

Jankó, F.: **From Borderland to Burgenland. Science, Geopolitics, Identity, and the Making of a Region.** Budapest, CEU Press, 2024. 381 p.

In recent years, historical research has shown a significant increase in interest in the relationship between spaces and the formation of identity (GULDIN, R. 2014; HANISCH, E. 2019; WITHERS, C. 2001; ETZEMÜLLER, T. 2022; RENES, H. 2022). At the same time, approaches and perspectives have changed and multiplied. Spaces, regions and landscapes are no longer regarded as given entities but as constructed ones—shaped through discourses, narratives, and everyday social and cultural practices (WERLEN, B. 2009; ERMANN, U. *et al* 2022). The shift allows us to trace how boundaries were drawn and specific spatial identities were defined and collectively imagined, leading to the formation of a concept of “our” territory. Linking questions of regional and national identity formation with inquiries into the production, circulation, and sharing of spatial knowledge by communities also opens up new insights into nation-building processes (MILLER, N. 2022).

In his book, Ferenc JANKÓ explores this issue through the example of the Austrian province of Burgenland. This predominantly German-speaking re-

gion belonged to the Hungarian half of the Habsburg Monarchy until the end of the First World War. Under the Treaty of Trianon (1920), Hungary was obliged to cede what was then known as *German-West Hungary* to the new Republic of Austria. In 1921, the territorial acquisition was completed, and the new province received its present name by the Federal Constitutional Law of 25 January 1921. After the Second World War, the border with Hungary became part of the Iron Curtain, bringing all contact and cooperation to a halt. Only after 1989 – and especially following the accession of Austria and Hungary to the European Union – did perceptions of Burgenland change once again.

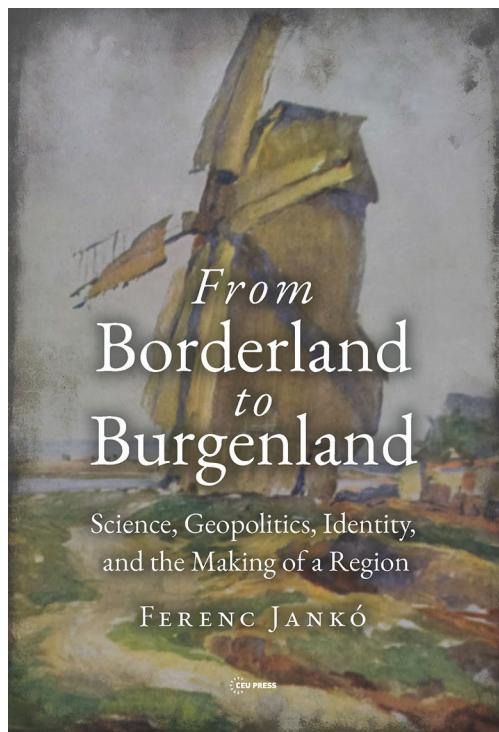
JANKÓ’s book investigates the complex process of Burgenland’s creation after the First World War and examines the scientific, political, and social transformations that led to its incorporation into Austria. While the focus lies on the interwar period, the book also considers the era of the Habsburg Monarchy and the post-1945 period as pre- and post-histories. From the outset, the concept of the “borderland” is used as a key metaphor to describe the intricate interactions between different national and cultural identities. Building on this, the author analyses how the image of Burgenland evolved – from a peripheral and supposedly backward border region into an area that came to symbolise unity and modernisation.

The book is divided into eight chapters, each approaching the topic from a different perspective.

Initially, the *first chapter* outlines the author’s methodological and theoretical framework, presenting Burgenland as a “geographical project” shaped by experts who, through mapping, classification, and description, contributed to its identity formation. JANKÓ asks how Burgenland was “discovered” and “made” as a region through scientific and geopolitical discourses. Drawing together recent debates from the histories of geography, science, and culture, he weaves them into a coherent interpretation that situates the making of Burgenland within broader European transformations.

Subsequently, the *second chapter* examines the region’s prehistory within the Habsburg Monarchy, which had often been romanticised as a frontier between the Austrian (*Cisleithanian*) and Hungarian (*Transleithanian*) halves of the empire. Here, the author compares the narratives produced on both sides, showing how each used geographical and symbolic descriptions to claim the region within contrasting territorial imaginaries. Both sides relied on historical analogies and idealised images of belonging and national identity to underpin their competing claims.

Thereafter, the *third chapter* explores the relationship between ethnographic documentation and po-



litical-territorial claims. This multifaceted discussion analyses the active construction of the region through scientific practice and symbolic labour. A wide array of actors – geographers, historians, ethnographers, statisticians, teachers, engineers, lawyers, and artists – are drawn into view, all operating from different professional and social positions and with varying motivations. These predominantly Austrian knowledge producers are portrayed as both the “discoverers” and “inventors” of Burgenland. JANKÓ convincingly demonstrates that geographical knowledge is not a neutral description of space but a social construct – a product of specific actors, their professional roles, and the political discourses of their time. Their research and publications contributed to the perception of Burgenland as a “natural” border region. Special attention is given to the work of geographers and their mapping projects, which spanned from the annexation by Austria to the reconfiguration of the area as a *Greater German* borderland under Nazi rule.

Meanwhile, the *fourth chapter* analyses the interconnections between emerging geographical discourses and German-national geopolitical interests. Burgenland was construed as part of a broader German-speaking “borderland” strategy aligned with National Socialist conceptions of space and nation. Reading these narratives against the grain, JANKÓ reveals how geographical discourses were constructed, mediated, and disseminated through coordinated texts, images, and maps – turning them into powerful tools of political imagination with tangible effects on local life.

In the following *fifth chapter*, the author turns to tourism and *Heimatkunde* (local heritage studies) as cultural instruments of regional identity formation. In the 1920s, Burgenland was increasingly presented as an idyllic and unspoiled *Heimat* – an idealised homeland that countered the political tensions of the time and fostered a positive sense of belonging. The author shows how popular texts, images, and symbols contributed to consolidating a regional identity that depicted Burgenland as a land of fertility, peace, and harmony.

Subsequently, the *sixth chapter* examines the concept of the “borderland” and its different meanings in German-speaking and Hungarian scholarly and political contexts. JANKÓ traces how Austrian, German, and Hungarian actors used the term with distinct ideological connotations. During the interwar years and the period of Nazi expansion, Burgenland was conceptualised as a geopolitical buffer zone situated between competing national and cultural spheres. The notion of the borderland, thus, emerged as a central political and cultural construct linking various, often contradictory narratives.

Later, the *seventh chapter* shifts focus to the everyday lives of Burgenland’s inhabitants and the social transformations resulting from the region’s border status. Beyond political and scholarly discourses,

the author examines the lived experiences of rural populations in an unstable frontier environment. Migration, mobility, and infrastructural change profoundly shaped local life. Particularly illuminating is JANKÓ’s analysis of architecture, housing, and settlement patterns, which were deeply influenced by geopolitical shifts and social upheavals. Questions of migration and encounters between ethnic groups are treated as central, illustrating the practical implications of geographical and political transformations.

Ultimately, in the *final chapter*, the author summarises his findings, concluding that Burgenland was not a natural geographical entity but a historically constructed project, shaped by the interplay of science, politics, and culture. The “discovery” of the region, he argues, was not only a collective imagination but also a tangible enterprise rooted in institutional and material practices.

The book, thus, offers a profound analysis of the emergence of Burgenland and of the geographical, political, and cultural processes underlying its identity formation. It is more than a historical-geographical case study: it transcends disciplinary boundaries to provide a dynamic synthesis of discourse analysis, the history of science, and regional history. The region’s changing fortunes serve as a prism through which broader historiographical and methodological questions are refracted. JANKÓ engages directly with current historiographical debates, skilfully connecting regional historical inquiry with perspectives from discourse, science, and knowledge history. The study thereby contributes to a growing body of research on the historical production of knowledge, using Burgenland as a compelling example.

The book demonstrates not only how geographical knowledge was produced and reproduced but also how it shaped regional identity. Although the emerging identity of the region – like its physical borders – was often fluid and contested, Burgenland ultimately became a powerful collective imagination. JANKÓ convincingly shows how such projections influenced local socio-political realities, affecting everyday life, administration, infrastructure, architecture, transport, tourism, and migration. By integrating both elite and popular forms of knowledge, the study moves beyond the narrow confines of disciplinary history. The diversity of knowledge examined encompasses not only the perspectives of scientific and political centres, but also the voices within the region itself, adding depth and complexity to the analysis. A further strength of the book lies in its binational perspective: it juxtaposes the Austrian-German and Hungarian viewpoints in a productive dialogue. This comparative framework highlights the transnational lines of conflict and the divergent interpretations that shaped Burgenland’s formation.

Some questions inevitably remain open – such as the representativeness and influence of individual

experts – but this does not diminish the value of the study. On the contrary, these gaps invite further research and reflection. It would also have been insightful to shift the scale and explore the reciprocal dynamics between the formation of a regional Burgenland identity and its impact on the construction of a broader Austrian national identity. By elevating the landscapes of Burgenland to idealized places of social cohesion, they may well have become instruments of higher state policy. Thus, the Burgenland region could be understood as a projection surface for broader visions of social and political order, which anticipated and naturalized the imagined community of the new nation-state of the Republic of Austria.¹

The book *From Borderland to Burgenland* is a fascinating and meticulously researched investigation into the making of Austria's easternmost province. Combining an interdisciplinary framework with rich empirical material and a critical analysis of geographical discourse, JANKÓ's work constitutes a major contribution to historical regional studies and the comparative history of geopolitics. It not only fills significant gaps in scholarship but also opens new pathways for research into the construction of similar regions across Europe and beyond. Through his ability to weave together diverse perspectives, JANKÓ has produced an important work for anyone interested in the making of regions and national identities in the 20th century and thereafter. The book, thus, represents a valuable contribution to the history of Central Europe in the interwar period.

For students and scholars of historical and political geography, as well as for those engaged in the history of science, knowledge, and Central European regionalism, the book is highly recommended. Richly illustrated and supported by detailed source material and case studies, its open-access publication further enhances accessibility, making its coloured maps and figures available to a broader readership.

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¹ See the example of the Rhineland for the German nation-state (ETZEMÜLLER, T. 2022. 71–86).

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