Edited by Jan Hansen, Jochen Hung, Jaroslav Ira, Judit Klement, Sylvain Lesage, Juan Luis Simal, and Andrew Tompkins

THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe, 1500-2000

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1.2.1 Borders in Early Modern History (ca. 1500–1800)

Benjamin Conrad and Markéta Křížová

Introduction

When thinking about geographical borders of the early modern period, it is necessary to point out that twentieth- and twenty-first-century conceptualisations of borders are inadequate for that period of history. A combined customs, state and tax border requires a centralised form of government, but this was rare in the early modern period. Moreover, states need a certain degree of economic prosperity to finance border systems. This was equally difficult to attain under the circumstances of the early modern period.

In this chapter, the working definitions of the key terms are as follows: the *border* is a dividing line; the *frontier*, an outer line of expansion. The second term grows in importance when taking Europe's overseas expansion into account. However, there were also frontiers of expansion within medieval and early modern Europe, such as the Iberian Peninsula, Eastern Europe beyond Poland-Lithuania, and the Balkans. Also, the term 'mental map' is used throughout the text, as it was used by such historians as Larry Wolff, to denote the way physical space is imagined and represented within a given society as a tool for cultural orientation and self-identification of its members.

For any human community, physical borders such as natural features, as well as man-made marks or barriers and symbolic cultural markers, are important in establishing the difference between 'us' and 'them'—in other words, the outlining of the community of belonging. The question of frontiers is strongly connected to this question of identity. Establishment, acceptance, affirmation, and refusal of identity is necessarily based upon the notion of borders.

Barth (1969) brought the attention of social science to the constitution of ethnic groups and the nature of boundaries constructed between them.

According to Barth, the communities of early modern Europe shared basic needs not only to define themselves in opposition to others and to mark social and cultural boundaries, but also to protect and delineate the territories they were living in. But there were also specificities to this process: some of them, such as language, were present throughout the period under study, while others evolved through time, such as the religious composition of a population.

Varieties of Geographical and Political Borders, and Types of Travel

In the early modern period, political borders and the territorial state were often marked by blazes on trees, boulders, ditches, earth mounds or by signposts. There were no comprehensive systems of control posts or guard patrols. To protect their border regions against outside invasion, a number of early modern states established a system of smaller camps and larger castles. This was the case, for example, in the second-biggest state of this period, the Kingdom of Poland-Lithuania.

These political borders were very rarely linked to tax or customs borders. As in the Middle Ages, toll roads, mountain passes, and narrow points on rivers were used to collect tolls and customs. The control of these checkpoints was often exercised by vassals. In the Holy Roman Empire, the Electorate of Mainz was one such vassal that controlled the toll point on the Rhine river near the town of Bingen. In Central European regions, town walls also marked tax borders, a system that had likewise been adopted during the Middle Ages.

Named natural borders, however—physically incontestable as they might seem—often did not completely overlap with cultural borders. There are some exceptions, such as the Rhine River, which had had a double function as natural and cultural border since the fall of the Roman Empire. The mountain ranges of the Alps and Pyrenees also marked such a unified natural and cultural border. Finally, seas such as the Strait of Dover or the North and Baltic Seas marked combined natural and cultural borders separating Britain, Ireland, and Scandinavia from its Southern neighbours. But in general, neither rivers, nor coasts, nor mountains in themselves constituted inevitable cultural dividing lines between states.

Of course, geographical phenomena like mountains, rivers and lakes limited travel options for greater parts of early modern pre-industrial populations. But apart from physical barriers, travel was generally possible between countries in early modern times without controls. On the Italian Peninsula, consisting of some dozen states, and particularly in Central Europe, in the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, consisting of around 1,800 territories, local rulers were technically incapable of controlling their borders. In France, however, a

passport was required from the beginning of the early modern period in order to transport goods across the country. In the sixteenth century, France also introduced passports for individuals, which replaced the former *sauf-conduits* or *Schutzbriefe* that were originally necessary only during wartime. However, for many decades, the French example of control of travel did not inspire other rulers to follow.

The outer political borders and frontiers of early modern Europe were more difficult to define than the borders between European states. During the Middle Ages, the Mediterranean region had experienced an intrusion of 'Africa' into 'Europe' due to the Arab conquest of the Iberian Peninsula. There, the shift from the Middle Ages to the early modern period was marked by the new military dominance of Spain in the western Mediterranean after the Muslim states were crushed during re-Christianisation, the *reconquista*, in Southern Iberia. Spanish expansion to North Africa followed, but after its failure it was the Strait of Gibraltar that became a political frontier, and the outer limit of 'Europe'. The Muslim rulers at that point held only one coast: that of North Africa.

In the eastern Mediterranean, the Austrian-Ottoman frontier marked a confessional, military, political and cultural edge of 'Christian Europe' facing the non-European 'Ottoman Europe'. This long-lasting configuration of frontiers with regions dominated by non-Christian rulers meant that 'Europe' had a shifting eastern and south-eastern border. Despite being Christian, Orthodox Russia was—like the Ottoman Empire—mostly seen as a non-European power in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Only during the eighteenth century did this view of Russia begin to gradually change, as a result of an integration process of Russia into Europe.

It is worth noticing that the medieval idea of equating Europe with Christendom faded with the decline of medieval Christianisation campaigns and crusades during the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The early modern period also saw massive overseas exploration and colonisation—the worldwide expansion of the *communitas cristiana*.

Concerning Europe's internal political borders, Febvre (1973) tied them closely to the state. He has pointed out that in the Middle Ages the very concept of territorial sovereignty had not yet been elaborated. The kingdoms and duchies were not coherent territorial entities, 'bounded' in a linear and consistent manner. Frequently one territory had several sovereigns. Fiefs were detached from one crown and attached to another, together with all that went with them and belonged to them. This changed with the strengthening of the state in the early modern era.

Early modern boundaries were, for most of the continent, perceived and defined less by clear geographical lines than by powers of jurisdiction,

taxation rights and feudal obligations. Their permeability was the result of various factors, most importantly the lax enforcement of border controls. The lack of a fixed or agreed division between one territory and another was quite common, and even when they were fixed, the borders were frequently ignored by the people crossing them, often with the silent approval of the lords. This permeability allowed the—sometimes illegal—transfer of goods and people from one jurisdiction to another, and also between tax and price regimes. Despite this permeability, the differences between residing under one jurisdiction, as opposed to another, were nevertheless known to contemporaries, who often utilised these modalities to their own advantage. In this sense, many borders had a fixed character, respected by local inhabitants on both sides.

States could shift their boundaries in early modern times in various ways, among them war, inheritance, or exchange. However, local boundaries and lesser jurisdictions usually remained intact on such occasions. That means they were taken over by the new ruler, but their inner coherence and outer borders remained unchanged. Such was the case in France and in the Habsburg Empire. This dynamic manifested during the early modern era in a mosaic of various types of regions, subject to a supreme ruler but conserving the original inner political structures, including tax regimes and even systems of ecclesiastical governance. In this regard, we could think of Europe as a palimpsest of civil and ecclesiastical borders, with its lowest layers almost always long-standing and broadly accepted, even when fiercely disputed in detail. Thus, border disputes tended to assume a chronic character in early modern Europe.

Mental Borders and Frontier Regions

Cartography developed slowly over the course of the early modern period, and it was only by the eighteenth century that relatively precise maps could be produced. Also, cartography was not an autonomous intellectual discipline; rather, it reflected the power aspirations of its patrons, particularly the rulers that invested in it. Enlightenment thinkers, as well as enlightened rulers, sought ordered and rational investigations of nature, but also endeavoured to influence statecraft by employing surveyors and other experts to identify cartographic resources and establish an efficient basis for tax assessment.

In France, for example, the mapping of natural territory had a considerable influence on the mental mapping of desired borders, resulting in policies to gain control over 'natural' boundaries. The Pyrenees in the south formed one of these desired borders, as did the Rhine between Germany and France. At the Rhine, cartographers from both nations worked to combine natural and political boundaries by drawing state borders along the course provided by the river. However, studying the political maps of the eighteenth century can

often lead us to neglect the blurriness of the borders in practice. Maps imply homogeneity within a given area, as well as sharp distinctions between a given area and its neighbours—delineations that were socially constructed and did not necessarily exist in practice.

Changes in manners, forms of behaviour, religious beliefs and language also marked cultural borders for those travelling through Europe. Long-running differences in lifestyle and natural conditions were a complex background to the enduring existence of these cultural borders. For example, according to Burke (2008), between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries there was a 'cultural border' in France, which could be drawn as a diagonal line from St Malo in France to Geneva in Switzerland, dividing a north-eastern zone of higher literacy from a south-western zone where fewer people were able to read.

For a long time, historians have treated the borders of the early modern period simply as barriers. In recent decades, this perception has changed to acknowledge their role as meeting-places or zones of cultural interchange. Both conceptions have their uses: walls and barbed wire cannot keep out ideas, but cultural barriers do exist. There are at least some physical, political or cultural obstacles, including language and religion, which slow down cultural movements and transfer or divert them into different channels. However, both borders and frontiers are also frequently zones of interaction for different groups. This process sometimes produced border zones, areas of reciprocal ethnic and cultural interaction and transmission in which distinctively hybrid identities might evolve. This was the case in the Habsburg-Ottoman (i.e. Christian-Muslim) frontier of the early modern Balkans.

The Evolving Functions of Borders, after Mental Mapping: Developments in the Early Modern Period

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, confessional borders became more and more important because of the European Wars of Religion. This development reached its climax in 1648 with the signing of the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). The political consequences—the emergence of the early modern state and the division of Europe along confessional lines—changed the nature of borders. In many instances, the monopoly of power in the hands of a single sovereign, including the right to mint coins, to make and enforce laws, and to raise taxes, replaced the dissipated power relations of the medieval feudal hierarchy. Holding rights of jurisdiction over a community of subjects separated areas under the sovereign rule from those where these rights did not apply. Besides other developments, the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries further increased the need for authoritative lines of demarcation.

Then, in the eighteenth century, the concept of sovereignty underwent major changes. A growing national consciousness on the part of state subjects was paralleled by the growing power and ambition of their rulers, who made use of professional armies and military equipment. These were all steps in the direction of the 'nation-state', a more coherent entity defined within clear political borders.

Enlightened absolutism was practiced by eighteenth-century sovereigns who aspired to supreme authority within their domains, while at the same time drawing inspiration from the intellectual premises of the Enlightenment for their rule. Absolute monarchs directed state-building measures towards the creation of a national community, breaking down privileges and vested interests in favour of notions of citizenship and patriotism, including previously maintained regional autonomies. France was Europe's pioneer state in combining mental maps and foreign policy, claiming natural borders such as the Pyrenees, the Rhine and the Alps as part of its own territory. Borders were again central to the process of defining a given nation *vis-à-vis* its neighbours, but now they were also a vehicle for the emergent patriotic sentiment. These new 'national' borders gradually superseded the confessional ones of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Thus, by the eighteenth century, several European states again consisted of territories with different religions and confessions. Confessionally homogenous territories were a phenomenon limited to the decades of religious wars in the preceding centuries.

French rulers of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were not only pioneers in combining mental maps with foreign policy. They were also at the forefront of establishing control over the movement of population. From the seventeenth century, the French king's subjects needed a passport to leave the country. In the eighteenth century, a passport was also required for foreigners travelling to France. Unsurprisingly, this passport and border system of the *ancien régime* was considered part of the tyranny of the French monarchy, and was abolished soon after 1789. However, following a very brief liberal period, the system was swiftly reintroduced in the following decade for security reasons, even though the 1791 constitution granted free permission to leave the country.

In other regions of Europe, governments attempted to consolidate state borders. For Habsburgian territories at the south-east edge of the continent, this meant abolishing the frontier zone with the Ottoman Empire. After signing the peace treaty of Carlowitz in 1699, the Austrian government sought to establish a clear line of demarcation to separate Austrian and Hungarian territories from Ottoman lands. These efforts were undertaken to avoid double taxation in border regions and to reduce border violations from the Ottoman side. While this process was quite successfully implemented by the Austrian authorities,

the clear marking of boundaries was not a model for other European states, as fortifications and stationed troops turned out to be very expensive.

The early modern period finally saw efforts to unify state, tax and customs borders. Alongside France, Austria and even Russia also established this form of border in the eighteenth century. This process of merging of different border types signified a huge step towards the unification of states, with long-lasting effects for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At the same time, with the imposition of these unified borders came the imposition of cultural borders, a process involving the standardisation of languages and homogenisation of cultures.

Conclusion

The meaning of borders underwent an important shift over the course of the early modern period, and particularly in the eighteenth century. Relatively fluid borders between political entities became more sharply defined over this period, in relation to the strengthening and centralisation of the state. The role of borders for the state was also transformed, especially with respect to tax and custom collection. Internal borders were dissolved or weakened as part of the same processes. At the same time, especially on the eastern and south-eastern frontier of Europe, frontiers remained shifting and permeable, serving as both physical and symbolic demarcations of the imagined community of Europe and the Western Christian world, and as a site of extensive cultural transfers and interchanges.

Discussion questions

1. What are the differences and similarities between natural and cultural borders, according to the text?

2. The text argues that borders were important for people's identity in early modern Europe. Can you describe how?

3. In early modern Europe, borders were much more porous than today. Why do you think that is?

Suggested reading

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