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Book Review: Naissance de la Suisse moderne

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Humair, Cédric. *Naissance de la Suisse moderne* (Lausanne: Éditions Antipodes, 2009). ISBN 978-2-88901-034-9. 167 pp. softcover. 26 Swiss Francs. 18 Euros. Amazon \$49.68.

Historically, historiography remains strangely reticent about the birth of the Swiss Federal State in 1848. Despite the major historical importance of this pivotal event, there exist few works which adequately explain its genesis and its profound consequences.

Seeking to instill in the Swiss a sense of national pride, an important desideratum in the imperial Europe of yesteryear comprised of the prestigious British, French, Prussian, Russian, Austro-Hungarian, Italian, Dutch and Belgian Empires, the historians of the late nineteenth century focused on the glorious exploits of the Swiss leaders of the Middle Ages. Thus William Tell and the Eternal Pact on the sacred Meadow of Rütli in 1291 became the symbols of the power and the independence of the Swiss state.

It is certainly understandable why these nineteenth century historians would have placed so much emphasis on the idyllic medieval past of the Swiss Confederation. Unlike its monoracial neighbor Germany, Switzerland is a pluriethnic and plurilinguistic democratic state, lacking any central ethnic core. By glorifying the deeds of the familiar Swiss heroes of the Middle Ages, these historians hoped to compensate for Switzerland's lack of ethnic unity, by giving the nation a sense of historical and political unity. Thus for a long time the study of the events of 1848 remained neglected.

Professor Cédric Humair proposes to address this problem in his recent book, *Naissance de la Suisse moderne*. The work has two primary objectives: the first is to understand the advent of the Swiss Federal State in 1848 as the culmination of a long process in which are intertwined economic, social, political and cultural dimensions. The second objective is to re-establish the importance of 1848 in the historical evolution of the Swiss Confederation. The role of the Constitution of the Federal State founded in 1848 has in fact been underestimated from several points of view. Most importantly, the establishment of the new Swiss state in 1848 permitted the repositioning of Switzerland on the international scene. From its status as a satellite of France and its subsequent status as a neutralized zone under the influence of the great European Powers, the Swiss Confederation progres-

sively acquired the status of a truly independent and autonomous State with which the various mighty European empires were compelled to reckon.

In addition, this new centralized Swiss State born in 1848 contributed decisively to the establishment of two political principles which would prove to be important for the development of a capitalist economy: the rights and liberties of the individual and sociopolitical stability. Indeed, since that era Switzerland has come to exemplify for the entire world how a true capitalist economy should function at the optimal level, and many nations have emulated the impressive Swiss economic model.

The book naturally clarifies the role of the War of the Sonderbund (November 1847) in the birth of modern Switzerland: this war ensued after seven Catholic cantons formed a union, the Sonderbund, in 1845, in order to protect their interests against the centralization of power. The war resulted in the emergence of Switzerland as a modern federal state.

Professor Humair gives considerable attention to the subject of the historically unprecedented level of centralization in Swiss government in the wake of the Sonderbund war. While he shows the prevalence of political disputes and the diversity of political points of view at this time in Swiss history, he likewise demonstrates that economic necessity compelled all social groups and political parties to work for the common good. Everyone at that time, for example, understood the pressing need for a certain degree of economic modernization.

There is an excellent chapter concerning the hostile reaction to the Swiss political experiment throughout Imperial Europe. The Swiss government established in 1848 proved to be the only successful and durable liberal government; all the other Revolutions of 1848 failed in Europe and resulted in the restorations of the various monarchies. Hence Switzerland became an island of liberal democracy in the midst of nineteenth century reactionary imperial Europe, and was a source of concern for the Habsburgs, the Hohenzollerns and the Romanovs.

Naturally, however, Switzerland could not ignore the economic requirements of the times: the new age of industrialization and free market capitalism required that the Swiss Confederation cooperate with the economies of the other European nations. Nonetheless, despite these necessary economic concessions, Switzerland never sur-

rendered its essential newfound political autonomy. Thus, at a time when the rights of many European dissidents were being ignored and suppressed and at a time when Imperialism and the power of the Habsburg, Hohenzollern and Romanov emperors was growing in Europe, the Swiss Confederation was able to preserve the independence of its people and acquire respect for their accomplishments in international affairs.

A work of rich and profound historical, economic and sociopolitical analysis, Cédric Humair's *1848: Naissance de la Suisse moderne* deserves to be on the shelves of any professor of history who contemplates any course on nineteenth century Europe.

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