

Nations, privilèges et ethnicité: Le Banat habsbourgeois; Un laboratoire politique aux confins de l'Europe éclairée. By Benjamin Landais. Strasbourg: Association Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2023. 577 pp.¹

Benjamin Landais's book is a brilliant, panoramic tour de force on ethnic relations in the eighteenth-century Banat, grounded in extensive research in the Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, the Central Archives of the Hungarian National Archives, and archives in Timișoara and Novi Sad, along with a good knowledge of the secondary literature in all the relevant languages. What gives particular interest to the subject is that the Banat was under direct civil, military, and economic governance by the Habsburg administration for most of the century, without feudal landlords or an estate-based political system; hence the laboratory metaphor in the title.

At the time of the Reconquista, the province's sparse population of cattle herders, collectively called the *Nationalisten*, consisted largely of Orthodox "Wallachen" and "Raitzen," with a much smaller segment of (similarly South Slavic and Romanian-speaking) Catholics. As new settlers repopulated the land, a famously variegated ethnic landscape began to take shape. Landais explores the nuanced interplay of legal, linguistic, and confessional distinctions, which in some reckonings also resulted in intermediary population categories, from the Romanian-speaking Roman Catholics in Slatina-Timiș to the solitary Greek Catholic community of Zăbrani. He tries to quantify the often-overlooked immigration of Orthodox settlers from the Ottoman provinces, Transylvania, and Hungary, which nevertheless seem to have surpassed Catholic settlement from West. Separate chapters examine the "Greek" petty traders, the urban Orthodox and Jewish diaspora, and the Catholic Bulgarian and Paulician refugees, who still appeared as two distinct groups.

Readers will welcome the commitment of French (and German) academic publishers to keep up the noble tradition of such comprehensive and expansive studies that branch out in many directions within a well-defined region and time period. While centered around collective identifications and governance, the book also addresses a wide array of topics, from brigandage to translation,

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changing land use patterns, and state-sponsored schooling for the *Nationalisten* to Joseph II's travels and acceptance of grievance petitions. In place of a single, streamlined argument, as is more typical in Anglo-Saxon historical writing, the stated aim here is to document a previous "regime of ethnicity," with emphasis on what has faded away or been forgotten. To underscore the distance of contemporary ethnonyms from present-day ones, Landais places them in quotation marks, though inconsistently, as the terms "Jews," "Šokci," and "Armenians" appear without them.

One should not expect either much coherence from this old "regime of ethnicity" or such a sharp contrast with the later period as Landais seems to announce in the introduction. Ethnic designations were perhaps more abundant, as some of them linked to collective privileges later petered out and others were subsumed under broader, national categories. A couple of them look quite idiosyncratic. The term "Illyrian," for example, denoted a political reality even though commentators agreed that it stood for several peoples rather than one. One could also mention the distinction between urban "Greeks" and "Arnauts," which seems to have been based on different geographical origins, with the latter group having family ties to Moscopole and Macedonia.

However, even the non-specialist reader will often find the criteria for classification very familiar. For instance, the regional chronicler Johan Jakob Ehrler (1774) understood "national" affiliation as based on an overlap of language, material culture, domestic economy, and customs. Similarly, the Orthodox synod of Sremski Karlovci argued that no distinction should be made between the South-Slavic refugees of 1691 and the later arrivals, due to their shared language, religion, and manners. Such reasoning was commonplace among administrators. Indeed, the home languages of the population were surveyed three times between 1743 and 1780. While these surveys served practical purposes, they also fixed ascribed identities in governmental reports, chorographies, and statistical tables.

The Habsburg government territorialized ethno-confessional differences by enforcing segregation, giving rise to settlements split into two or even three neighborhoods, with some form of ethnic power sharing between them or each with its own communal structures. This policy partly addressed conflicts between new colonists and long-established residents, although the most violent conflicts typically arose within the same groups. It typically reinforced confessional divides, yet it could also cut across confessional lines; between Orthodox "Wallachen" and "Raitzen" in Ciacova, for instance, or Roman Catholic Šokci and Germans

in Rekasch. In one documented case (in the “German” part of Caransebeș), a failed attempt at spatial and administrative segregation unintentionally drew a boundary where none had existed before. Local “Wallachen” resisted their “German” neighbors’ land grab and dismantled their freshly piled up boundary cairns. Landais then reveals that the peasants labeled “Germans” were actually Romanian-speaking Orthodox under “German” jurisdiction, who far outnumbered the 20 or so “real German” families, mostly artisans, in the neighborhood.

Governmental taxonomies and administrative preconceptions inevitably fed back into social realities. The influx of Ottoman immigrants seldom created new ethnic divisions because Habsburg border officials considered these newcomers to be of the same stock as the native “Wallachen” or “Raitzen” and usually scattered them among the existing Orthodox communities or resettled them in deserted flatland villages earmarked for Orthodox settlers. Conversely, the new milieu and the fact that families from various German lands were usually intermingled must have reshaped “German” settlers’ collective self-perception and solidarities. The extent to which ethnic segmentation as seen by the foreign-born Catholic administrators also reflected popular views remains difficult to determine given the scarcity of sources. Orthodox ecclesiastical records did differentiate between Serbs and Romanians (although rarely with political overtones), but Landais acknowledges the limits posed by pervasive illiteracy. Admittedly, *Wallach* and *Raitz* were exonyms, which may partly explain why “German” appears more often in Landais’s corpus of petitions written on behalf of village communities. Their mediation by literate scribes diminishes the evidentiary value of such sources, but it also cannot justify Landais’s aprioristic dismissal of ethnic terminology in them as mere appropriation of an elite discourse. In the context of the book, this and a few other weakly substantiated assertions sprinkled in the closing sections can be read as a conciliatory apology in the face of the narrowly conceived modernist perspective on ethnicity popular in Habsburg Studies.

Despite some reservations about certain conclusions, I highly recommend this richly layered history of governance and local politics in a multiethnic Habsburg province, and not only for historians of the era. Viewed from the perspective of the historiography on nineteenth-century and twentieth-century ethno-national loyalties, books like this could offer a way out of the bind between a self-centered, narrow modernism, which blinds itself intentionally to their complex antecedents, and an ethno-symbolism that seeks to link modern

loyalties to early modern patriotic discourses even where such connections are tenuous. Neither of these two schools has spoiled us with archival-based works of this scope. The volume is beautifully illustrated, featuring original color maps and diagrams.

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