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*Frontiers of Possession: Spain and Portugal in Europe and the Americas*

by Tamar Herzog (review)

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The border region between the Portuguese province of Trás-os-Montes and the Spanish province of Zamora is a sparsely populated, starkly beautiful area. The Portuguese side of the international divide is covered by the Montesinho national park, where rolling grass-covered hills are interspersed by valleys filled with chestnut trees. The landscape of the Spanish side is more rugged, with steeper slopes and nearby rocky peaks that abut the largest glacial lake on the Iberian peninsula, Lago de Sanabria. Perhaps the most curious aspect of this border region are the villages that lie close to the frontier, especially the village of Rio de Onor (Rihonor on the Spanish side) which straddles the international divide. Visitors to this town learn of curious customs that date back centuries, such as the presence of common bread ovens, the shared use of grazing lands, and the communal burden of labor on village lands. They also see the large international boundary sign that sits along the village's main street, and hear both Portuguese and Castilian spoken by the locals. Most leave wondering how such a place came to be, especially since Portuguese and Castilians have lived for the most part of the past two centuries with their backs turned to each other, culturally speaking. Points of contact such as Rio de Onor are few; they are now primarily historical curiosities.

Tamar Herzog's new study of the Spanish-Portuguese frontier intends to explain how such places came to exist and how the border itself was formed. She examines this process not only in Europe, but also in South America, structuring the story of both regions so as to permit comparisons. Provocatively, Herzog recounts the story of the American border first, intending to reveal the dynamics that produced the New World border before describing those of the Old. What emerges are a great number of similarities in the processes of frontier formation between the two, where it is not clear which situation influenced the other. In other words, the case of the frontier between Brazil and its neighbors was not simply the reproduction of European patterns in South America. Herzog's argument, simply put, is that the process of border formation was not a smooth one nor one that was quickly resolved by conquest or treaty. Borders, she argues convincingly, were often established by means other than war or diplomacy, and often far from court. They were determined in many cases locally, in response to the desires of the inhabitants of frontier regions. Her study takes a long view of both the American and European cases, starting, on the one hand, with the first acts of possession in the Americas and, on the other, with the 1297 border treaty that determined the initial limits between some of the territories of the Portuguese and Castilian monarchs. The end of the story in *Frontiers of Possession* only comes in the nineteenth century, with an attempt by the two modern nations at resolving the contested portions of their shared border.

Herzog's story of the Brazilian frontier with neighboring Spanish territories focuses on the issue of possession, a theme which runs throughout the book. She begins by discussing the relevant legal definitions according to early modern

jurisprudence, demonstrating that the same concepts were shared by Portuguese and Spaniards transversally across the ranks of society. As a result, notions of legal possession were repeatedly invoked by individuals such as royal officials, *bandeirantes*, missionaries, and settlers to justify their occupation or control over territory. Perhaps most importantly, the elaboration of the South American frontier between Portuguese and Spanish lands was the result of agreements with indigenous peoples. The vastness of the American interior made possession, in the way that contemporary Europeans understood it, difficult, so it had to be buttressed by protocols of political recognition mutually agreed upon between Europeans and Americans. Yet the dynamics of control in the forests of South America often gave indigenous peoples far more importance than the immigrants. Herzog demonstrates the crucial role played by missionary religious orders, such as the Society of Jesus, whose members were crucial intermediaries between crown authorities and indigenous groups. Negotiating political accords with the Americans therefore often fell to the Jesuits, even when its members were not even Portuguese or Spanish. The story presented in *Frontiers of Possession* about South America is primarily an eighteenth-century one, in which the negotiations for treaties, as well as the aftermath of those agreements, take center stage. Critical for the resolution of the dispute between the two crowns were links to the indigenous peoples of these areas, underscoring the importance of diplomacy on the ground.

Herzog's story of the European border follows a similar pattern. After insisting that the formation of the frontier was a complex process involving many layers of authority and interests, she proceeds to examine three cases where outside attempts to establish borders were unsuccessful for centuries. Those familiar with continental Portugal will recognize the areas at the edges of Alentejo, Trás-os-Montes, and Minho where the curious outline of the border raised conflicts. Attempts to settle disputes in these areas at the highest levels came to naught owing to the intricate knot of jurisdictions, civil and ecclesiastical, as well as economic interests, which overlay the regions' geographies. The prime movers in the disputes were local figures who pursued their ends by skillfully manipulating legal codes, appealing to different authorities, invoking historical precedents, or, in some cases, moving back and forth across the border as it served their interests. At issue, Herzog shows, were local questions, not royal ones, and that attempts to impose a resolution on local crises from outside rarely met with success. Sometimes, such as in the case of the *couto mixto* near Montalegre on the border with Galicia, inhabitants asserted their long tradition of belonging to both Spain and Portugal (or neither, when it pleased them). It was only in the mid-nineteenth century, when the two nations moved to abrogate the old feudal privileges and the oft-cited memory of tradition that the frontier was fixed in place.

*Frontiers of Possession* examines the establishment of American and European frontiers with an insistence on the importance of legal concerns over battles or formal treaties between sovereigns. This is a complex story, and Herzog is right to underscore the difficulty of correctly identifying the specific factors

which were decisive for producing the imperial borders—especially in the face of a long historiographical tradition that argues for the primacy of royal will and the importance of diplomatic agreements. Two things might nevertheless have contributed to making her argument even more powerful. The first is a more complete set of maps. While the book contains three general maps (two of South America, one of the Iberian border), they are insufficient for Herzog's task. Better would have been to divide the maps into more detailed images and place them next to the relevant parts of the analysis, since so much of the book's argument concerns local specificities. A second addition would be a longer discussion of the political dynamics of early modern corporations. In light of the importance of religious orders such as the Jesuits on both sides of the Brazilian territorial dispute, it would have been enlightening to know how the Society of Jesus (rather than just its individual priests) sought to gain by performing diplomatic tasks for its royal patrons. Beyond this, different groups in Europe, both civil and ecclesiastic, also made their corporate will known in border negotiations. These institutional goals, whether motivated for economic, religious, or political reasons, merit further analysis and explanation. Such additions to this wide-ranging study, however, would simply serve to reinforce its primary argument: Far from being clearly demarcated boundaries, the borders between Spanish and Portuguese territories were often blurred lines.

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