

State Aid for Europe's Peripheries: A Transregional History of Development in and beyond the Habsburg Empire, 1870s–1914

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In the late nineteenth century, rural regions across Europe were undergoing fundamental changes and experiencing increasing economic pressure. Stricken by famines, outmigration, and economic crisis, peripheral spaces dependent on agriculture, forestry, fishery, and mining became the focus of state aid. From the 1870s, the Habsburg Empire was among those who initiated programmes aiming to provide relief to the population in affected regions such as in Galicia, the Ore Mountains, or Dalmatia. These initiatives complemented earlier philanthropic endeavours by the gentry and entrepreneurs who now continued to play an active part in newly established state institutions, especially in places with large estates or dominant industries. Emerging at the intersection of imperial authorities overseeing trade, education, and agriculture, the objective of these new programmes was the development of rural regions by fostering local trades. The promotion of vocational training and technical instruction assumed a prominent role, intending to supply locals with new skills in commercial activity, to make products for an international market, and thus to prepare them to ‘help themselves.’

This paper discusses the state aid devised by the Habsburg Empire for rural regions in the context of activities by imperial states across Europe and extending into colonial territories overseas. By drawing on source material from state authorities, learned publications, letters, and reports, it sheds light on how development was devised for rural peripheries in the late Habsburg Empire. Using the crownland of Galicia as a particularly illuminating case, this paper will then highlight the transfers and exchanges with regions in other empires that were considered peripheral to industrial activity and economic growth. By zooming into rural regions, a transregional history of development in and beyond the Habsburg Empire contributes new insights for research debates that have largely been focusing on metropolitan spaces.

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Peasants, Power, and Politics: Rural Perceptions of Nationalism in Late 19th-Century Slovakia

This presentation will explore the political awareness of Slovak-speaking rural populations within the Hungarian Kingdom during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, focusing on their interactions with nationalist movements and state authorities. Traditionally depicted as politically apathetic, these rural communities were often portrayed by both Hungarian officials and Slovak nationalist activists as passive subjects shaped by external forces. Drawing on an ongoing analysis of approximately 200 letters written by peasants, artisans, and other rural inhabitants to Slovak nationalist leaders and newspapers, the presentation will challenge these simplistic portrayals by highlighting the complexity and nuance of rural political engagements.

The study investigates how nationalist discourses, disseminated through Slovak nationalist propaganda, were selectively appropriated by rural populations, blending with local realities and pre-existing social frameworks. The letters reveal varying degrees of political awareness, ranging from basic appeals for justice to more sophisticated understandings of institutional power. Common themes include local grievances, critiques of “Magyarization,” and moral concerns about fellow villagers. Significantly, anti-Semitic and nationalist labels were frequently employed to articulate socioeconomic and political tensions, illustrating the integration of elite nationalist concepts into local discourse.

This presentation will examine the interplay between local agency and nationalist propaganda, offering insights into the politicization of rural communities. It will emphasize how non-elite populations interpreted, adapted, and sometimes resisted the ideologies promoted by nationalist movements and state power. The analysis contributes to broader discussions on nation-building, rural political consciousness, and the transformation of Central European societies during the age of nationalism.

Negotiating with the Nation-State in Interwar Transylvania: Land Reform, Socio-Economic Marginalization, and Political Disaffection

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Romania more than doubled its territory and population at the end of World War I. The territories that joined the 'Old Kingdom' of Romania brought serious challenges in terms of political and institutional integration, while transforming the country into a multiethnic state. The nation-building project in interwar Romania failed to integrate ethnic majorities and minorities into an inclusive power arrangement. Besides ethnic minorities, however, the national integration of ethnic Romanian peasants also proved difficult. This paper contributes to the ongoing debate regarding the nonelites' engagement with nation and nationalism. It draws on the concept of national indifference and elements of exchange theory to examine the rural dwellers' diverse attitudes toward the Romanian nation-state.

In the early 1920s Romania adopted a radical land reform. Born out of social and political urgency, rather than economic considerations, the reform sought to avert the threat of political upheaval and to pacify the peasants. Mismanagement of the reform process, corruption, insufficient land, and an economic policy favoring industry and finance over agriculture enraged the peasants, causing them to lose trust in the state and main political parties. An analysis of the numerous land-related petitions which the peasants submitted to local and central authorities reveals how political disaffection fueled starkly divergent attitudes toward nation and nationalism. While some villagers foregrounded ethnonational categories and embraced nationalism in their dialogue with authorities, others questioned elite nationalism and negotiated their political and military support for the nation-state.