

**Karl Kaser.** *Macht und Erbe. Männerherrschaft, Besitz und Familie im Östlichen Europa (1500-1900).* Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2000. 343 pp. DEM 76,00, paper, ISBN 978-3-205-98990-5.



**Reviewed by** Jim Brown

**Published on** HABSBURG (August, 2001)

Many more studies of family history have been done of western Europe than of eastern Europe. What research has been done on the east has often not been easily accessible to non-easterners, making it difficult to undertake broad comparisons of family and household between east and west. In *Macht und Erbe*, Karl Kaser has achieved two valuable goals: he has brought together and systemized the results from many studies of families in eastern Europe, and he has presented these results in a comparative perspective to give them wider relevance.

Chronologically the book concentrates on the period between 1500 and 1900, but has a considerable amount to say about developments before and after those dates. Before 1500 few studies exist, and after 1900 traditional peasant inheritance practices broke down in the face of administrative intrusion and social change resulting from industrialization and modernization. The focus is on the agricultural and pastoral families that represented ninety per cent or more of the population of eastern Europe. Geographically the book's concern is with eastern and southeastern Europe,

though for comparative purposes it refers to western Europe and briefly to Asia as well. Kaser's approach to family history rests on historical anthropology, which has been extensively used in the Balkans and has now spread more widely. As a result, in examining family structure he centers on the cultural and historical context, including economic circumstances, cultural traditions, naming systems, inheritance patterns, and kinship systems, among others.

The conclusion of *Macht und Erbe* is that inheritance systems play a significant role in differentiating societies. In particular, the practice of equal male inheritance contributed greatly to defining eastern European family and social structure. Furthermore, this practice formed one of the major differences between eastern and western European family systems. Kaser's explanation is not simplistic, however; he recognizes the interplay of many elements as contributing to the differences between east and west.

The first chapter provides a valuable introduction to the inheritance systems of eastern and western Europe. It is particularly helpful for

southeastern Europe, which was long under Ottoman control. The coverage of Islamic law and of research on this region brings together information that has seldom been covered in studies of European family history. The *timar* system - in which cavalymen received land, called a *timar*, in return for wartime service -, and its accompanying *Ciflikwirtschaft* system - in which peasants received parcels of land, called *cifts*, for which they owed goods and obligations to the *timar* holder -, created a different context from the *Gutsherrschaft* system of eastern Europe, and yet in both systems the custom of equal male inheritance predominated. Kaser also covers other regions of southeastern Europe which had different historical contexts including the Adriatic "Kolonats," the military border, and the mountainous areas of the western Balkans, the latter being the area where Kaser has concentrated his own research.

In chapter 2, Kaser explores the background of the equal male inheritance system in eastern Europe to identify the factors which contributed to its creation and continuation. Furthermore, he looks at the effects of inheritance on household structure. According to the author, the inheritance system could have arisen from either the actions of manorial lords through their administration or through the state, or from cultural or other circumstances ("auf kultureller oder anderer Grundlage") (p. 18). In light of Kaser's use of an anthropological approach, this dichotomy was a bit troubling. In many American anthropological studies the term "culture" is all embracing; in this definition politics and economics are facets of culture rather than separate factors. It would have been helpful for the author to spell out more explicitly his definition of culture. Historical and other social scientific studies have been criticized quite rightly for using "culture" as a catch-all for residuals left over after other variables have done their explanatory work. Cultural variables need to be identified with precision in order to create a more satisfactory interpretation of historical data.

Two general household structures arose from the system of equal male inheritance. On the one hand, if landholdings were actually divided at the death of the household head, a system of stem or nuclear households would result. In some areas, however, families delayed the actual splitting of the holdings over several generations and instead held and worked the holdings in common, resulting in a system of large complex families. Over time demographic factors came to interfere with the practice of frequent division as the pool of available land became increasingly insufficient to support new households. This often led to the cohabitation of heirs, thus changing the inheritance arrangement towards an impartible system, i.e., one in which division was not the usual practice.

The way by which the book categorizes families is confusing in its use of the term *Stammfamilie*. A *Stammfamilie*, or stem family, household is

one in which a single heir inherits the land and marries, bringing his bride into the household while other siblings leave. Thus landholdings are passed from father to a single son -the stem - while others move off - the branches. This term describes the development of a household over time. Kaser combines this term with the most widely used system of household classification, the Laslett-Hammel system, which is based on coresidence at a particular moment in time. Households consist of single persons; unrelated persons; parents and children (nuclear households); parents, children and unmarried relatives (extended households); or parents, children, and relatives including at least one married relative (complex households). The mixing of the term "stem", based on residence over time, with the terms of the Laslett-Hammel system, static measures, is thereby confusing. It is unclear how at a single point in time one could distinguish a stem family from a nuclear, extended or complex family since a stem family could exist in any of these forms over the course of time.

Chapter 3 examines the contribution of the inheritance system to differences between eastern and western Europe. It uses systems of household formation, labor organization, family ideology, kinship, and life course to identify basic differences. The bulk of this chapter concentrates on southeastern Europe because of the lack of data from other areas in the east.

The model western European household between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries was nuclear in form, consisting of parents and children with no other relatives present. Labor needs that exceeded the capabilities of parents and children were met by hiring servants. Servanthood was often a phase of childhood; beginning at around 10 years of age children frequently left their family to work in the household of others as servants. Households were formed when a couple married and set up a new household, a neolocal marriage system. The age of mar-

riage was high because of the need to amass sufficient resources to support independently a new household; the period of servanthood provided young people the usual means for accumulating wealth to establish such a household. Wealth passed from generation to generation when one heir, usually a son though daughters were not excluded, took over the farm from the father. In many areas of the west other siblings were paid off in moveable goods for their share of the inheritance, while in others they were not. Although this practice of impartible unigeniture was widespread, there were also innumerable variations as well.

In eastern Europe, on the other hand, a different model dominated. Here, in addition to parents and children households often included other relatives, married siblings or grandparents. These complex households provided all the labor for the family holdings without resort to non-relative servants; if the household members were insufficient for the labor needs of the holdings, the family adjusted its holdings, not its membership. The local community frequently played a strong role in rural life by periodically redistributing land in order to balance household labor capacity and landholdings. When a couple married the wife moved into her husband's household, a patrilocal system. Because the ongoing household provided the economic support for the newlyweds, they could marry at younger ages rather than having to work to accumulate wealth, thereby delaying marriage. On the death of the head of the household, the wealth was divided equally among the adult males of the family, with females being excluded.

One of Kaser's goals is to connect inheritance with male domination. In his view, eastern European society was strongly patriarchal and inheritance practices supported this system. For example, women moved away from their family into a close-knit household of strangers and received no benefits from inheritance, thus substantially lim-

iting their opportunities and power in relation to those of men.

Kinship and phases of the life course differed between eastern and western Europe, too. Kinship was very important in the east, with the circle of kin clearly including past and future generations. The collective ownership of family holdings among kin led to stronger feelings of group membership. Furthermore, the phases of "youth" and "elderly" were less clearly defined in the east. In the west, marriage represented a clear boundary between youth and adulthood, with its neolocality and high age of marriage. In the east, however, individuals married early, often in their teens or early twenties, and men remained in their homes after marriage. The act of marriage in the east was less clearly a boundary between distinct phases of the life course than in the west. The phase of elderly was also less clearly demarcated. While in the west, parents frequently "retired" by formally turning the holdings over to the next generation and entering a position that was often accompanied by a legal contract spelling out mutual obligations between parents and heirs, in the east the head of the household remained in this position until his death, undergoing no formal change of position.

In matters of kinship and life course as in others, Kaser recognizes many regional variations, including large areas of Romania characterized by a neolocal, nuclear household system very much like that found in the west. He is careful throughout not to lapse into a simplistic dichotomous construction of the differences between east and west. Neither was a unified bloc, but rather each had considerable variations. Kaser's question is whether the most widespread inheritance system practiced in eastern Europe contributed meaningfully to differentiating this area from western Europe. Furthermore, he asks how this system of equal male inheritance could have been adopted in the differing political and economic contexts that existed in eastern Europe. The in-

heritance system thereby becomes a tool for contrasting and comparing regions within the east rather than a normative device into which varying regional practices are forced. The point is not that everybody behaved the same, but that similar behaviors arose from very different situations.

In the final chapter, Kaser looks at the occurrence of the equal male inheritance system in the different "milieus" found in eastern Europe. While different economic contexts seem to have contributed to the inheritance system, he argues that at its base it was "cultural," growing out of a patrilineal descent system which accorded great honor to ancestors and frequently to an original ancestor. The book divides eastern Europe into two broad regional types: areas of persistent stability of the inheritance system and areas of sudden change in the system. In areas of persistence, labor organization might have affected the timing of property division, but it did not affect the principle of equal inheritance itself. With expressions of caution, Kaser identifies two "ecotypes" which seem to have had some relevance for equal inheritance: forest areas characterized by slash and burn techniques, and alpine pastoral systems. Plains areas might have an equal inheritance system depending on the type and quality of local resources. For instance, households could rely on small parcels of land in vineyard, tobacco, and rice- and olive-growing areas for their economic support, so there was little to hinder division of holdings among heirs. In areas where the land was poor, impartible inheritance was more widespread due to the need to amass a larger holding to support the households.

Areas changed their inheritance practices rather suddenly under particular conditions which affected areas of eastern Europe at different times. Such conditions included migration (e.g., the movement of Christian and Muslim populations following the changing fortunes of the Ottoman Empire), urbanization, modernization, and socialist collectivization. Each of these left in-

dividuals less subject to the pressures of a patriarchal system and thereby expanded the range of individual choice and activity. Only with the loosening of ties that bound individuals to inherited land were new methods of wealth transfer opened, new ways of family and social reproduction unlocked, and male dominance questioned.

The minor criticisms do little to detract from the great significance of this book. In many sections Kaser identifies issues that remain open to investigation, for instance, the large areas of the east that have few micro-historical studies, and the question of the relationship between the limited geographic mobility in areas of equal male inheritance and the delay of industrialization. Overall, the interpretive framework—that inheritance forms a significant variable in accounting for differences between eastern and western European families—and the systematic presentation of research on the social history of eastern Europe both provide invaluable services to those interested in these issues.

Copyright (c) 2001 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>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg>

**Citation:** Jim Brown. Review of Kaser, Karl. *Macht und Erbe. Männerherrschaft, Besitz und Familie im Östlichen Europa (1500-1900)*. HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. August, 2001.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5417>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.