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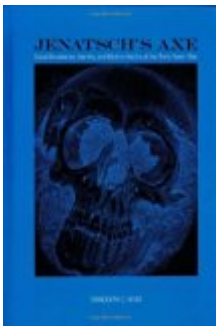
**Randolph C. Head.** *Jenatsch's Axe: Social Boundaries, Identity, and Myth in the Era of the Thirty Years' War.* Changing Perspectives on Early Modern Europe. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2008. xvi + 177 pp. $70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-58046-276-1.

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George (Jürg) Jenatsch is known to some as the protagonist of Conrad Ferdinand Meyer's nineteenth-century novel of the same name. The man behind the story is well worth closer investigation, as Randolph C. Head's new book clearly illustrates. *Jenatsch's Axe* is not exactly a biography, however, and even less a story about an axe. It deals with the social and cultural factors that shaped the identity of an early modern pastor, soldier, and warlord *avant la lettre* who belongs to Swiss national memory almost as much as William Tell. The author of this fine book has published widely on early modern Switzerland, notably on the social and political history and the political languages of an "early modern democracy" in Graubünden (the Grey Leagues or Grisons). [1] These are the contexts from which his new book and the story of Jenatsch begin.

Jenatsch (1596-1639) was raised in the Upper Engadine valley. He spent some time in his youth studying in Zürich before returning to Graubünden as a Reformed pastor. He quickly became involved in the greater politics of this remote, semi-autonomous mountain region, which had attracted the interest of the European powers in the wake of the Thirty Years' War. The reason for the growing interest in the territory of Graubünden among Habsburg as well as French, Venetian, and Spanish politicians and troops lay in its strategic position and its hold on important mountain passes between the northern and the southern part of the continent. Local issues and factionalism in this mountainous territory mixed with European politics when Jenatsch began to participate in the confessional and political struggles of his native region, moving from ardent support for Calvinism toward confessional toleration and even conversion to the Catholic faith; from pastor to mercenary, guerilla fighter, and politician; from membership in Ernst von Mansfeld's army in the Thirty Years' War to alliance with the Venetians and the French. While always serving his home country first, he seemed to have served his own career as well, as he eventually betrayed the French duke, Henri de Rohan, in order to ally with the Habsburgs. Habsburg authorities ennobled Je-

natsch in 1639, just before a man in a bear's costume killed him with an axe in a tavern. Jenatsch's life was full of violence and bloodshed and so was his death. Shortly afterwards, rumor spread that the axe that killed Jenatsch was the same he had used some fifteen years before to kill a member of one of the most important families of Graubünden.

Head does not aim to present the story as a biography in a conventional sense. He uses it as a case study, an indicator of the social and cultural identity of Graubünden and its inhabitants on the brink of the Thirty Years' War. The book is therefore arranged in six chapters, together with a prologue, an introduction, and an epilogue. Chapter 1 gives the reader an idea about Jenatsch's biography, while chapters 2 through 6 address important biographical details to develop our understanding of identity formation and the transgressions of a life seemingly full of contradictions. Chapter 2 focuses on his regional and linguistic attachment to the decentralized, multilingual area of Graubünden in a period of emerging national identities. Chapter 3 deals with his religious moves from Calvinist pastor's son and pastor to convert. He did not force his family members to abandon their old faith and, at least in his later life, seemed to hold an altogether relaxed opinion about personal religious belief. Chapter 4 follows Jenatsch's social progress and his career from pastor to soldier and towards ennoblement, and chapter 5 searches for "hidden" boundaries in his life and society, such as kinship, honor, and gender (here, the sources seem to be particularly sparse). The concluding chapter traces Jenatsch's afterlife between historiography, novel, myth, and marketing.

Overall, Head's Jenatsch develops into a grand pragmatic, in whose life regional affiliations and personal interests often seem almost inextricably linked. The book is a mixture between a narrative of a fascinating life and a structural analysis of society and culture in early modern Graubünden and Europe. What becomes evident at times is that sources on Jenatsch seem to be rather scarce, in particular for important turning points in his life, such as the massacre in the Valtelline or his personal role at certain riots and fights. In this respect, the book sometimes relies on existing narratives about Jenatsch even as it extends them significantly into the cultural setting of a Swiss mountain society of his time. Jenatsch's personal transgressions of confessional and social boundaries underline a fundamental shift in European society. Although the confessional convictions of the Swiss pastor-*cum*-warlord sometimes remain obscure due to an apparent lack of sources, particularly in the section on his youth, Jenatsch's personal progress is displayed as an example of turning toward modernity: "away from confessional attitudes toward a more secular understanding of faith's place in human life" (p. 70) According to the author, the society of Graubünden was the perfect stage for these developments, with its semi-autonomous and perhaps even proto-democratic structures: "Such a shift may have taken place more easily in the Three Leagues, one of the few European states that openly enshrined freedom of conscience, and even of worship, in its formal documents and public discourse. Yet, like all great cultural shifts in history, this change had less to do with formal debates or established laws, and more with the changing sensibilities of an entire society" (p. 70). In this respect it seems like Jenatsch, at times a warlord and ruthless guerilla fighter, presents the other side of the coin of Graubünden's "early modern democracy."

Jenatsch's manifold transgressions, which sometimes seem difficult to trace in the written documents, and the apparent paucity of sources for crucial points of his life leave some room for interpretations and hypotheses. Since the author carefully avoids speculations, the book is sometimes more a fine piece of social and cultural history than an elucidation of the last hidden secrets that surround Jenatsch's life. His death might have been a punishment for "violating entirely

too many boundaries" (p. 92). However, we may never find out whether Jenatsch was really killed with his own axe. This said, the book goes much further than simply popularizing the life of an early modern Swiss terrorist for the Anglo-American world. By thoroughly analyzing the cultural setting and thus telling Jenatsch's story a number of times and from different angles, it challenges long-accepted ideas about historical biography as a logical (and teleological) narrative with a climax at the end. It also underlines the fluidity of early modern confessional, political, and social boundaries. Furthermore, the book is a lively and entertaining read.

Note

[1]. Randolph C. Head, *Early Modern Democracy in the Grisons: Social Order and Political Language in a Swiss Mountain Country, 1470-1620* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).