Book Review

Bogdan G. Popescu. **2024**. ***Imperial Borderlands: Institutions and Legacies of the Habsburg Military Frontier***. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press. 332 pp., ISBN 9781009365161 (hardcover), ISBN 9781009365185 (paperback), ISBN 9781009365178 (eBook), £85.00 / $39.99 / £29.99

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Popescu's first book is brilliant and flawed at the same time, a prime example of the advantages and challenges of an interdisciplinary approach. The topic it addresses is how the extractive colonial institutions of the Habsburg Military Frontier in Croatia (*Hrvatska Vojna Krajina*) have influenced developmental trajectories, social norms, and political attitudes, the impact of which is still felt today. Created in the 16th century in response to the Ottoman threat, the Frontier existed between 1553 and 1881 and served both as a buffer zone and a tool of Habsburg imperial expansion. Eventually, it was governed directly by the Aulic War Council (*Hofkriegsrat*) in Graz, which established a distinct legal and political order, whereby peasants-turned-soldiers were granted land without feudal obligations in return for hereditary military service. Within these military zones, the Habsburgs systematically neglected infrastructure investment, displaced landed elites, and imposed communal property rights on the local populations. Certain institutions related to the Frontier persisted informally after its abolition. Popescu traces the Frontier's enduring legacy through both long- and short-term transmission mechanisms.

The Habsburg military colony, as Popescu calls it, was not only peripheral to the empire but has remained marginal in the Habsburg historical scholarship written in English. Popescu's main English-language basis is Gunther E. Rothenberg's 1958 PhD dissertation from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, "Antemurales Christianitatis: The Austrian Military Border in Croatia, 1522–1749", which was published in 1960 by the University of Chicago Press as *The Military Border in Croatia, 1522–1749,* followed by his second study, *The Military Border in Croatia, 1750–1888: A Study of an Imperial Institution*, released by the same publisher in 1966. (Both volumes were translated into German in 1970.)

Today, most heirs of the Habsburg border soldiers, the so-called *Grenzer* (*graničari*), are to be found in Serbia and Croatia, and the emotional attitudes they have adopted about the military border's past are highly polarised. The military commanders of Slavic, or Croatian/Serbian, origin were referred to by the Habsburgs

according to their religious denomination as (Orthodox) Vlachs, (Roman Catholic) Uskoks, and others. Paradoxically, in today's Croatia and Serbia, they are celebrated as heroes, even though it was only in the 19th century that they were allowed to reach higher ranks and they were entirely in the service of the Habsburg Empire. The brilliance of Popescu's book consists in the fact that he managed to avoid a one-dimensional national or confessional contextualisation of the Frontier's history. Instead, he documents and analyses how the *Grenzer* were exploited for the benefit of the empire, held back for centuries, and often beaten or executed for minor breaches of the strict rules regulating their poor, militarised existence.

To stress the longevity of its key features, Popescu begins with recent satellite luminosity data showing underdevelopment in those parts of Croatia that correspond to the former Frontier. Using modern econometric methods and drawing on insights from political science, anthropology, and sociology, he convincingly situates the Military Border within the framework of (military) colonialism and institutional persistence, usually reserved for Western overseas colonial enterprises. Popescu singles out the forced recruitment of the local populations, their limited access to public goods, and the rigid communal property systems, drawing striking parallels with other colonial contexts. While certainly not the first to describe the Habsburg Frontier as a form of colonialism, Popescu presents it as the key to understanding its legacy, dedicating his initial chapters to justifying this theoretical framework and his reading of the Frontier's history within the paradigm of colonialism. In his last chapter, Popescu also relates the Frontier to other similar cases, such as the Russian military colonies of Cossacks, and shows how both the Habsburgs and the Russians created a model that the French later tried to emulate in Africa. They explicitly used the term "colonialism" when referring to the Habsburg prototype of their own colonial empire.

Popescu applies the concept of military colonialism based on its extractive features, that is employing a three-dimensional model of extraction through infrastructural underinvestment, the removal of property rights, and the use of violence. Using a spatial regression discontinuity design, he compares communities within and just outside the Military Frontier and shows that areas formerly under the Frontier administration persistently faced lower levels of public goods provision, for example transport infrastructure, education and schools, hospital access, and sanitation infrastructure, than the neighbouring civilian territory. This is something that previous scholarship has noted but not examined in detail or presented as a Habsburg strategy of keeping its subjects subservient. One field marshal's report which Popescu cites insisted that it was not possible to have prosperous peasants and cheap soldiers at the same time. Other features specific to the Military Frontier, such as the ban on Jewish settlement until its abolition in 1881, are not considered, but Popescu identifies a high level of land equality and more communal property as

crucial long-term legacies of the aforementioned Habsburg extractive institutions. This not only hindered successful economic development, but continued to affect political attitudes, such as interpersonal trust – a higher degree of trust in family members than in outsiders – perception of corruption, higher risk aversion and lower levels of social capital and political participation, and a prevalence of traditional gender roles. The evidence for the latter comes from foreign travellers, some early ethnographers, but mostly from modern datasets, namely the recent Life in Transition Surveys (2006, 2010, and 2016) designed by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), with Popescu analysing responses from the former military colony versus civilian areas.

While this praise for Popescu's shift in focus and use of innovative methods is justified, let me now turn to the more problematic aspects of his interdisciplinarity. Leaving aside the survey methodology used to measure perceptions, whose purpose and implementation were entirely extraneous to Popescu's research interest, the biggest problem remains his assumption that those surveyed were descendants of military colonists. First, he has not used general demographic tools such as Vladimir Stipetić's and Nenad Vekarić's *Povijesna demografija Hrvatske* (Historical demography of Croatia), published by the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts in 2004. Second, he disregards that after its abolition in 1881, the Frontier experienced massive outmigration to America, followed by two large-scale resettlement campaigns in the aftermath of both world wars as part of agrarian reforms and rewards for participating in the war. Finally, the war in Croatia (1991–1995) and its consequences saw significant expulsions and population exchanges with new settlers from Bosnia, Serbia, and Kosovo. The EBRD surveys do not trace the origin of the people examined. In place of these methodologically problematic surveys, research on the long-term legacy of the Habsburg imperial institutions would require more intensive engagement with other aspects of imperialism and racism within the empire and with its constitutive and neighbouring countries and peoples.

Furthermore, Popescu does not apply the same rigour and critique in his survey of historical literature or sources authored by imperial apologists or evolutionary anthropologists as he does in his econometrics. A case in point is Popescu's reliance on the concept of the so-called *zadruga*. He argues that the *zadruga* functioned both as an economic unit and a mechanism of social control which reinforced the imperial extractive scheme by reproducing hierarchical and exclusionary social norms, including respect for authority figures and attitudes towards women. These features, he claims, outlived *zadruga* or family clans. Assuming that the *zadruga* existed among the South Slavs prior to the establishment of the Habsburg military colony, Popescu ignores the fact that its historicity as a purported long-standing practice has long been questioned. There is very little historical evidence to support his

assumption, let alone the use of the word, as Maria Todorova established quite some time ago.[1] While aware of the work of the late Karl Kaser, who problematised the emergence and life cycle of the *zadruga*, Popescu still essentialises it as the key carrier of the Military Frontier legacy and its impact on norms to this day. His only reference is the ethnographic case study about the Varžić family, who lived at some distance from the Frontier, as studied by Philip Mosely in the 1920s.[2] Kaser also explained how imperial legal and fiscal intervention to uphold extended families, or to determine their land properties, dated only to 1754, when the Ottoman threat had disappeared and the *Grenzer* were needed as soldiers elsewhere. This undermines Popescu's arguments about the longevity of communal property and the *zadruga* as Habsburg institutions.

Nowhere is the dissonance between the historical and metrical, or micro and macro, perspective more apparent than when Popescu fails to capture one of the most significant and longest-lasting consequences of the military colonies. Investigating the historical occupational structure of the Frontier inhabitants, he begins with the Austrian census of 1857 and finds that 5 % of the population were registered as military officials, compared to 1 % in Civil Croatia. He then looks at the occupational differences between the former military and civilian areas in the Hungarian and Yugoslav censuses of 1910, 1931, and 1991 and concludes that these were insignificant, meaning there was no occupational legacy. Yet, once abolished, and especially after the border changes, the Frontier lost all of its military significance and no longer housed garrisons. Consequently, its officers and their sons and grandsons served in the armies of subsequent states and were stationed elsewhere, making it impossible to capture the link between their origin and military occupation using the population censuses.

The high preponderance of men from the Frontier in the armed and police forces of both interwar and post-Second World War Yugoslavia is well known. For example, Admiral Branko Mamula (1921–2021), one of the last and longest-serving military chiefs in Yugoslavia, frequently invoked his military ancestry, most notably his great grandfather's brother, Austrian General and Governor of Dalmatia Lazar Mamula (1795–1878), and wrote positively about the Military Border legacy, though others would point out its toxicity.[3] The predominance of *Grenzer* heirs in the forces of law

1 Todorova, Maria. 1989. "Myth-Making in European Family History: The Zadruga Revisited." *East European Politics and Societies* 4 (1): 30-76. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325490004001003.

2 Kaser, Karl. 1994. "The Balkan Joint Family: Redefining a Problem." *Social Science History* 18 (2): 243-69. https://doi.org/10.2307/1171267; Mosely, Philip E. 1976. "Adaptation for Survival: The Varžić Zadruga." In *Communal Families in the Balkans: The Zadruga. Essays by P. E. Mosley and Essays in His Honor*. Edited by Robert F. Brynes, 31-57. Notre Dame/IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

3 See his memoir, Mamula, Branko. 2020. *Admiral s Korduna*. Zagreb: SNV; and on the ethnic composition of the Yugoslav army, Mamula, Branko. 2000. *Slučaj Jugoslavija*. Podgorica: CID.

and order in socialist Yugoslavia was one of the biggest drivers of anti-regime criticism throughout the country, and especially in Croatia during its independence campaign, with an abundance of literature to refer to.[4]

4 Bjelajac, Mile. 2004. *Generali i Admirali Kraljevine Jugoslavije (1918-1941)*. Belgrade: INIS; Marijan, Davor. 2006. "Jugoslavenska narodna armija: važnija obilježja." *Polemos* 9 (1): 25-43. https://hrcak.srce.hr/17159.