

Scott, Tom: *The Swiss and Their Neighbours, 1460–1560. Between Accommodation and Aggression*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017. ISBN: 978-0-19-872527-5.

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The Swiss and Their Neighbours aims at offering a reflection on the dynamics of Swiss territorial expansion during the period 1460–1560. Scott's analysis is built on two case studies: the first examines the Swiss conquest of Thurgau in 1460 and the problems arising from its administration during subsequent decades (pp. 7–58) while a second, more developed, case study focuses on Bernese foreign policy and the conquest of the Pays de Vaud in 1536 (pp. 61–171). The administration of Thurgau, which became a common lordship (*gemeine Herrschaft*) after its conquest, brought to the cantons a „web of legal entanglements and territorial disputes“ (p. 13). The Swiss faced two main obstacles presented by the conquest: the administration of justice, shared by the cantons and the imperial city of Konstanz, and the presence of more than 130 lords (noble families, ecclesiastical institutions and even burghers from the surrounding cities including Zurich and Konstanz) possessing lower jurisdictional rights. The unstable geopolitical situation, characterized by a „veritable spate“ of alliances (*Burgrechte / combourgeoisies*) between the Swiss cantons and their neighbours, led to what Scott describes as a series of „unforeseen consequences, lack of coherent policy, and abrupt changes of direction“ (p. 11). The conquest of Thurgau and the cantons' difficult relationships with the actors involved led to a reorientation of Swiss foreign policy. The Perpetual Accord (1474) and the Hereditary Agreement (1511) between the Confederation and the Habsburg monarchy are, according to Scott, the best evidence of the search for accommodation, for a *modus vivendi*. In the end, the Rhine became a sort of „buffer zone“ where an accommodation between the Swiss and southern Germans became a necessity (pp. 57–58).

The second part of the book is a detailed reconstruction of the political and economic background and the course of events that led

to Bern's conquest of the Chablais and the Pays de Vaud in 1536. Scott's main thesis is that the outcome of 1536 was far from being the consequence of a precise, predetermined plan of conquest. As for the case of Thurgau, Scott argues that after the conquest „Bern's aggression yielded to accommodation“ (p. 171). This conclusion needs, in the view of this reviewer, some additional nuance. In fact, Bernese policies with respect to a significant portion of the newly conquered territories – the three Bernese bailiwicks of Thonon, Gex and Ternier-Gaillard – hardly exhibited a search for accommodation. Certainly, military operations had ceased, and for many decades nothing comparable to the conquest of 1536 happened, but the region remained highly unstable and riven by tensions for at least three decades. Without entering into the details of a long and complex history (about which Scott is aware, cf. pp. 155–169), the conquest of 1536 did not mean the end of conflict or of Bernese appetites. These were simply transferred to another, still highly conflictual, plane: a legal and jurisdictional one.

Scott's choice of a chronological framework for the narrative might give historians familiar with this region in this period the impression of reading about events and facts already established by the historiography. Also, the detailed narrative of events makes it sometimes difficult to follow the arguments, leaving the reader feeling a bit overwhelmed by dates, numbers and other details. However, it is precisely Scott's meticulous reconstruction that allows him to show that the events that actually took place were not the only ones possible, thus emphasising the multiple possible paths of history. Concerning the second section, Scott's wise choice to stress financial issues as a key to understanding these events permits him to correct a historiography that, in explaining the conquest of 1536, has often given more importance to other factors, such as Bern's desire to promote the Reformation.

Scott's study is generally based on the materials published in the *Eidgenössische Abschiede*. A more detailed discussion of these sources, given their importance to Scott's narrative, would have been welcome, especially for readers not familiar with the Swiss context (the short note at the end of the book, p. 192, is

insufficiently detailed). A more in-depth examination of these sources, and particularly of the institution (the Diet) from which they originated, would have allowed a more nuanced conclusion (pp. 176–177). Scott poses a fundamental and difficult question: „How, therefore, did the Confederation operate and how did it survive?“ and concludes that it is „unwise to search for the key to Switzerland’s survival primarily in institutional advances“. He maintains that „pragmatism and flexibility ensured that discord did not lead to disaster. Ultimately, aggression yielded to accommodation.“ That pragmatism and flexibility were an important component of Swiss functioning and survival is not in doubt, but the role of the Diet – after all, the most important central institution – in this functioning and survival deserved, at least in the conclusion, a more in-depth discussion.

Finally, some of Scott’s introductory claims (pp. 3–4) will raise some eyebrows. It is surprising to read that „a comprehensive history of Switzerland which dispenses with traditional pieties and does full justice to the numerous and conflicting aspects and aims of politics within the Confederation itself remains to be written. Much of Swiss history is still coloured by local (cantonal) loyalties, by religious confession, or by linguistic and cultural divisions“ and that Swiss historiography for the period 1460–1560 essentially focused on two themes: the Italian Wars, the ‘Drang nach Süden’ and mercenary service and the Reformation and confessional conflicts. These judgements are oversimplifications which do not do justice to numerous rigorously researched works published during the last forty years.¹ And one can only speculate about the absence in the book of reference to the excellent up-to-date histories of Switzerland published by François Walter,² Thomas Maissen,³ Volker Reinhardt⁴ and Georg Kreis (ed.).⁵ Finally, Scott’s statement that the only recent synthesis in English is Jonathan Steinberg’s *Why Switzerland?* (published in 1976) is also incorrect, since English readers have at their disposal the precious *Concise History of Switzerland* by Clive H. Church and Randolph C. Head.⁶

It is to be hoped that these brief, unfortunate historiographic comments will not divert

readers from an unquestionably well-written book. Scott effectively presents the intricacies of the relevant political conflicts and provides a good analysis of the complexities of Swiss policy during the period 1460–1560.

Mathieu Caesar über Scott, Tom: *The Swiss and Their Neighbours, 1460–1560. Between Accommodation and Aggression*. Oxford 2017, in: H-Soz-Kult .

¹ See for instance, the historiographic sketches published in *Traverse. Zeitschrift für Geschichte – Revue d’histoire* (2010/1, 2011/1, 2012/1 and 2013/1).

² François Walter, *Histoire de la Suisse*, 5 vols., Neuchâtel 2009–2010.

³ Thomas Maissen, *Geschichte der Schweiz*, Baden 2010.

⁴ Volker Reinhardt, *Die Geschichte der Schweiz: von den Anfängen bis heute*, München 2011.

⁵ Georg Kreis (ed.), *Die Geschichte der Schweiz*, Basel 2014.

⁶ Clive H. Church, Randolph C. Head, *A Concise History of Switzerland*, Cambridge 2013.

Zitierweise:

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