

Klaas van Gelder, *Regime Change at a Distance. Austria and the Southern Netherlands Following the War of the Spanish Succession (1716-1725)* (Dissertation, Ghent University 2012; Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten, Nieuwe reeks 29; Leuven/Paris/Bristol: Peeters, 2016, 449 pp., ISBN 978 90 4293 242 5).

Once regarded as the classic example of the ills brought upon the Habsburg Netherlands by foreign oppression, the first half of the Austrian regime has since become a rarely visited corner of the past. Apart from the sorry end of the guild dean Frans Anneesens, there is little drama to be relived. Denied the reforms that would characterize the reigns of Maria Theresa and Joseph II, it may appear longwinded and steeped in bigotry and immobility. It is probably for these reasons that one of my colleagues has made it a habit of referring in conversation to the eighteenth century as the most boring period of our past. Fortunately, there is now a book inviting us to think again. *Regime Change at a Distance* takes a fresh look at the opening years of the Austrian regime. It concentrates on how Vienna sought to incorporate its new and remote possessions into the Habsburg Monarchy, and to what degree the administration of Governor-General Prince Eugene of Savoy and of his representative, the Savoyard Ercole Giuseppe Turinetti, Marquis of Priero (aka Prié), laid the foundations for the future reforms. Originally a doctoral dissertation, it has been reworked and translated.

A decade may seem a relatively short period of time for a book length study, but the author has a lot of ground to cover. The acquisition of the Habsburg Netherlands by the Austrian branch of the dynasty was the outcome of the War of the Spanish Succession. The new provinces came with strings attached. Before allowing Emperor Charles VI to enter into possession, his allies – the Dutch Republic and Great Britain – restricted his political, military, and economic liberty of action through the Barrier Treaty. The country had been exhausted by war and the local elites were divided in their loyalties. In short order, the new regime had to settle its process of decision-making, quell urban revolts, and find ways to fill the seemingly ever-empty coffers. Much was expected from venturing in the trade of the Indies, but Austria's allies were quick to scuttle that project. All the while, the new regime sought to foster loyalty through monarchical representation and the distribution of favors. Contrary to what has been traditionally believed, the book argues somewhat convincingly that there was slow but steady progress on most, if not all, fronts. In its final chapter, it also seeks to shed new light on the fall of Prié and the replacement of his patron Prince Eugene by Archduchess Maria Elisabeth.

The central theme of the book is regime change: How the Austrian Habsburgs took over the formerly Spanish Netherlands, and how they sought to consolidate their rule over the new acquisition. An introductory chapter conceptualizes how regime change was brought about in early-modern composite states. The conclusion makes judicious comparisons, yet some questions remain. In the case at hand, it would appear that regime change meant to change as little as possible. Unless its authority was openly challenged – such as during the riots in Brussels and Antwerp – the new regime seems to have scrupulously respected the liberties and privileges of its new subjects. Under those circumstances, novelties stood little to no chance whatsoever. Charles VI, Eugene, and Prié may have dreamt of introducing French-style *intendants*, but they invariably caved in at the first signs of resistance. Bearing in mind that overall trend, it is to be regretted that the book pays almost no attention to the one instance where the Austrians imposed a significant change in regime. By virtue of the peace treaties, France had returned some parts of the county of Flanders. Disregarding requests by the Flemish States, Vienna decided not to reintegrate them, but instead to treat them as a distinct entity. Known as the *Landen van Impositie* or the Retroceded Lands, they became the only province of the Habsburg Netherlands that was not allowed a say in matters of taxation. Given the central theme of the book, it would have been illuminating to investigate why the new regime felt strong enough to stand firm in this instance, while it wavered in so many others.

Not unlike the intricate lace that adorned the garments of the high and mighty of the day, the book draws attention to a number of interesting patterns. One of these is the way in which the possession of the Habsburg Netherlands was regarded by all sides as a means to cement the alliance between the Austrian Monarchy, the Dutch Republic, and Great Britain. Another speculates on the impact that the permanent absence of Prince Eugene and the distance between Brussels and Vienna had on the political crisis that unfolded in the course of 1724 and 1725.

Methodical, cautious, and based on the abundant archives of the eighteenth century, at times the narrative might come across as reporting from a closed world of bureaucrats moving stacks of papers across a table. Voices from outside of the system are only rarely heard. It would appear that more could have been made out of the reports from the foreign diplomats residing in Brussels. The author has worked through them, as he has through an almost incredible amount of documents, but does not often draw on them to add the freshness of the outsider's view to the story. To give but one example, the treatment of the fall of Prié – where it is quite obvious that a lot more was going on behind the scenes – could have benefited from their reports. This emphasis on the formal aspects of politics also leaves little room for political representation. It would seem to this reviewer at any rate that a regime that extolled its magnificence in the Hereditary Lands by means of

the *Kaiserstil* would have invested more time and energy in propagating its legitimacy among its new subjects of the Habsburg Netherlands.

On the whole, however, *Regime Change at a Distance* can count as a deft re-examination of a neglected period. Rigorously based on a careful reading of an impressive amount of archival sources, it quietly sets aside some deeply engrained historiographical stereotypes.

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