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Book Reviews: A Concise History of Switzerland

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Book Reviews

Church, Clive H. and Head, Randolph. *A Concise History of Switzerland* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). ISBN 978-0-521-14382-0 Cloth: \$72.00. Paperback: \$27.99.

Writing an accurate history of Switzerland has often proven a challenge for authors. To understate the task, it is monumental. How does one try to distill over 900 years of history into one volume? How does one explain the complex political systems, the linguistic challenges and the cultural uniqueness that makes one Swiss? In the past Edgar Bonjour, J Murray Luck, Jonathan Steinberg attempted to answer these questions. There have also been other books that never move beyond rehashing the traditional ideas, views or stereotypes of previous works. The most recent attempt to explain the history of the Helvetic Confederation is *A Concise History of Switzerland* authored by Clive H. Church and Randolph C. Head.

A Concise History of Switzerland does a very good job of taking the traditional narrative that many are familiar with: the pre-historic people, the arrival of the Romans, William Tell, Hapsburg's domination and overthrow, Religion and its impact, Economics and the role that Switzerland played in the growing global economy, etc and puts a new interpretation on these events. The authors take as their main question why is a nation, located in the geographic heart of Europe, so overlooked in the modern scholarship? Refreshingly scant attention is given to the traditional stereotypes of cheese, chocolate and Heidi. In their place is a well researched, organized, and written book detailing the rise and seemingly rise of Switzerland.

The authors succeed in breaking down Swiss history into manageable time periods, which permit the reader to see the connections within each period, but also allow for connections to be made between the periods. As expected, much ink is spent on the religious changes in the Confederation. The discussion which is covered in Chapter 3 explains the major players well and more importantly their role in the growing confederation of cantons and also their importance in Europe in general.

Another well-written subject is the discussion of World Wars I and II. The traditional narrative of this period has been one of heroic resistance against very difficult odds, or the counter point of abject appeasement especially in the Second World War. Church and Head manage to walk the tightrope without apologizing for the actions of the Swiss in the two wars, but also attempt to explain why some of their actions were necessary face to face with the Allied and Axis powers. They also adequately discuss Jewish bank account questions without falling into canned arguments or conclusions.

The section that needed more is in Chapter 6 titled “Forging the New Nation, 1848-1914.” The section about the Swiss Civil War is only three pages. It is understood that the Civil War is a major situation in Swiss history, albeit brief and without many causalities. A greater discussion on rationale, tactics, and the build up to the war could have strengthened this chapter on the war.

A discussion of social events, such as athletics clubs which proliferate through the nation, service organizations or other clubs, could have humanized the latter chapters especially. Understanding the difficulty of incorporating individual anecdotes into a broad survey of a nation’s history, their inclusion would have enlivened the text and personalized the chapters.

Church and Head have succeeded in attempting to write a single volume history of one of the most complex areas of the world to understand. Not only have they written this for the lover of Swiss history, who will find the vast majority of the book engaging, but the novice in Swiss history, who known nothing more than chocolate, cheese, and the Alps, will enjoy reading this well-written book.

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