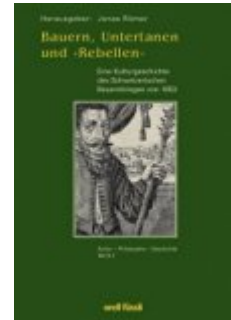


Jonas Römer. *Bauern, Untertanen und "Rebellen": Eine Kulturgeschichte des Schweizerischen Bauernkrieges von 1653.* Zürich: Orell Füssli Verlag, 2004. 358 S. EUR 36.00, cloth, ISBN 978-3-280-06020-9.



Reviewed by Randolph Head

Published on H-German (March, 2006)

For generations, historians of early modern Europe have concentrated on the great uprisings at the beginning and end of the period--the German Peasants' War of 1525 and the French Revolution--while allowing the western European peasant rebellions of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to linger in relative obscurity. The Swiss Peasants' War of 1653, despite occasional mention in works on Europe as a whole and the occasional study within Switzerland, suffered the same fate until Andreas Suter's magisterial monograph of 1997, which analyzed both the course of events and their structural context in exhaustive detail.[1] While Suter's larger argument about the consequences of the war has continued to stimulate debate, scholars both local and from far away will not need another monographic treatment for another few generations.

Plenty remains to be worked out about the Swiss rebellion, however, as the articles edited by Jonas Römer in the volume under review illustrate. The rebellion itself remains deserving of attention from historians interested in various topics. Not least of these is the fact that the rebellion

was described even during its course as a "revolution" (as ably analyzed in the article that Römer himself contributed to the collection). The appellation was well justified by the expansive claims of the rebellious Bernese and Lucernese peasant communes, which sought to create a "Diet of the Peasants" to balance the existing "Diet of the Magistrates." As the Zurich authorities put it, the situation in 1653 could not be tolerated, "da sich vast ein durchgehende Revolution mehrheitlich eydtgnössischer Underthanen erzeugt" (p. 134).

The essays in this volume derive from a series of public lectures as well as a conference that celebrated the 350th anniversary of the uprising. This origin explains the unusual diversity of the contributions. The volume begins with a careful reconstruction of the course of the war by André Holenstein, oriented to one of the key peasant manifestos, the "Huttwiler Bundesbrief" of May 14, 1653. A photograph, transcription and editorial commentary on the *Bundesbrief* by Stefan Jöggi follows Holenstein's article. Suter himself contributes a more theoretically-oriented reflection about the historical memory of the event, and sev-

eral other distinguished scholars of early modern Switzerland, including Susanna Burghartz, Jon Mathieu and Christian Pfister, contribute articles that connect their own specialties (gender history, the agrarian history of the Alpine region and climate history, respectively) to the events of 1653. In between, other scholars present work from their recent research on related topics. The diversity of approaches does result in a somewhat uneven tone and perspective, but many of the individual authors make valuable contributions to fields both broader and narrower.

Of the more focused contributions, those by Niklaus Landolt and Gregor Egloff stand out. Landolt draws on his 1996 dissertation on popular rebellion in the Basel countryside, arguing that despite the participation of Basel subjects in the peasant parliaments that characterized the 1653 peasants' war, the region around Basel experienced the event neither as a war nor as a revolution. As was the case elsewhere, the peasants subject to Basel resented rising fiscal burdens and military recruitment—especially when these were imposed not for regional defense (as had been the case until 1648), but to help suppress peasant revolt elsewhere in Switzerland. They assembled, petitioned, and sent delegates to the rebellious peasants, but did not actually fight. When the ruling cantons defeated the core of the revolt, however, the Basel city government carried out repressive measures that included the execution of seven ringleaders along with confiscations of both property and privileges. (That Landolt describes these seven executions—which were surely deplorable—and the accompanying measures as "äusserst hart" does suggest that both domination and rebellion in Switzerland were relatively tame compared to some parts of Europe.) On the whole, Landolt sees the revolt as resting largely on traditional methods and forms of legitimation and limited in intensity by Basel's peripheral location in the Swiss Confederation. Moreover, although the city's harsh absolutist and French-style approach (thus Landolt) appears to contradict Suter's argu-

ment that the war as a whole blocked absolutist tendencies in Switzerland, the longer-term outcome seems to fit Suter's paradigm. As Landolt writes, "Die Obrigkeit musste einsehen, dass ein Regieren ohne die Untertanen nicht möglich war" (p. 102). In fact the magistrates fulfilled a number of peasant demands shortly after the end of the conflict. Gregor Egloff, in a delightful essay about the tiny clerical territory of Beromünster and the Michelsamt, concentrates on Wilhelm Meyer, the Lucerne patrician who was serving as provost of the canons of Beromünster during the war. Egloff's approach combines the structural with the micro-historical to investigate how individual peasants may have decided for or against participation in the revolt, and how Meyer tried to balance the demands for rigor coming from Lucerne with local flexibility and realism. Meyer, whose father sat on the small council in Lucerne, opposed the city's hard line from the outset, writing his father: "ist besser, etwas am zitlichen zu liden als die religion, die undertanen und entlich alles zu verlieren" (p. 211). While removing the canonry's archive to safety and provisioning the micro-town of Beromünster with shot and powder, he also continued to exhort the local peasants to peace. When the latter nevertheless assembled and seized the town, Meyer and the town citizens managed to make the absolute minimum contribution to the occupying army, avoid being sacked and take a neutral position on the new peasant alliance. By tracking the communication between provost, canons, citizens and peasants, Egloff not only can explain the twists and turns of the rebellion in this tiny territory, he also reconstructs for us the vast cultural gulf between the urban patrician who acted as lord there and the local population, swept back and forth by external forces and trying to keep their heads above water.

Further detailed articles by Marco Polli-Schönborn, Sandro Guzzi-Heeb and Andreas Ineichen delve deep into the political, kinship and economic structures of pre-modern Swiss village life. Polli-Schönborn first compares four separate

early modern revolts in Lucerne, finding that they responded both to long-term intensification of dominion over peasants as well as to short-term weakness in the ruling city. In a second contribution focused on the Emmen district, he investigates the strategies peasant dynasties used to "stay on top," finding that well-established families built on affinal allies, whereas ambitious newcomers recruited allies through godparenthood. In both cases, vertical ties to the Lucerne patri-cians--established through mercenary recruitment, placement of financial credit and links of fictive kinship--became a crucial determinant of a family's success. Guzzi-Heeb extends similar questions to the lower Valais over a longer *durée*, with particular focus on extended kin networks. Ineichen, finally, provides a meticulously detailed study revealing the economics of enclosure in one district of eighteenth-century Lucerne where the practice was common and popular among the peasantry.

The book closes with several broader essays by well-known historians of Switzerland. Jon Mathieu, director of the Istituto di Storia delle Alpi in Bellinzona, offers a provocative analysis of Alpine peasants as "subjects of nature" (*Untertanen der Natur*) rather than of their lords. Posing the question on the basis of nineteenth-century engravings that connected peasants' excessive dependence on nature with their excessive liberty from civilization, Mathieu suggests that we should treat Alpine exceptionalism as a hypothesis to test rather than as a frame for further understanding. Were Alpine agricultural yields really lower, and were the Alps really weakly feudalized, leading to a good negotiating position for the population? These propositions have become virtual tropes for historians of the region, after all. Impressionistically but persuasively, Mathieu argues that we should look again: grain yields on good Alpine land were competitive, while concentration on pasturing may in fact have been a form of agricultural intensification, not a sign of backwardness. Nor were Alpine peasants always "weakly feudal-

ized," as Mathieu points out: after all, Otto Brunner used east Alpine regions to build his classic description of feudal dominion in "old Europe." Mathieu closes with an etching of the first ascent of the Grossvenediger (3660 meters), completed in 1841. Far from being a moment of individual triumph, the event was represented as a collective glorification of the House of Habsburg, which funded the climb, while the ascent party was carefully separated by estate and status. Mathieu's altogether sensible conclusion is that the alpine region in the early modern period was characterized by diversity, not uniformity.

Professor Christian Pfister of Bern offers a typically valuable and detailed analysis of climate variation and agrarian conjunctures from 1550 to 1670 and delivers a typically sober and cautious assessment. No general climate shift took place that can explain the outbreak of rebellion in 1653, though the end of several wet, cold years from 1648-1651 and the shift to dryer, more favorable weather after 1651 allowed the economic impact of the postwar agrarian depression to hit home, since good harvests drove prices down. The indebted peasantry thus faced an increasing risk of default. Professor Suzanna Burghartz of Basel follows with a detailed and fascinatingly illustrated discussion of marriage and premarital sexuality in the countryside throughout the Old Regime. An elaborate folded love letter from 1771 is depicted on p. 308: it contained multiple statements of love and loyalty when unfolded, but when properly folded up, the words combined to say "Flieg hin du kleines Briefelein und grüss mir die Hertzliebste mein." On the following page, a "Geburts-Tafel" possessed by the marital court in Basel allowed quick calculations about when a pregnancy might have begun, allowing the court to determine whether a couple had married before commencing intercourse or, in some cases, who a baby's most likely father was (p. 310). The volume closes, finally, with Holger Böning's meandering if

enjoyable essay on Ulrich Bröker and the popular Enlightenment in Switzerland.

Various readers may enjoy a useful or simply entertaining moment with the essays presented in the volume. In addition, the introductory material and Andreas Suter's contribution offer one additional perspective. The celebrations of the 350th anniversary of the Swiss Peasants' War were not the first such ceremonies. The introduction cites the inscription placed on a memorial to the peasants of 1653 erected in Sursee, Lucerne in 1953: "Was die Bauern von damals--im Zeitalter des Absolutismus--zu Rebellen stempelte, macht sie heute--im Zeitalter der Demokratie--zu Helden der Freiheit." The Cold War rhetoric that made heroes of the peasants contrasted with the much more confrontational attitude of 1903, when the Basel town of Liestal erected a monument describing the peasants as "Unterdrückt, aber nicht überwunden." Even if the scholarship on this revolt has been limited, its popular resonance has continued. One wonders what the relevant festivities, and any essays written in 2053, will look like.

Note

[1]. Andreas Suter, *Der Schweizerische Bauernkrieg von 1653. Politische Sozialgeschichte - Sozialgeschichte eines politischen Ereignisses* (Tübingen: Bibliotheca Academica, 1997).

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

Citation: Randolph Head. Review of Römer, Jonas. *Bauern, Untertanen und "Rebellen"; Eine Kulturgeschichte des Schweizerischen Bauernkrieges von 1653*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2006.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11583>



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