

## Book Reviews

### ANCIENT TO MODERN EUROPE

*Imperial Borderlands: Institutions and Legacies of the Habsburg Military Frontier.* By Bogdan G. Popescu. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024. Pp. xiii + 300. \$87.56, hardcover.  
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In their seminal work on Balkan economic history, Lampe and Jackson (1982) begin by examining the geographical unity of the Balkans—a term derived from Turkic, meaning “high mountain.” They argue that the region’s unique economic geography is shaped by its rugged mountain ranges and the influence of waterways like the Danube River and the Black Sea, which divide and unify the area in different ways.

Recent decades have seen substantial growth in our understanding of the region’s broader economic history. The collection of essays edited by Matthias Morys (2021) consolidates much of the scholarship that has followed the foundational works of Berend and Ránki (1974), Lampe and Jackson (1982), and Palairt (1997). However, these studies have often given limited attention to the regions situated between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires prior to their dissolution. Research that approaches the region’s history from either the Ottoman or Habsburg perspective frequently overlooks the comparative and unifying characteristics of these borderlands, largely due to the challenges of accessing sources in multiple languages. As a result, these imperial borderlands have remained peripheral not only to the empires they once belonged to but also to the scholarship on those empires.

Bogdan Popescu’s *Imperial Borderlands* makes a significant contribution by addressing this gap. By integrating new historical evidence with social science methodologies, Popescu enhances our understanding of a region that has historically lagged behind the rest of Europe, caught between the expansive territorial empires of the Ottoman and Habsburg.

The title of Popescu’s book, *Imperial Borderlands*, is not entirely novel, as it echoes the subtitle of Lampe and Jackson’s (1982) classic work, which traced the evolution of the Balkans “from imperial borderlands to developing nations.” While Popescu builds on this traditional line of inquiry, the book might have benefited from a more direct engagement with this literature at the outset, potentially making it more compelling for scholars of economic history in the region. Instead, Popescu situates his work within the debates of new institutional economics, drawing on insights from political science, anthropology, and sociology.

When examining the Habsburg legacy in the imperial borderlands, Lampe and Jackson primarily focus on shifts in commercial orbits, increasing trade with and migration from the Ottoman Balkans, and the Habsburg authorities’ failure to integrate the borderlands into their internal market. Popescu’s work resonates most with this last point, as he provides a more in-depth analysis of these institutional legacies.

Conceptually, Popescu applies the theory of extractive institutions, as proposed by Acemoglu and Johnson (2005), to the military borderlands of the Habsburg Empire. His central argument posits that the institutions established by the Habsburgs in these military frontiers stifled development through the use of violence, restrictions on property rights, and inadequate provision of public goods. This new institutionalist narrative is well-known among economic historians. According to Popescu, the economic success of Western Europe and North America can largely be attributed to democratic institutions that protect property rights, facilitate efficient resource allocation through the free exchange of ideas, and incentivize governments to make prudent policy decisions due to the risk of electoral

loss. Although there is a substantial body of critical literature on this framework, Popescu does not challenge its core tenets; rather, he seeks to explain the underdevelopment of the Habsburg borderlands by examining the institutional diversity within the empire.

Popescu begins his analysis by employing satellite luminosity data, which he overlays with the political borders between the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires as they existed in 1739 (p. 3). He argues that the military frontier, which he refers to as a “colony,” first emerged in 1553 as part of the Habsburgs’ defensive efforts against the Ottomans. Over time, this frontier expanded to encompass parts of modern-day Croatia, Serbia, and Romania, persisting until the mid-nineteenth century. Within these military zones, the Habsburgs systematically neglected infrastructure investment, displaced landed elites, and imposed communal property rights on the local populations. Even after the formal abolition of the military frontier in 1881, certain institutions persisted informally. Popescu traces the enduring legacy of these institutions, analyzing their impact on political attitudes and norms through both long-term and short-term transmission mechanisms. While the initial chapters may give the impression of the “compression of history,” as Austin (2008) might describe it, the subsequent chapters provide a more balanced narrative, offering detailed historical accounts of the mechanisms and causality involved.

The book is organized thematically. Chapter 2 establishes a theoretical framework for understanding military colonialism as an example of extractive institutions, characterized by limited infrastructure investment, the suppression of individual property rights, and the use of violence. Popescu then applies this framework to the Habsburg case, offering examples across different historical periods. He argues that under military colonialism, inhabitants of the imperial frontier were transformed into professional soldiers, as demonstrated by the significant portion of the year they dedicated to military activities.

Following a presentation of how military colonialism emerged and evolved over time, Chapter 4 examines the legacies of military colonialism. By using historical maps and GIS methods, Popescu quantitatively reconstructs the military frontier and contrasts it with the surrounding civilian areas through a regression discontinuity analysis, using the frontier as a dividing line. This chapter is particularly noteworthy for its extensive visual evidence and maps. The correlations presented are compelling, indicating that the borderlands have historically had, and continue to have, lower access to public goods. However, some questions remain unresolved regarding the selection of treatment and control groups. Would similar patterns emerge in other Habsburg military frontiers, such as those in the western regions closer to the heartlands of the Industrial Revolution? Or is this phenomenon unique to the Ottoman frontier? Additionally, how does one account for the relatively better economic performance of certain regions within the military frontier, such as Slovenia? The chapter concludes with a discussion of “alternative explanations,” offering a reflective examination of potential limitations in the analysis.

Chapter 5 explores the micro-mechanisms of transmission, providing evidence on the governance of families and family clans. This chapter will likely resonate strongly with historians, as it offers a more tangible connection to primary sources by focusing on a specific family clan, though one located outside the military colony. Additionally, by engaging with anthropological scholarship, this chapter introduces a new layer of interdisciplinarity, enriching the overall analysis and adding depth to the historical narrative.

Chapter 6 continues the exploration of family clans, examining their role as substitutes for the central state. Popescu employs recent survey data on attitudes and norms to estimate the impact of military colonialism on group bias and nepotism, once again utilizing regression discontinuity methodology. By comparing respondents from the military colony areas with those from the civilian empire, this chapter reveals further

correlations, such as a stronger affinity for family members, a persistence of risk aversion and collectivism, and the specific role of women within households. However, when it comes to other values, such as trust in political institutions, Popescu finds no significant differences between the two regions.

The final chapter offers a reflective analysis on the uniqueness of the Habsburg case and the Habsburg-Ottoman military frontier. Popescu draws intriguing parallels with other historical examples, such as the Cossacks under the Russian military system and the military colonies established by the French in Algeria, noting that the Habsburg and Russian models served as templates for these systems. These comparisons are thought-provoking and have the potential to further develop the concept of military colonies as a distinct unit of analysis.

Popescu deserves commendation for bringing together an impressive array of primary and secondary sources, as well as for engaging with literature in multiple languages. The book successfully blends historical methodology with a social science framework, incorporating modern data analysis techniques. The extensive appendix, which supplements the regression discontinuity analysis in Chapters 4 and 6, is particularly useful. However, the appendix could be further enhanced by including some of the underlying data, allowing for replication of the analysis—especially given that many of the black-and-white maps included in the book are difficult to decipher.

Overall, the book raises significant questions about several key concepts within institutionalist literature and state-building, and it examines their applicability in historical contexts from a cross-disciplinary perspective. It makes a valuable contribution to the historiography of the Habsburg Empire and the ongoing debates in new institutional economics regarding the emergence and functioning of extractive institutions.

More than 40 years ago, Lampe and Jackson observed that Habsburg policies did little to promote economic development in the “Military Border” compared to “Civil Croatia,” attributing this disparity to geographical constraints and the persistence of the “zadruga system” (pp. 62–68). They also noted the “near complete lack of imperial investment in the border’s infrastructure,” which limited opportunities for manufacturing development (p. 71). Popescu’s book builds upon this earlier scholarship, utilizing a broader range of historical evidence combined with modern analytical techniques to shed new light on the underlying mechanisms at play. It is a welcome addition to the literature and offers a compelling case study of the military frontier as an example of an extractive institution.

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