

Timothy Olin: The Banat of Temesvar. Borderland Colonization in the Habsburg Monarchy. Stanford University Press. Stanford 2025. XII, 327 S. ISBN 978-1-5036-3994-2. (\$ 75,-)

There were numerous banats in the history of the northern Balkans. The word just means a territory administered by a local viceroy called a “ban” (or “banus”). *The Banat*, however, by convention refers to a roughly square-shaped province more or less centered on the town of Temesvar and established by the Habsburgs in the aftermath of their recovery of the region from the Ottomans which was confirmed by the peace of Passarowitz (Požarevac) in 1718. It existed under direct rule from Vienna for only sixty years, before being reincorporated—by one of Joseph II’s not infrequently puzzling decisions, since it seemed to contradict his centralist priorities—into the Kingdom of Hungary and the latter’s established administrative and social structures. At that point the Banat’s official history ceased, apart from a brief and titular revival in the 1850s; however, since it was co-extensive with the three counties of Temes, Torontál, and Krassó-Szörény, it retained a certain geographical coherence.

The prime Austrian policy for the Banat was resettlement of its devastated plainlands with colonists from the Holy Roman Empire: quite a multifarious crew, but identified as “Germans” (and often loosely as “Swabians”). The purpose was to establish flourishing agriculture, based on arable production, and stable loyalist village communities, in pursuit of which settlers were accorded grants and at least temporary privileges by the authorities. This formed part of a meliorative and civilizing process, intended to rest on a dominance in the Banat of those Catholic values that the Habsburgs promoted as the cultural fabric of their imperial rule. It went with a deliberate partiality for “German” standards and practices, as against the traditional extensive farming methods and semi-nomadic proclivities of the existing populations of mainly Rascians and Wallachs.

Timothy Olin tells this story efficiently and thoroughly within its own terms, drawing much fresh material from the voluminous *Banater Akten*, generated by the provincial administration in Temesvar and the offices at the court in Vienna—mainly the *Hofkammer* and *Hofkriegsrat*—to which it was subject. He afforges these with a selection from the vast literature of memoirs, travels and village chronicles (he could have cited more such *Heimatbücher* to supply local color). O. also had the bright idea of consulting British newspapers which reported regularly, albeit briefly and often with garbled information, from the Balkan frontier.

These sources tend to confirm the thrust of his argument: The Banat represents a classic case of colonization, which succeeded in its goal of “Europeanizing” (a term he employs repeatedly but uncritically) a remote and backward territory. As such he likens it to other contemporary experiments with German settlement in Russia, Spain, North America, and elsewhere. Above all there was the Habsburgs’ own parallel creation in Galicia which became for some the fondly remembered image of a society designed on the principles of enlightened absolutism and doomed to extinction once the carapace of the Monarchy was broken. There are no consistent or sustained transnational comparisons here, and no direct engagement with the influential ideas of Larry Wolff,¹ but O.’s approach is suggestive.

That makes it the more surprising that he misses the wider Hungarian context of resettlement. The boundaries of the Banat were shifting, and anyway encompassed only a limited part of the southern and eastern borderlands (more and better maps would have helped to clarify this). There were myriad “German” settlers in neighboring Batschka and Baranya, where very similar conditions prevailed; likewise in Syrmia and Slavonia further west. The institutionalized Military Frontier (*Militärgrenze*) stretched for hundreds of miles, incorporating at times part of the Banat, and its miscellaneous gathered populations

1 LARRY WOLFF: *The Idea of Galicia: History and Fantasy in Habsburg Political Culture*, Stanford 2010. See now: NORMAN DAVIES: *Galicja: Historia nie narodowa* [Galicia: A Non-National History], Kraków 2025.

faced much the same challenges. Portions of the Partium and Transylvania received a flow of immigrants—sometimes such as had originally been tempted by an offer from the Banat. At the start the Habsburgs had envisaged a much larger project which treated the whole of Hungary as a kind of *tabula rasa*. O. mentions this so-called *Einrichtungswerk*,² originally drafted in 1689, but neglects its lasting relevance as a larger conjectural context for understanding what took place in the Banat.

A more disquieting absence is that of the native population of the Banat, always a clear majority of its inhabitants. These were mainly the Rascians and Wallachs of O.'s text, where they appear essentially as staffage. He took the decision to describe them using those exonyms, the language of his sources: a creditable expedient up to a point, avoiding the anachronism of attributing to them markers of modern ethnic identity. The Austrian administration often referred to these peoples collectively as *Nationalisten*, again without the later connotations of the word. Yet that sort of usage was, and is, also inescapably patronizing. Their equivalent endonyms were "Serb" and "Romanian" respectively; and an examination of some features of their cohabitation in the eighteenth-century Banat was called for to enhance O.'s portrayal of it.

Above all religion, for both peoples sustained a single rich Orthodox ecclesiastical culture. Whereas O. stresses the official policy of Roman-Catholic hegemony and the establishment of Uniate (Greek-Catholic) churches to extend it, he neglects the differential impact of this on the *Nationalisten*. Serbs, who controlled the Orthodox hierarchy and had settlers' privileges to protect its operation, remained aloof and hostile. Romanians, subordinated and lacking such advantage, could be won over, at least superficially, in large numbers. In both cases, though in separate ways, the experience contributed by the end of the century to calls for national recognition. O. notes this only for the Rascians, ignoring the Wallachs, and he doesn't develop the point. His coverage of the key Serbian political episode, the Sabor convened at Temesvar in 1790, is sketchy; his consistent misspelling of the young and dynamic prelate Stefan Stratimirović who led that assembly as "Startimirović" doesn't inspire confidence.

There is more than one way to write the story of the Banat. For all his scrupulous scholarship and the current resonance of his discussion of an experiment in colonialism, O.'s account belongs in a traditional genre of German settler historiography, with a distinctly national tinge which culminated in the likes of Joseph Kallbrunner and Fritz Valjavec. Another approach has been signaled in the broader multiethnic survey by Irina Marin, which appeared in English in 2013 and is now available in augmented form as *Kleine Geschichte des Banats: Umkämpfte Grenzen im östlichen Europa*.

Oxford

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- 2 Recent tricentennial survey: ANDRÁS OROSS (ed.): *Neuaufbau im Donauraum nach der Türkenzeit: Tagungsband der internationalen Konferenz anlässlich des 300-jährigen Jubiläums des Friedens von Passarowitz*, Wien 2021.

19th-Century Hungarian Political Thought and Culture. Towards Settlement with Austria, 1790–1867. Hrsg. von Ferenc Hörcher und Kálmán Tóth. Bloomsbury Academic. London u. a. 2024. XIII, 245 S. ISBN 978-1-3502-0295-5. (\$ 28,76.)

This collective volume on nineteenth-century Hungarian political thought and culture provides an overview of the major thinkers of this crucial period. It also offers a survey of current Hungarian research on the history of political ideas, represented by the fourteen authors who come from various academic institutes. The essays are also framed as a dialogue between different scholarly generations: one study is by the doyen of the research field, while others were written by young postdoctoral researchers. Unfortunately, however, the book is quite "masculine;" there is not a single female scholar among the contributors.