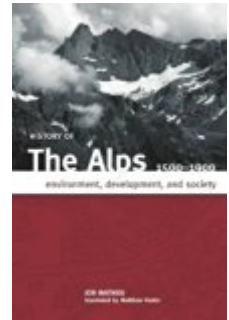


**Jon Mathieu.** *History of the Alps, 1500-1900.* Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2009. iii + 260 pp. Illustrations \$37.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-933202-34-1.



**Reviewed by** Lee W. Holt

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Jon Mathieu's *History of the Alps 1500-1900: Environment, Development and Society* is an ambitious work in terms of both its scope and its objectives. Mathieu's temporal framework is conditioned by the availability of quantitative data from the beginning of the early modern period, with its accelerating state formation, to the flourishing of statistical studies in the late nineteenth century. Relying on these two quantitative watersheds as benchmarks, Mathieu sets out to trace economic and sociopolitical developments in alpine territories throughout the European continent. This work serves to correct widespread misconceptions of the Alps as a geography defined in opposition to the politics, society, and environment of the flatlands.

Within this broad temporal scope, Mathieu focuses on historical developments within the geographical space of the Alps, ranging from France to Switzerland to Austria and Germany. In this regard, Mathieu has done alpine studies an immense service, collecting an expansive body of research long divided along national, linguistic, and

disciplinary lines. As Mathieu accurately states, "Quantitative history is sorely missing from Alpine research," and this slim volume provides a very valuable resource for scholars who wish to redress this lacuna (p. 11).

In the book's early chapters, we learn that the Alps tripled in population from 2.9 million in 1500 to 7.9 million in 1900. In addition to his painstaking analysis of a mountain of statistical data, Mathieu reminds us that demographic studies of these populations, especially in the 1800s and 1900s, were instruments utilized in efforts to establish political and social control. Mathieu raises the question of how such growth was possible, given the then widely held notion that, as Thomas Malthus put it in 1803, "There are no grounds less susceptible of improvement than mountainous pastures" (p. 47). Mathieu demonstrates overall agricultural growth from 1500 to 1900, despite pessimism about alpine agricultural potential. Irrigation and water projects contributed significantly to new distributions and intensities of agricultural activity. This expansion of alpculture

was accompanied by the appearance of cities. From 1500 to 1800, Alpine cities predictably grew at a slower rate than in the lowlands surrounding alpine territory; agricultural and other material resources necessary to drive urbanization simply were not available at higher altitudes. In the nineteenth century, however, urbanization accelerated significantly, with "the number of Alpine cities with at least 5000 inhabitants increas[ing] from nine to forty-two" (p. 109). Mathieu attributes this sudden development primarily to technological and material advances in transportation. He also notes that the rise of alpine tourism was accompanied by urbanizing cultural influences; royal residences were scattered through the Alps, such as in Ischl in the Salzkammergut, but therapeutic and health resorts were located in places such as Davos as well.

In the book's later chapters, Mathieu focuses on the development of agrarian and state structures in alpine territories and the ways in which these systems interacted in political, economic, and demographic contexts. In a chapter that focuses on agrarian structures in nineteenth-century France, Switzerland, and Habsburg Austria, Mathieu traces two interesting developments that stemmed from the abolition of feudal structures. First, collective land ownership in the Alps received attention as a possible alternative to private property, even though, as Mathieu points out, such communal forms of land use and sharing took on several different forms according to regional and local restrictions. Second, the modernization of alpine property rights resulted in a new perception of the alpine peasantry: "These new rights enabled the rural population to be seen in an entirely different light: the peasant order was transformed into the heart of the nation, expanding its prestige in ways that definitely influenced the image of the Alps, a relatively rural region" (p. 156). In another chapter that focuses on the development of different agrarian and political structures in the early modern period, Mathieu points out that agrarian structures in the western

alps (in Savoy and the Grisons) tended toward small holdings, while political structures in the same region tended toward princes and communes that ruled over centralist and localist structures. In the eastern Alps (Carinthia), however, the nobility accrued increasing political power and land, resulting in a system of larger farms, a model that spread to Bavaria and the Upper Danube region of Austria by 1900. Mathieu concludes that, while agrarian and state structures throughout alpine territory were far from uniform, discernible patterns nonetheless transcended political borders.

In conclusion, Mathieu's work distills a staggering amount of statistical data from a long period of time and a number of Alpine regions into a relatively compact volume. The book's main weakness, however, is that Mathieu's inspiration for this project seems to have arisen from a desire to present historical reality as a corrective to the historical imagination of the Alps, but he rarely writes with any specificity about the contours of this historical imagination. Instead, the book becomes an empirical survey of statistical research that, although it raises important theoretical and methodological questions, leads to a series of conclusions that are, with a few exceptions, divorced from discussions of historical perspectives and imaginative projections on the Alps. Despite this omission, however, Mathieu has nonetheless produced a work that will be of interest to historians of the Alps, especially for the early modern and modern periods. This book is an essential addition to research library collections and an indispensable work for researchers interested in alpine history.

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