

# Interview: Constantin Ardeleanu

**Constantin Ardeleanu** is currently a Senior Researcher at the Institute for South-East European Studies and New Europe College – Institute for Advanced Study, Bucharest. His research interests include the social and economic history of Danubian Europe and the Black Sea region since the eighteenth century. Ardeleanu has published articles on various topics related to the opening of the Black Sea to international trade and shipping and the market integration of South-Eastern European port cities. His latest monograph is titled [\*Steamboat Modernity. Travel, Transport, and Social Transformation on the Lower Danube, 1830–1860\*](#) (CEU Press, 2024).



Constantin Ardeleanu  
Institute for South-East European Studies;  
New Europe College

***Can you briefly present your background? What motivated you to focus your research on the history of health?***

“I am a social and economic historian of Southeast Europe, with a particular interest in the larger Black Sea region. I obtained my degree in History from the “Lower Danube” University of Galați. Subsequently, I was awarded my PhD from the “Nicolae Iorga” History Institute of the Romanian Academy, where my doctoral thesis focused on the emergence of British economic and political interests in the western Black Sea region during the long nineteenth century. My experience as a seaman in the Romanian navy has had a significant impact on my development as a social and economic historian with a particular interest in maritime history and the study of waterways, port-cities, shipping, and trade. The sea is, by definition, a space of free and intense mobility. However, as is evident in relation to its international status or in relation to the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine, the Black Sea has a distinctive character that makes it a particularly fascinating object of analysis from a historian’s perspective.

In the course of my research on shipping and trade in the Black Sea and along the Danube, I have also examined the relationship between free trade and public health. As evidenced by the recent Covid-19 pandemic, outbreaks of epidemic or pandemic proportions have the potential to significantly impede the functioning of free market principles. In examining the integration of the Black Sea grain trade into international markets during the nineteenth century, I also investigated the impact of plague and cholera outbreaks on regular economic flows in Southeast Europe. These outbreaks prompted private investors and state bureaucrats to seek solutions to mitigate the associated risks.

I have therefore been interested in the history of public health from the perspective of this connection to port cities, which were the region’s greatest commercial hubs, but also the main gateways through which contagion was believed to enter those territories.”



# Interview: Constantin Ardeleanu

**Can you briefly present the project “Entangled Histories of the Danubian Quarantine System (1774–1914) (Exploratory Research PN-III-P4-PCE-2021-1374)”? What are the main findings? Did you encounter any challenges during the implementation of this project?**

“This project, which in 2022 received funding from UEFISCDI, Romania’s executive agency that oversees research grant competitions, aims to investigate the various functions of the quarantine system established along the Lower Danube in the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia/Romania during the long nineteenth century. This investigation has adopted an entangled and global histories perspective and has connected with recent developments in the transdisciplinary field of quarantine studies. Public health crises in the form of pandemics were critical junctures in the process of modernisation. Scholarship in the field of quarantine studies has emphasised the role that the fight against pandemics played in the nation- and state-building, as well as in the development of transnational cooperation and the “unification of the world by disease”. Similarly, epidemiological concerns played a significant role in the formation of modern Romania.

This project seeks to make a contribution to this emerging field by focusing on the case of the Danubian quarantine from approximately 1774 to 1914. The project thus aims to capture the clash and cooperation of different interests, from those of the Austrian and Russian empires (which initially sought to use the river as a natural barrier against the spread of disease) to those of the newly established nation-states in the region (Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia), which struggled to find a balance between the economic function of the river (which made it a busy transportation infrastructure) and the risks associated with the mobility of disease.

The project is structured into three main components, touching on different historical scales. The first component is to delineate the institutionalisation of the quarantine system from 1774 to 1853, at the advent of the Crimean War. It aims to emphasise the political and medical functions of quarantines during a period when it constituted an extension of Austria’s and Russia’s anti-epidemiological defence. However, it also contributed to state- and nation-building in the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia. The Organic Regulations, for instance, imposed standardised quarantine policies that, through the medical, administrative, economic, and political aspects involved, contributed to the rapprochement of the two states towards economic and political union. The second component seeks to examine quarantine stations or lazarettos as nexuses of knowledge and technology transfer between relevant parties, including imperial powers, riparian nation-states, and commercial networks. Following the Crimean War, the European Commission of the Danube played a pivotal role in maintaining the region’s connectivity to mainstream epidemic control measures while facilitating the continued commercial activity along the river. The third component is a micro-history of Danubian lazarettos, which are presented as busy global hubs. It considers lazarettos as contact zones that challenge the traditional dichotomy between private and public spaces.

The [team](#) have conducted research in a range of Romanian and international archives and have commenced the publication of papers on the subject. In these publications, my colleagues and I have demonstrated how pivotal the quarantine system has been for imperial expansion and state-building in the region.

One significant obstacle to be overcome has been the restricted access to sources in Ukraine and Russia. Given the pivotal role played by imperial Russia in the establishment of the Danubian quarantine system, it would be highly beneficial to have access to the relevant funds that are preserved in Odesa or in Russia’s central archives. Nevertheless, we have been able to use sources from provincial archives preserved in the Republic of Moldova, which shed light on the political role of the quarantine system in imperial Russia’s anti-Ottoman policies.”



# Interview: Constantin Ardeleanu

***Can you describe the methodologies you use in your research? How do you ensure the accuracy and reliability of your sources?***

“Methodologically, this project is indebted to a mixture of approaches specific to quarantine studies, entangled history, global history, mobility studies, and institutional history. The project employs a multi-scalar approach, integrating three distinct historical levels: the local, the national, and the global. The Danubian quarantine stations, situated at the crossroads of international mobility corridors, were dynamic institutions established through the transfer of knowledge and technology from neighbouring empires. Throughout their existence, they remained interconnected with similar institutions in the Levant and in Southeast Europe.

By examining the complex web of connections and interactions, it becomes evident that the Danubian quarantine system was not merely a rigid barrier against the spread of epidemics. Instead, it constituted a network of porous global hubs, facilitating the circulation of epistemic communities, standardised practices, and vital public health information at the peripheries of empires.

In this project, we pursued three research avenues. The first is the spatial turn, which demonstrates how the cordon sanitaire contributed to the fixation of territoriality and the creation of state borders in the region. The threat of epidemic disease led to the fixation of a fluid border along a circulating river, which allowed for negotiations of power and identity across the Danubian borderline. Secondly, the transnational paradigm reveals social interactions in cosmopolitan lazarettos, which were mainly based on “quarantine narratives” authored by voyagers who spent time in these establishments. Thirdly, as arenas of intense economic relations, quarantine stations are of interest to be studied in connection with the paradigmatic struggle between money and microbes.

We use a wide variety of sources, from diplomatic and consular dispatches to reports from local officials or doctors, from newspaper articles and pamphlets to statistics and memoirs. We rely on our experience as researchers to take sources for what they are: incomplete or partisan bits of information, but which, taken together and critically analysed, allow us to “see” more clearly into the past.”

***What are some emerging trends or new areas of research within the study of the history of health that you find particularly promising or intriguing?***

“My own research has increasingly focused on the interconnections between the history of public health and environmental studies.

The nineteenth century saw the introduction of quarantines not only for human passengers and cargo, but also for animals, which were themselves the subject of a particularly intense focus in Southeast Europe. It is notable that Romania’s cattle export industry was particularly significant, whereas Serbia was renowned for its pig and pork trade. It has therefore been my intention to study not only epidemics such as plague or cholera, but also epizootics and the genesis of the modern veterinary system in the region.

A second interesting aspect pertains to the correlation between the dissemination of epidemics and non-human species. Since the late nineteenth century, with significant advancements in the medical sciences, new strategies have been employed to target “pests” with the objective of halting the transmission of diseases. The rat is perhaps the most famous case, with new technologies being employed to eradicate this “pest”. Examples of such technologies include the Clayton machines, which, as Lukas Engelmann and Christos Lynteris demonstrated in their recent monograph, gave rise to utopian visions of disease-free global trade exchanges.”

*Interview conducted by Anna Batzeli.*