

Meeks, Joshua: *France, Britain, and the Struggle for the Revolutionary Western Mediterranean*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2017. ISBN: 978-3-319-44078-1; IX, 212 S.

Rezensiert von: Erik de Lange, Departement GKG (Geschiedenis en Kunstgeschiedenis), Universiteit Utrecht

This book on the French-British rivalry in the Western Mediterranean of the 1790s is, in the author's own words, a book of „false starts, missteps, contradictions, and dissonances.“ (p. 4) Misdirected ventures, mistaken expectations, and the misdemeanour of various officials are the very stuff that shape this narrative of diplomacy and warfare. In this revision of his dissertation, Joshua Meeks provides a refreshing take on the complicated, muddled beginnings of what we now call the Revolutionary Wars. He problematizes seemingly neat delineations between Revolution and Counter-Revolution, between French policies of radicalization and British agendas of stabilization, while flipping the script on the supposed dominance of great over small powers. This book is thus far from a false start. It poses the right questions at the right moment and neatly complements historiography's recent attempts to understand the French Revolution and the accompanying wars anew, matching the ongoing effort to go beyond Franco-, Anglo- or Eurocentric readings of the period.¹

Meeks explicitly positions his work as a history *in* rather than *of* the Mediterranean, and that choice lends great coherence to his analysis. The inquiry has clear geographical delineations as it centres on a cut-out of the larger sea: the „Western Mediterranean.“ This includes the waters and coastal regions around the Iberian and Italian peninsulas, but most of the story is actually set in its north-eastern pocket, in the Ligurian triangle of Livorno, Toulon and Corsica. Meeks rightly asserts that this area is „uniquely suited“ (p. 5) for an exploration of the ways in which Great Britain and Revolutionary France related to each other as both vied for influence over the Mediterranean powers. That rivalry quickly turned diplomatic when both parties reached a military/naval stalemate almost immedi-

ately after the War of the First Coalition began. In the two introductory chapters, Meeks argues that the French Revolution thereby „destabilized“ (p. 7) the region, as great power actors began to „pick apart the tangle of dynastic ties and claims of neutrality that served as the basis for stability in the Western Mediterranean.“ (p. 18)

The exact nature of that „destabilizing“ influence of the French Revolution (and of its British countering) is unpacked in the four subsequent chapters. It was a heavy toss and turn that marked the political history of the region between 1789 and 1796 – with French attempts to radicalize Corsica and invade Sardinia in early 1793 (Chapter 3), the shaky beginnings and mounting tensions of the British-led First Coalition from June 1793 through to August 1796 (Chapters 4–5), and the advancing of the Italian Campaign under Napoleon Bonaparte in spring 1796 (Chapter 6). Meeks zooms in on the French and British engagements with the region's smaller powers during these episodes, which enables him to problematize set ideas of French Revolutionary diplomacy as a prime destabilizer, and of British endeavours as attempts to restore Old Regime stability.² Instead, he argues that British actors often acted with disdain for the regional status quo (evinced by the founding of the Anglo-Corsican Kingdom, p. 113) and notes that France gradually began to act as a defender of vested local interests (exemplified by the peace treaty with Tuscany of 1795, p. 148).

The greatest strength of Meeks' analysis, however, lies not in nuancing such standard readings of this historical era, but rather in highlighting the important role of local incidents and actors to that history. The oft-recounted pivotal events in London and Paris that generally mark the timelines of textbooks nearly all take place off-stage in Meeks' narrative. They enter the story only when included

¹ Lynn Hunt / Jack R. Censer, *The French Revolution and Napoleon. The Crucible of the Modern World*, London 2017; Pascal Firges, *French Revolutionaries in the Ottoman Empire. Diplomacy, Political Culture, and the Limiting of Universal Revolution, 1792-1798*, Oxford 2017.

² For instance, Robert Holland, *Blue-Water Empire. The British in the Mediterranean since 1800*, London 2012, pp. 12–13.

in diplomatic instructions or when echoed in circulating rumours. Generally ignored and „seemingly small issues“ (p. 136) such as conflicts over smugglers and privateers, or a drunken brawl of the British consul in Tuscany, appear to be much more relevant in grasping the regional dynamics of the Anglo-French rivalry than directives from the warring metropolises. Accordingly, Meeks repeatedly stresses that local actors in places like Corsica or Algiers managed to appropriate the terminologies of Revolution and Counter-Revolution, played the French and British off each other, and pursued their own agendas in the process.

It is therefore unfortunate that Meeks does not give all regional actors equal treatment and, at times, uses confusing phrases to analyse small power conduct. Algiers and Tunis, two of the North African Regencies that were under Ottoman suzerainty, are portrayed rather crudely. They are labelled „wild cards in the Mediterranean game“, their main policy goals being „monetary gain“ through a „game of bribes and supposed insults“ (pp. 24–25). Yet, the actions and aims of these Regencies were not inherently different from those of their near or distant Mediterranean neighbours. North African corsairing was not more or less piratical than the Corsican privateering that Meeks describes with much more detail and nuance (pp. 132–133). The policies of the deys and beys, moreover, were dynamic, as the late Daniel Panzac has shown with great clarity.³ The other smaller power policies are, by contrast, at times described in terms that are certainly less normative, but not much clearer. It seems that Meeks considers policies of neutrality to be reflective of a „peripheral“ position. Still, what is exactly meant by phrases such as „the French now began to accept the peripheral status of various Mediterranean powers“ (p. 152), was not always clear to me.

However, what resonates much more strongly in the book than the occasional odd note, is Meeks' recounting of the political „conversation that took place within the Western Mediterranean between representatives from both major and minor powers“ (p. 189). This dialogue, Meeks concludes, led to a new stabilization of the region as it helped to settle

the limits to Revolution, Counter-Revolution, and the dominance of great powers. Beyond that conclusion gleam further questions, though they would be more aligned with a history of the Mediterranean: how did contemporaries attempt to redefine the region as a space for imperial expansion and intervention? And what role did local actors play in that effort? Nonetheless, as it stands, Meeks' book already provides a more than welcome corrective to (enduring) narratives of great power hegemony.⁴ In his Western Mediterranean setting, we can actually see that the exercise of power depended on local alliances, that naval mastery had its fair share of misfires, and that plans for dominance were often off to false starts.

HistLit 2018-2-093 / Erik de Lange über Meeks, Joshua: *France, Britain, and the Struggle for the Revolutionary Western Mediterranean*. Cham 2017, in: H-Soz-Kult 18.05.2018.

³ Daniel Panzac, *Barbary Corsairs. The End of a Legend, 1800-1820*, Leiden 2005. Despite the title, Panzac also treats 1789 and its immediate aftermath. The book is not included in Meeks' bibliography.

⁴ William Nester, *Titan. The Art of British Power in the Age of Revolution and Napoleon*, Norman 2016.