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# (Review) Der Schweizerische Bauernkrieg von 1653

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## (Review) Der Schweizerische Bauernkrieg von 1653

### **Keywords**

Germany, confessionalization, reformation, counter-reformation, Catholic, Lutheranism

### **Comments**

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*Der Schweizerische Bauernkrieg von 1653: Politische Sozialgeschichte—Sozialgeschichte eines politischen Ereignisses.* By Andreas Suter. Tübingen: Bibliotheca Academica Verlag, 1997. Pp. 687.

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Andreas Suter's study of the Swiss Peasant's War of 1653 is surely the definitive study of this seminal event in early modern Swiss history. This book goes, however, a step further. Moving beyond the narrow concerns of much German-language historical literature of this period, Suter successfully engages a whole range of important theoretical issues of concern to historians, sociologists, and anthropologists.

The subject of this book is not well known outside Switzerland. In 1653 peasants in the Entlebuch region, a district governed by the city of Luzern, protested a number of new taxes and monetary reforms undertaken by the authorities. Protest led quickly, in the terminology of 17th-century contemporaries, to open "revolt," then to a "revolutionary situation," and finally to a full-scale "peasant's war." The peasants developed a strong sense of unity and collective purpose, and the rebellion quickly spread to neighboring regions of Switzerland. Suter emphasizes that the peasants and their leaders (mostly landed peasants with considerable political experience) were determined, flexible, and capable of learning quickly in new situations.

Ultimately, however, like all early modern peasant revolts, this rebellion was suppressed by military force followed by a savage repression. As peasant resistance went underground, rebel leaders increasingly drew on Swiss historical memory, in particular the stories of the defeats of the Habsburgs in the 15th century and the semilegendary tale of William Tell, to construct a political discourse that focused on the tyranny of the authorities. This charged language laid the groundwork for the assassination, in September 1653, of several important Luzern officials on a lonely road in the Entlebuch, understood as a *Tyrannenmord* (tyrannicide) by the population. Suter argues that this assassination indicates a level of "treachery" (*Heimtücke*) and brutality that was unknown in other social conflicts in Switzerland in this period (p. 307).

Suter's primary goal in this book is to examine the relationship between long-term structures and historical events. How does a historian acknowledge and account for historical structures (economic trends, demographic changes, social structures, long-term cultural patterns) without predetermining the outcome of a particular event? In order to analyze the relationship between structure and event, Suter divides his book into two parts. Part 1 examines the Peasant's War from "the very short perspective of slow motion" (p. 45). Here he describes and analyzes events in close detail. Part 2 of the book examines long-term structural issues. Suter's organization consciously reverses that of Fernand Braudel's *The*

*Mediterranean in the Age of Philip II* (Harper and Row, 1972), giving primacy to events not structures.

Suter's discussion of events emphasizes the role of political leadership, focusing on the ways in which peasant leaders learned from and exploited events happening around them. Suter's extensive archival research shows that the rebels in 1653 made informed decisions, particularly at the decisive moments as they moved from protest to revolt to revolution to full-scale war against the authorities. Thus, although events had their own dynamic, people made real decisions. Suter also has a sophisticated understanding of the role of communication and language in peasant revolts. He details the role of economic ties and market connections in bringing Swiss peasants together as well as the use of traditions and historical memory in strengthening support for the rebellion.

Suter turns to a discussion of structural reasons behind the Peasant's War in part 2 of the book. Here the discussion is somewhat less original. The chapters discuss (1) the economic causes of the revolt, (2) the fiscal and political preconditions, (3) the role of "collective learning processes" and culture, and (4) the impact of lordship, economic ties, and social division on the "structuring" of the revolt. As this list of themes indicates, there are many important links between structure and the issues discussed in part 1. Perhaps most interesting is the significance Suter gives to cultural factors. He emphasizes here again the various ways peasants used cultural traditions, but also indicates the limitations imposed by tradition and historical memory. Thus the memory of major military victories in the 14th century gave peasants the willingness to revolt, but it also made them overconfident in their conflict with the authorities. Furthermore, because historical experience was passed down orally, it was "fragmented" and "inexact" and easily misled the rebels in 1653 (p. 455).

This beautifully produced volume is clearly organized with an English summary, illustrations, appendixes, and invaluable chapter summaries. Suter's scholarly apparatus demonstrates an impressive knowledge of the relevant literature in French and English as well as in German, an important factor in the quality of the book. At times, however, Suter has gone too far in his effort to be all inclusive. Although certain themes stand out (the "learning process" of the rebels and the culture structures within which they operated) the reader can get lost in the details. What does Suter believe were the most important factors, the most significant aspects of the process of rebellion in 1653? This weakness is more than compensated for by the discussions of theoretical and methodological issues, which are intelligent and thoughtful and based on an analysis of real events.

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