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Thomas Lau. *"Stiefbrueder
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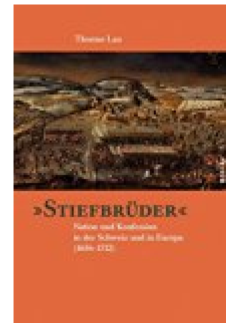

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From Confessionalism to Nationalism: The Swiss Case

In this learned and insightful study, Thomas Lau investigates the interplay between nascent Swiss nationalism and the late phase of the Confessional Age. In contrast to the great majority of works on nationalism, which focus either on its "classic" phase from the French Revolution forward or on its humanist forerunners in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Lau directs our attention to the late seventeenth century. It is here that he finds insight into the confessional roots or origins of the particular form of nationalism in the Swiss Confederacy. Eschewing a strictly domestic examination of these concepts, Lau follows Partha Chatterjee's lead in questioning the interplay between foreign and Swiss forces in this particular elaboration of nationalism (pp. 16-19).[1] By looking to the late seventeenth century, Lau has identified a Swiss Confederacy in the grips of its last confessional conflicts and, at the same time, subject to amplified interest for its loyalties from Louis XIV's France and his Grand Alliance opponents. In this period, the Swiss Confederacy underwent a series of steps, from deep confessional mistrust to political pragmatism finally to stable national unity while at the same time moving out from under France's aegis and into an anti-French stance. These two developments each played a role in the development of an ultimately secular national discourse focused on defensive neutrality within a republic established for the maintenance of peace and virtue. The resultant Swiss nationalism was successful in bridging the confederacy's long problematic confessional divide, though ultimately only by reinstating the rift between the cities, Catholic and Protestant alike, and the rural cantons, a legacy that lasts well into the modern age.

Lau analyzes these developments in three major steps. The first main section of Lau's study is devoted to the decline in earlier pan-Swiss frameworks, a loss of shared myths, and a heightening of confessional tensions in an atmosphere of failed constitutional reform in the aftermath of Westphalia. After offering a sense of the ways in which the classic Swiss foundational myths–William Tell, Brother Klaus–were eroded especially under criticisms stemming from Protestant cantons, Lau describes what took their place. Tellingly, in a pattern that held through the entire early modern period and, indeed, into the modern era, the new Swiss myths of a community of values, of honor, or of virtue were driven by voices harkening not from the rural inner, now Catholic cantons, but from the predominantly Protestant urban cantons. And, as Lau demonstrates examining the work of the Bernese dramatist and historiographer Michael Stettler, these new myths often did not much pretend to be terribly inclusive. As a consequence, the myths lost their powers to hold together the motley assembly of cantons, condominiums, protectorates, associates, and other assorted entities that comprised early modern Switzerland. Attempts to substitute allegorical figures like the "Old Confederate" for these myths proved weak, because such

figures were vague and vacuous. The old Swiss Confederacy of honor and values gave way to a brittle political union held together only by political prudence, a glue that proved too weak in the strains to come. The Swiss had become "confederate step-brothers," as one contemporary put it (p. 118). The Tagsatzung (the pan-confederacy diet) began to lose its place of primacy to exclusive, intraconfessional meetings, especially those coordinating the politics of the Catholic inner cantons. And those few spaces of true a-confessional interaction between the elites–like the baths of Baden during diets–disappeared. Against Andreas Suter's claims, Lau argues that the surpaconfessional interaction in the subject territories was relatively rare and short-lived. When, finally, in 1655 the Catholic cantons rejected Protestant-sponsored plans for reform of the loose confederate structures, grievances rose to dangerous levels. Now "the normal case in the cohabitation of the confessions was one of bitter petty conflicts" (p. 75). The polarization was evident both at the Tagsatzung and in the discourse about the nation. The mood was ripe for an instrumentalization of confessional antagonism by a minority, led by a hawkish Zurich clergy, who delivered the confederacy into a religious conflict which only few wanted. When the resultant "war," the first of Villmergen (1656), proved less easily won than the hawks in Zurich thought, all parties found themselves at the table in a desperate effort to salvage peace before the confederacy tore itself wholly apart. Remarkably, through the intervention of the neutral cantons and the French patron, the cantons did find themselves, rather easily one notes, willing to return to the common cause of the confederacy and began cooperating again in the Tagsatzung and elsewhere.

In the second main section, twice as long as the first, Lau takes on two very large tasks. He introduces us first to the rise of France's importance for Switzerland in the era of the Sun King and then to the ways in which Switzerland was lured into cooperation with Louis's Grand Alliance opponents. The story of early modern France's immense virtuosity in the field of diplomacy is familiar, but Lau offers new insight into how France's perhaps most effective tool of persuasion, at least in the confederacy, was the role its propaganda played in the creation of national self-images in Switzerland. French diplomats and pamphleteers offered self-images for the confederacy as participant in France's reputation–not least on account of the role Swiss arms played in France's wars. French agents portrayed the Swiss nation as a republic protected in its political constitution by its relationship with France. Of course, the luxury and high society available to French clients through Louis's ambassadors in the confederacy strengthened the draw of these images. The strong alliance with France thus brought considerable wealth and command over resources to those military and commercial elites throughout the confederacy who sided with France. But this wealth and social prestige also exacerbated an ongoing process of social differentiation within the confederacy, contributing to a closing off of elites and creating a reservoir of discontent among those shut out from both the French clientage and the social prestige now held by an ever more exclusive elite. These misgivings were fed by the growing suspicion throughout the confederacy towards France, especially among Protestants who could no longer so easily wish away Louis's confessional policies.

Eventually, this situation instanced a rift between France and its Swiss neighbors; and France's European competitors used the chance to foster their own ties to the confederacy. Continuing his focus on the question of national self-images, Lau considers especially the ways in which these other European states–the Dutch Republic, England, and the empire–offered Switzerland alternate models for thinking about its nationhood. Again tracking these offerings in pamphlets and in presentations offered by foreign ambassadors to the Tagsatzung, Lau distills three national models offered by these states. These conceptualizations, though less uniform than those issued by France, did offer the Swiss concepts that proved long-lived: the image of Louis both as archenemy of the nation and as a secularized Antichrist was especially effective. Luis's foreign and confessional policy–aggressive, corrupt, vain, and destructive–made it easier for the Swiss to warm to these foreign models. In a process of gradual appropriation, Swiss pamphleteers adapted the various models to the confederacy, but each model in a way that, as Lau effectively demonstrates, spoke to different segments of this highly segmented state. Despite such differences, these images, together with traditional forms of diplomatic persuasion and pressure by the Allies, led to a shift in pan-Swiss attitudes towards France and Swiss ideas of their own nationhood.

After describing these foreign models and images of the nation as offered in the international contest for the confederacy's loyalty and soldiers, Lau examines what the Swiss did with these models to fashion them to their own internal debates over what the nation was. Ultimately, there was a triumph of the image of Louis as nemesis in a way that demoted inner-Swiss confessional antagonisms to secondary importance. Even in the tra-

ditionally pro-French rural cantons, whose economy remained so dependent on the income generated by the military contracts with France, there was a gradual turn from France. A series of pan-Swiss conceptualizations–the confederacy as place of learning, as a space of peace and neutrality–may have been particularly attractive to the elites in Protestant cities, but, as Lau insists, there was potential for their adoption in Catholic regions, too. Meanwhile, changes in the relationship between individual Catholic cantons returned many issues from their intraconfessional gatherings to the national Tagsatzung. This rupture of Catholic unity created strong structural incentives for cooperation between the cities, including even the nominal chief of the Catholic cantons, Lucerne, and what was considered a potentially unruly set of rural cantons. When a conflict over Toggenburg, a protectorate of Glarus and Schwyz, nominally ruled by the abbot of St. Gallen, threatened Zurich's traditional significance as commerce corridor for the inner cantons, Zurich seized upon the matter as *causus belli.* The ensuing "war," the second of Villmergen (1712), began in a mood of much-reduced confessional antagonism, starting instead as a strictly "political" conflict. Though the abbot of St. Gallen and his Catholic inner-canton allies endeavored to make it appear a confessional conflict, Zurich's ultimate victory neutralized this threat of future confessional conflicts for good: Zurich's military successes had shifted the power dynamic in the confederacy away from the Catholics to the advantage of the Protestants. At the same time, full parity was introduced to the condominiums that had long provided so much fuel for confessional ire. With traditional sources of confessionalized conflict thus sealed off, national images of a defensively neutral, peace-upholding confederacy took hold and persevered until the coming Napoleon.

Lau has certainly succeeded in one of his goals: he effectively demonstrated the influence foreign forces had on the evolution of national self-images and discourses about the nation. His keen attention to the pamphlet literature tracked against diplomatic presentations at the diets is clearly successful in uncovering the various models, images, tropes, and themes of national self-understanding that eventually crept into the national discussions of the Swiss themselves. Both in this specific task and in his larger effort to offer an example of Chatterjee's theory of nationalism, Lau is successful. Certainly, scholars of Swiss history will appreciate Lau's ability to move from the level of *Gemeinde* to canton to confederacy to Europe, and back down in analyzing this period; he has made fully clear how impossible it is to fully understand the stakes of inner-Swiss debates without the full European context.

At a few points, the study suffers from a few structural weaknesses. For instance, Lau's arguments rest especially heavily upon the language of a very large corpus of pamphlets he studied in several different countries. As stated above, these efforts yielded important insights. This discursive analysis, however, leaves the actual process of transfer often under-illuminated. In the case of many of the pamphlets disseminated at the confederate political levels and in the Tagsatzung, the transfer can be comprehended. However, just who was reading many of the other pamphlets and how the process of transfer worked at the sub-confederate level is never very clear. Another consequence of Lau's extensive use of the pamphlets is that it proves difficult in his presentation to adequately narrate the shift from the bellicose and rabidly confessional publications in the run-up to the outbreak of the first war in 1656 to the remarkably rapid return to political normalcy in the course of mere days. We hear how the war let loose decades of stored-up mistrust (p. 114), but then, almost without any developments highlighted, also how trust between the cantons was so quickly reestablished within a few days of negotiations (p. 116). The language of some pamphlets, especially those commissioned by certain involved parties, may well suggest such sudden shifts in national consciousness, but one wonders whether all national actors were necessarily given to such immoderation. One can scarce imagine such a rapid shift from confrontation to reconciliation in a political climate that spoke only the stark language of pamphleteers.

These few concerns do not detract from an overall positive impression of the book. They will certainly not prevent students of the early modern period, even those with an only passing interest in Swiss matters, from using the text profitably. Certainly, all scholars of nationalism would be served very well to appreciate how Lau has highlighted the ways in which this topic–all too often considered in the strict confines of the nation-state–can be approached in a relatively novel and productive way.

Note

[1]. For Chatterjee's approach to nationalism and national identities, see his *The Nation and its Fragments. Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

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