

Roeland Goorts. *War, State and Society in Liège: How a Small State of the Holy Roman Empire Survived the Nine Years' War (1688-1897)* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019, 418 pp., ISBN 9789462701311).

The Prince-Bishopric of Liège was a small and peculiar state. As a *Reichskirche* of the Holy Roman Empire, Liégeois politics were dominated by the local Estates and Chapter that managed to limit the authority of the elected Prince-Bishops. As a result, the Prince-Bishopric functioned as a semi-independent state within the Empire, allowing the Liégeois to ignore Imperial fiscal, diplomatic and military policies. Liège adopted a longstanding policy of unarmed neutrality, allowing foreign troops safe passage within its territory. As a small state that lacked a substantial military organization while bordering France, the Dutch Republic and the Spanish Netherlands – states that were quasi-permanently at war throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – the armed neutrality of the Prince-Bishopric was often put to the test by foreign armies and diplomats, that used Liège's territory for 'safe' transit and as tax-base. At the onset of the Nine Years' War (1688-1697), however, Emperor Leopold I simply forced the Liégeois to join the war against Louis XIV, leaving the territories of the Prince-Bishopric exposed to French aggression. Nonetheless, the Prince-Bishopric of Liège survived and was able to restore most of its previous independence as well as its neutral diplomatic status. And, according to Goorts, it continued to prosper.

The main aim of this book is to understand how the Liégoise managed to fight and bargain themselves through the Nine Years' War. The focus on a small state and short time span notwithstanding, this is a highly significant research question for military historians, historians of international relations of the early modern period and, more generally, for historians interested in the emergence and developments of state organizations – scholarships that are arguably mostly focused on larger states. At the same time, the question of how the Prince-Bishopric of Liège managed to quickly develop a military force, increase fiscal revenues, while dealing with the disruptions and destructions of the war itself, is a complicated one. Beyond the simple observation that the Prince-Bishopric existed after the war; the how, what and why, as well as the consequences of its survival are much harder to interpret and explain. Besides the unavoidable lacunae in available source material, the success of any policy pursued by the Prince-Bishopric must be nuanced by the fact that its vastly more powerful foreign rivals were the main driving forces of military and diplomatic developments within the Prince-Bishopric.

Rather than developing a particular explanation or evaluating existing explanations for the political and military developments within the Prince-Bishopric, Roeland Goorts divided his book in thematic chapters. Besides a summarizing introduction (Chapter I) and conclusion (Chapter IX), the chapters cover internal political affairs (Chapter II), the international relations of the Prince-Bishopric (Chapter VI), the central fiscal system (Chapter III), the central military (Chapter IV), local organization of defence (Chapter V), the patterns of warfare (Chapter VII), and the social and economic consequences of warfare (Chapter VIII). All these chapters start with extensive coverage of the general situation in the Prince-Bishopric, and in doing so, provide valuable background information for anyone studying this principality. In addition, the chapters are all based on impressive amounts of relevant archival sources and information derived from heritage literature. For instance, in his excellent second chapter, Goorts makes use of a variety of documents on elections of a new Prince-Bishop that provide substance to his emphasis on the importance of local politics for his study – and, by implication, downplay the weight of the dynastic ambitions of the many Wittelsbach Prince-Bishops of Liège on Liégeois policies. Equally impressive are the variety of sources that highlight the role of monetary policy in financing the military effort in the third chapter and detailed information on a specific army regiment in the fourth chapter.

The empirical material used in this book is wide-ranging and creative, but quite fragmentary. Unsurprisingly, the chapters are descriptive and the author hardly attempts to develop conclusions. This works well for the second, third and fourth chapters as these chapters – covering internal politics, financial organization and military organization – provide substantial empirical material to readers interested in the general or conceptual elements of the internal dynamics and processes of early modern state formation. The subsequent chapters are less impressive. Despite extensive information on local defence structures and anecdotal evidence on the numerous skirmishes and raids during the war in chapters five and six, respectively, they have little to offer because Goorts' anecdotal evidence is too limited and unsystematic.¹ The last thematic chapter on the social and economic consequences of the war presents another collection of anecdotal evidence highlighting the ravages of war and the deprivation suffered by the Liégeois. Here too, the information is not systematically discussed or evaluated but followed by a general conclusion that is simply problematic and reads '(...) the peoples' will to stay

1 The topics of these chapters are arguably less relevant for all but the most ardent military historians. Good and more comprehensive literature on these themes are readily available, for example John A. Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle. The French Army, 1610-1715* (Cambridge

1997); David Parrott, *The Business of War. Military Enterprise and Military Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge 2012); George Satterfield, *Princes, Posts and Partisans. The Army of Louis XIV and Partisan Warfare in the Netherlands (1673-1678)*. History of Warfare Series 18 (Leiden 2003).

and rebuild their communities gave the Principality the opportunity to once again flourish. Thus, our research confirm's [sic] Gutmann's claim that the Meuse valley remained a prosperous region' (302-303).² The chapter provides absolutely no information to warrant this claim.³

How the Liégeoise managed to survive the Nine Years' War remains somewhat of a mystery after reading this book. The book tells the story of an endless routine of domestic political manoeuvring between and within the Estates, resulting in a balance of power. This political balance, simultaneously, imposed obvious limits on the pursuit of any significant political change, especially the type of change required to turn the Prince-Bishopric into a relevant military state. As a result, the Liégeoise seem to have stumbled through the Nine Years' War rather passively. Perhaps, this is little surprising for this small and peculiar state that, for just this once, was forced to fight at the frontlines of the war. Although this book falls short in formulating a convincing conclusion to its central research question, Goorts provides a wealth of relevant empirical material on the internal politics and fiscal-military organization of the Prince-Bishopric of Liège that will prove valuable for historians working in this field.

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- 2 The reference in this quote is to Myron P. Gutmann's, *War and Rural Life in the Early Modern Low Countries* (Princeton 1980).
- 3 Arguably, a minimal empirical requirement for this statement should be to show changes in the standard of living of the Liégeoise. However, the 'flourishing' of the economy also requires a comparative assessment to demonstrate that the Prince-Bishopric was indeed relatively prosperous. The implied causal relation between

the specific will of the Liégeoise to remain in their communities throughout their hardship would require systematic evidence that the Liégeoise indeed remained, but also that they did so more often or better than in other places; and then still clear evidence that communities where inhabitants remained were indeed better off than places where that did not happen. None of this is provided in the chapter.