Map 35 offers a composite glance at (almost) all the scripts employed in Central Europe during the last two millennia, obviously with a clear focus on the second millennium CE, when the technology of writing became widespread across the region due to Christianization and, to a degree, Islamization. Both Christianity and Islam are scriptural religions, steeped in their respective “holy books,” each executed in a given language with the use of a specific script. By extension, traditionally, these languages and scripts were deemed as “holy” too. In premodern terms, when religion served as the leading ideology of statehood creation, legitimation, and maintenance, this officially sacred status translated into the high prestige of such “holy tongues” and “holy scripts.” Hence, when in the early modern period vernaculars began to be employed for written purposes and publishing, their users stuck to the script of their religion’s “holy tongue.” Subsequent secularization rarely dissolved this premodern scriptal link.

This map is a version of Map 34. The largest extents of the now (largely) defunct scripts are interposed in the form of lines on the blocks of solid color with which present-day Central Europe’s three official scripts of Cyrillic, Greek, and Latin, are denoted. Also, the furthest extents of ancient and modern use of the Greek and Latin alphabets are marked in the form of lines, alongside the furthest modern (mainly nineteenth-century) employment of Cyrillic.

The extents of the ancient and medieval scripts are mainly of antiquarian interest and no contemporary political or ideological claims are typically connected to them. However, in the first half of the twentieth century the early medieval presence of the Gothic (i.e., the Germanic-speaking Goths’) script in the Balkans and the medieval one of (Nordic) Runes from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea allowed nationally-minded German(ic) archeologists, historians, and ideologues to present these finding as “proof” that Central Europe and much of Eastern Europe should “rightfully” belong to the “civilizationally superior” Germans and other Germanic nations rather than to the inferior Slavs and Jews. This view, or rather prejudice, informed Germany’s “science of race” (Rassenkunde), which proposed an extermination of these “weed-like” Slavs and Jews, who were purportedly “choosing the natural growth” of the Germans and Germanic nations in “their” natural Lebensraum (living space). Despite the fact that it was wartime Germany that banned the use of Fraktur and the Gothic type of the Latin alphabet (also known in English as Blackletter) in 1941, the easternmost employment of this script eerily marks out the predicted eastern reaches of Germany’s Lebensraum. This clearly shows that thinking about such inherently nebulous concepts as civilization or culture seems to be translated into space with the prop of the attested, however tenuously, presence of this or that script, typically connected to a religion and its holy book.

This regularity is well exemplified by the early nineteenth-century Greek thought on the desired borders of a future Greek nation-state. In the north the limit of the Greek national dream was either the Dniester or the Prut because Moldavia’s inhabitants were Orthodox Christians, and until 1821 were ruled by a Phanariot prince who employed Greek as the language of central administration. As a result, early Greek nationalists claimed all the Ottoman Empire’s Orthodox faithful—irrespective of language—for a Greek nation and its nation-state. They equated the empire’s Rum (Roman) milieu of Orthodox Christians with a Greek nation on account of the fact that this milieu’s main language of administration was Greek. Bulgarian and Serbian nationalists disagreed and pointed to “their” respective medieval empires as indicators of where the frontiers of future Bulgarian and Serbian nation-states, respectively, should be put on the political map of modern Europe. In scriptal terms, these two, to a degree overlapping, empires can be mapped out by the furthest extent of the employment of Cyrillic in the late medieval Balkans. As in the case of Greek nationalists, their Bulgarian counterparts’ claim clashed with Romanian nationalism, because first, the Church Slavonic language, and later the Cyrillic-based Walachian (Romanian) were in official use across today’s Romania from the Middle Ages to the turn of the 1860s. Among others, this clash prompted Romanian national leaders to order a switch in the early 1860s from Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet for writing and publishing in Romanian.

Before Cyrillic was invented in the late ninth century, Glagolitic had been in use for writing (Old Church) Slavonic since the 860s. Some rudimentary use of this script survived in Slavophone Catholic liturgy in northern Dalmatia until the turn of the twentieth century. Unsurprisingly, Croatian nationalists seized the history of the use of Glagolitic across the Balkans, especially to strengthen their claim to Dalmatia. On the other end of historical Hungary, Glagolitic and a vague memory of medieval Greater Moravia, where this script was invented and used for two decades, allowed Slovak nationalists to “prove” that their nation had the coveted tradition of early statehood going back in time for at least a millennium.
What is more, armed with this argument, Slovak national activists could stand up to the Czechs on the ideological arena of national competition by showing that (Moravia-)Slovakia was older than any Czech polity.

The furthest easternmost extent of the Latin alphabet—nowadays deep in the area of Cyrillic in western Russia, east of today’s Belarus and (central) Ukraine—marks out the easternmost frontier of Poland-Lithuania. In turn, the westernmost employment of Cyrillic, cutting through today’s Poland (obviously, monoscriptal in the Latin alphabet) is a memory of the fact that from 1772 to 1815 the Russian Empire annexed over four-fifths of the Polish-Lithuanian territory. To a degree, the historical employment of both alphabets were used by Soviet politicians, alongside Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian nationalists, to propose where the “correct” western frontiers of their polities should be placed. In turn, their Polish counterparts used the same argument in reverse when proposing the proper eastern boundaries of the Polish nation-state.

At present, the furthest northernmost use of the Arabic script does not seem to be serving any political ends or projects, beyond allowing Bosniak (Bosnian) nationalists to substantiate their claim to the Ottoman-Islamic heritage for Bosnia and the Bosniak nation. This script’s northern extent preserves a memory of the early modern military successes of the Ottoman Empire which reached what today is Slovakia and western Ukraine, alongside the Arabic Caliphate’s expansion in the eastern Mediterranean during the medieval period. In contrast, it appears that the northernmost and westernmost extent of the use of the Old Turkic script and its related Old Hungarian version informed political projects of various Pan-Turkic and Pan-Turanian movements in the early twentieth century and in the 1990s, following the fall of communism. Furthermore, after 2015, the Old Hungarian alphabet was elevated to the position of the de facto second national script of the Hungarian language in present-day Hungary.

The extent of the use of the Hebrew abjad is a timely reminder of the fact that the majority of the world’s Jews lived in Central Europe until the Holocaust perpetrated during World War Two by Germans, Austrians, and their wartime allies. Especially in the northern half of Central Europe, from Latvia to Hungary and from Germany to western Russia, the presence of Hebrew letters in books and on gravestones marks out the space of former Yiddishland (see Map 16). The presence of administrative documents and gazettes in the Hebrew script-based Yiddish, marked separately on the map, indicates where Germany’s semi-colonial polity of Ober Ost used to be. For the first time in history, in this occupation polity, Yiddish was used in administrative capacity and as a medium of education. Afterward, in interwar Soviet Belarus, Yiddish became one of the country’s four official languages, alongside Belarusian, Polish, and Russian.

The westernmost extent of the diasporic use of the Armenian script shows where Armenian diasporic communities existed or still exist in the wake of the destruction of medieval Armenia. San Lazzaro degli Armeni in Venice was a monastic institution where Modern Armenian was codified at the turn of the nineteenth century. This institution also gave an impulse to the standardization of the Bulgarian language in the 1820s. In central and eastern Turkey gravestones and buildings with Armenian inscriptions remain silent witnesses to the 1915 Ottoman genocide of Armenians and Assyrians.

Last but not least, the extent of the “mixed” scripts denote the areas where conflicting scriptal and political traditions clashed and then interwove for a time, before monoscriptalism of a certain type was selected as appropriate for a given nation. This was the case of the Walachian (Romanian) language written in an idiosyncratically executed mixture of Cyrillic and Latin letters from the 1820s until the turn of the 1860s in the Danubian Principalities of Walachia and Moldavia. Another example is that of Albanian speakers. On the ethnoreligious basis, they used to belong to as many as three Ottoman millets, namely, those for Muslims, Orthodox Christians, and Catholics. The initial movement for cultural (and then national) autonomy of Albanian speakers first drew on the tradition of Catholic literacy developed by co-ethnics in southern Italy in Latin letters. In addition, Orthodox Christianity with its prestigious Greek script allowed for distancing the political project from Ottomanism. But until 1908 Albanian national leaders could not agree on a single script, though they subscribed to the idea of nationally and ethnolinguistically motivated monoscriptalism. As a result, another idiosyncratically executed mixed script emerged, as a cross between the Greek and Latin alphabets. In 1908 this mixed script, alongside some others, was replaced with the Latin alphabet, then quite universally seen as the “script of progress and civilization.”