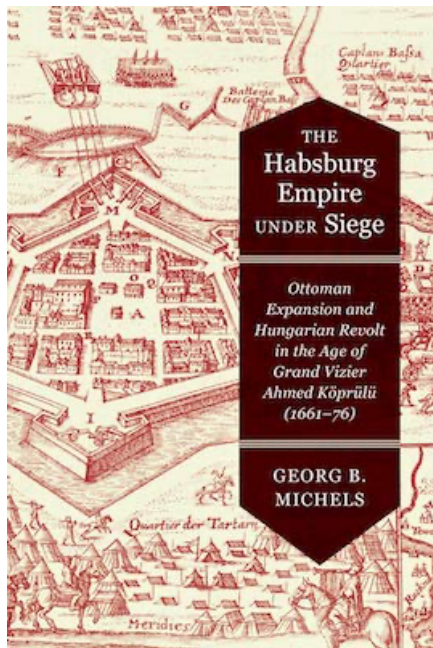


2021 Hans Rosenberg Book Prize Laudatio

Georg B. Michels, *The Habsburg Empire Under Siege: Ottoman Expansion and Hungarian Revolt in the Age of Grand Vizier Ahmed Köprülü (1661–76)* (McGill-Queens University Press, 2021)

The story of the late seventeenth-century Habsburg Empire has long been told—by historians, Viennese tour guides, and Hungarian nationalists alike—as one of a “clash of civilizations” in which the Hungarian borderlands served as a “bulwark of Christendom” against the foreign intrusion of the Ottoman Empire. In this groundbreaking study, Georg Michels turns this narrative on its head, illustrating that the Habsburg victory in the 1683 Siege of Vienna and the Empire’s subsequent rise as a European power, far from being the culmination of imperial strength and consolidation, is better understood as a lucky (for the Habsburgs) accident.



Michels upends the conventional narrative of mounting “Christian” and “Habsburg” successes against the Ottomans in the late seventeenth century by showing how precarious Habsburg rule of Upper and Lower Hungary was in the period between 1661 and 1676. Fragmented imperial power and brutal counterreformation policies sparked mass revolt among Protestant nobles and commoners. Emboldened by the relative religious tolerance and political stability in Ottoman Hungary, large numbers of Hungarians in Habsburg Royal Hungary not only hoped that the Ottomans would liberate them from Habsburg rule, but asked them to do so.

The book examines the Hungarian borderlands as a study of the dynamics of early-modern European empires that acknowledges the competing interests of the imperial centers in Istanbul and Vienna while decentering them in favor of the

Hungarian borderlands. We encounter those borderlands teeming with people intent on shaping the futures of their families, local communities, religious confessions, and, in some cases, governments. Michels’ microhistorical approach introduces us to local Habsburg officials, military officers, and undercover agents trying to secure control of the territory; to Catholic priests whose efforts to carry out counterreformation were met with hostility; and to nobles, peasants, Protestant soldiers, rebels, brigands, and spies who defied the Habsburg administration, acted in response to rumors, and used trans-imperial communication networks to court Ottoman support. Thus, the book not only demonstrates compellingly that “the actions of ordinary people had world-historical significance.” It describes in vivid detail how they did so, providing a window into a long-neglected part of the early-modern world.

Our glimpse into this world is the result of meticulous transnational archival work conducted in Austria, England, Hungary, and the Netherlands. The resulting source base ranges from Habsburg administrative letters, inquisitorial records, and correspondence from papal nuncios to local Hungarians' letters to Ottoman officials and more than 1500 eyewitness accounts. Michels uses these diverse sources to tell a creative, multilayered story that connects local experience to imperial aspirations.

In the process, he offers a fundamentally new lens through which to approach the history of the seventeenth-century Habsburg–Ottoman border as well as transforming our understanding of early modern Central European, Habsburg, and Ottoman History more broadly. Further, he challenges historians of Central Europe to abandon old restrictive narratives and to think more broadly about the boundaries of Central European, and European, history.

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