

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Karl Kaser. *Freier Bauer und Soldat: Die Militarisierung der agrarischen Gesellschaft an der kroatisch-slawonischen Militärgrenze (1535-1881)*. Wien und Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 1997. xxvi + 688 pp. DM 140,00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-205-98614-0.

Reviewed by Lohr Miller (Louisiana State University)  
Published on HABSBUURG (April, 1998)



## The Grenzer World

The Croatian army offensive that swept into the Serb-held Krajina in the Spring of 1995 began just as Karl Kaser was completing his study of the economic and social history of the Habsburg Military Border (*k. k. Militärgrenze*) in Croatia-Slavonia. Kaser notes in his introduction that the Croatian victory and the consequent mass exodus of the Serb population put an end not only to the idea of an independent Serb Krajina, but also to a survival of the vanished era of the Military Border. The Croatian victory, Kaser writes, offered him an occasion to reexamine the nature of the Border and its population. His thorough economic evaluation of life on the Border provides a series of new insights into the history of one of the Habsburg Monarchy's most distinctive institutions.

American students of the Monarchy are likely to have found their first exposure to the Military Border in Gunther Rothenberg's two classic works, published in 1960 and 1966.[1] Rothenberg's focus was on the military and political history of the Border, and his work introduced a generation and more of American Habsburg scholars to the military structure of the Border and the military record of the Grenzer regiments. Kaser, though, is not concerned with administrative history or the battlefields on which Grenzer regiments fought for the Monarchy. His work concentrates on the question of ordinary life for the Border populations. The lives of the Grenzera, Kaser notes, were spent far more in making a living as farmers than as soldiers, and Kaser concentrates on the Grenzer as farmer rather than as infantryman or hussar. His work characterizes the Border as an agrarian soci-

ety caught between the two social roles defined in his title—the “free peasant” and the lifetime soldier. This social and economic focus follows the issues raised in the 1970s and early 1980s by Fedor Moacanin's work on Border landholding patterns,[2] but Kaser's *Freier Bauer und Soldat* goes on to chart the effects of change on the Border populations and tensions between military necessity and agricultural life.

Kaser's work begins with the devastation and depopulation caused by the Ottoman conquests of the 1520s. He emphasizes the sheer ruin of Croatia-Slavonia and its economy, a process that continued throughout the sixteenth century. The process of utilizing the Border populations—refugees and survivors—as a defense against Ottoman incursions required grants of privilege designed to give locals some personal stake in their lands. It was also necessary to create areas of discipline and control which protected more settled areas from an influx of refugees from Turkish territory and from dispossessed peasants on the Monarchy's side of the Border. Kaser examines a number of local areas, beginning with the mountainous Sichelberg district, where in 1535 refugee settlers were granted exemptions from feudal dues in return for military service, to chart the growth of a Border society and a new set of economic conditions.

Border society, Kaser notes, grew out of a series of ad hoc measures designed to defend the Croatian-Slavonian lands against the Turks, control flight into more settled areas, and restore some semblance of trade and agricul-

ture in a wasted no man's land. The Border in its first century and a half was less an organized system than a collection of singularities—Croat, Vlach, or Serb areas barely connected to one another by tradition, trade, or similar laws. The inhabitants of the Border would face common economic problems in isolation.

Kaser identifies the major weakness of the whole Border concept: a successful defense of the Border by the Grenzlers would inevitably lead to a growing population in an area of limited capacity, and the demands of military service would keep farmers away from any agricultural work and make new technologies difficult to introduce. He traces the rise in landlessness and the stagnation of agricultural production in the mid-eighteenth century as moving in tandem with both a more settled society and the expansion of a regularized administration. Moreover, the very freedom on which the Grenzlers prided themselves meant that, unlike in the villages of "civil" Croatia, there were no market-oriented landlords to force serfs to adopt new methods and adapt to the market. This tension is exactly Kaser's point. The Grenzlers were both "free" peasants and increasingly disciplined soldiers—especially after the military reforms of the mid-1760s, when Grenzlers were increasingly used not merely as irregulars or border patrols but as infantry expected to perform very much as line regiments. The increased demands of the military administration for soldiers meant that Grenzer families would need to produce more sons and that their men would be away from the fields for ever-longer periods. The Border could not be successfully farmed by soldiers subject to service in distant wars, nor would its free farmers adapt to a new economy. The "territorialization" of the Border (the extension of a regularized canton system for military administration and an attendant bureaucratic structure wholly separate from "civil" Croatia) created an artificial and ultimately unsustainable zone which failed as both an agrarian society and a reservoir of soldiers.

In view of the 1991 declaration of independence by the Krajina Serbs, Kaser asks why the Border never found any sense of specifically Grenzer identity. After all, the Grenzlers were subject not to local authority but to the military authorities in Vienna and faced, at least in name, a common Turkish threat. Moreover, they shared a common freedom from serfdom and a history of military accomplishment. How did it happen that the Grenzlers remained "pre-national" and ultimately divided into adherents of rival Serb and Croat national movements? Kaser responds to the question by pointing out that throughout the Border there was a sharp and permanent division

along confessional lines. Serb refugees moving up out of the Ottoman lands found their Orthodoxy to be a major means of maintaining any village-level cohesion. And in a region where villages were often isolated from one another, where roads were more often used to move troops than goods and ideas, local churches and clerics, both Catholic and Orthodox, enjoyed leadership roles. Kaser overestimates the role of "Croat" vs. "Serb" dialects, but he quite correctly stresses that local identifications with village, family, and church were not eroded by military service but, given the territorialization imposed by the canton system, solidified by regimental service. In the isolated conditions of the Border, isolated by geography and deliberately isolated from "civil" Croatia by the military administration, national consciousness developed from a confessional base, with economic interest groups or social classes trailing far behind in importance.

Kaser has written a purely economic and social history: his Border exists almost in isolation from Vienna and the rest of the world. He presents a strong picture of changes in demography, in production levels for various crops, and in landholding patterns. Yet the reader is given very little sense of how the *Hofkammer* or the war ministry saw the Border or how the authorities responded to change and decay. This is a book where individuals, whether administrators or commanders or villagers, do not appear. Kaser is far too cursory in his treatment of how the Grenzlers saw themselves in relation to the serfs of "civil" Croatia. The whole era of the Napoleonic wars is given only a brief mention, something which slights the influx of both political and economic ideas occurring under the French occupation of Illyria. The events of 1848 are barely mentioned. While one cannot expect an economic history to recount the tale of Jellacic, Kossuth, and the Serb revolts as Rothenberg and Istvan Deak[3] have done, the issue of Croatia after serfdom and the effect of the revolutions on the Border is largely ignored. Kaser also fails to treat the policies of the surrounding civil authorities in relation to the Border: the estates of Styria and Inner Austria appear in the discussions of the sixteenth century, but the attitudes of the Hungarian and Croatian authorities toward the Border in the critical economic era of the 1830s are not discussed.

Kaser has done valiant service in assembling a host of archival data on the Border economy. His discussion of the *zadruga*, the communal household found all across the Border, both demythologizes this institution and provides a clear picture of exactly what its role was both in promoting a higher birthrate and in serving as a vehicle for social control by the authorities. The focus here is on

Croatia-Slavonia, and while he does examine the position of Vlach villages within the Border landholding system, his interest is in the western Military Border and not on the entire Border complex.

The title announces that the book is about Croatia-Slavonia. But while the eastern regions of the Border are outside the scope of his chosen topic, an extension of this research to Romanian or Szekler areas would be valuable, and a comparison of both landholding and national identity patterns between the western and eastern Border regions would be a major contribution to a full history of the Grenzers and their world. Despite Kaser's successes, he has not given a picture of how the village economy supported the Grenzer regiments. The Border, he writes, was increasingly militarized after the 1750s. But while he treats cereals and wine production in some detail, he neglects to describe how the regiments fed themselves or how the local economy provided or failed to provide military production.

Kaser's book has as its end-piece a number of reproduced illustrations of seventeenth and early eighteenth century Border fortresses—Sichelberg, Sluin, Ogulin, and Prindl as well as the massive walls of Karlstadt. These images of blockhouses and bastions underline the weakness of Kaser's book. For all its wealth of archival information, for all its clear and informative style, for all its focus on the too-often neglected daily life of the Grenzers, the book does lose sight of the military role of the Border. Kaser rarely asks what the institutions of the Border were *for*.

Every work of history begins with a choice of questions. Kaser begins by asking how the two roles of the Grenzer—free peasant and as the Emperor's soldier—were

in tension. The question is well worth asking, and Kaser has enabled his readers to see how complex the daily life of the Border was and how the struggle against the Ottomans, Prussians, or French was subordinate to the sheer struggle to farm and survive. Any reader interested in the life of the Grenzers would do well to examine Kaser's work. One might wish, however, that he had looked a little more at the *military* economy of the Border and at how the role of "free peasant" supported the role of soldier.

Notes:

[1]. Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Austrian Military Border in Croatia, 1522-1747* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960), and *The Military Border in Croatia, 1740-1881: A Study of an Imperial Institution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1966]).

[2]. Fedor Moacanin, "Das Problem des Grundbesitzes der Militaerbevölkerung an der kroatischen und slawonischen Grenze," in Othmar Pickl, ed., *Die wirtschaftlichen Auswirkungen der Tuerkenkriege* (Graz, 1971). See also O. M. Utjeenovic-Ostrozinski, *Kucne zadruge: Vojna krajina* (Zagreb: Skolska knjiga: Stvarnost, 1988).

[3]. Istvan Deak, *The Lawful Revolution: Louis Kossuth and the Hungarians, 1848-1849* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the reviewer and to HABSBUrg. For other permission, please contact <reviews@h-net.msu.edu> and <habsburg@ttacs6.ttu.edu>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg>

**Citation:** Lohr Miller. Review of Kaser, Karl, *Freier Bauer und Soldat: Die Militarisierung der agrarischen Gesellschaft an der kroatisch-slawnischen MilitÖrgrenze (1535-1881)*. HABSBUrg, H-Net Reviews. April, 1998.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1874>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).