe around 1920.

In the Second World War the Soviet Union got back the areas the tsarist empire lost after the First World War. The Baltic states were incorporated into the USSR. White Russia and the Ukraine – ruled by the Soviet Union of course – expanded far to the west at the expense of Poland. As a compensation for its losses in the east, Poland was simply pushed westwards, this time at the expense of Germany.

This political map lasted till 1990. In 1991 the Soviet Union was dissolved, and the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) was founded, largely consisting of the Soviet Union's successor states.

New old ethnic conflicts



The map shows Eastern Europe around 1995.

The policy of glasnost had far-reaching consequences for the whole of Eastern Europe. The consequences were most far-reaching in the former Yugoslavia. Here the tensions between the various ethnic groups broke out into a series of civil wars. But there are also other places where there are smouldering ethnic conflicts, for example the unsolved dispute between Hungary and Romania over Transylvania. The example of the Czech Republic and Slovakia makes a welcome change – they separated peacefully.

In the course of the past 1,000 years, peoples and borders in Eastern Europe were moved around on the map by the quarrels of the Great Powers as if they were chess pieces on a chess board; some were even wiped off the map. That caused certain national identities, long thought defunct, to become active again. After all, identity can only be defined by reference to what is foreign, what is not part of that identity.