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Andreas Affolter, *Verhandeln mit Republiken: die französisch-eidgenössischen Beziehungen im frühen 18. Jahrhundert* (Externa 11). Cologne, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau, 2017. 455pp. €70.00 (hb.). ISBN 978-3-412-50717-6.

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Diplomatic history, once labelled as conservative and methodologically backwards, has been re-discovered in recent years by cultural historians in Germany and Switzerland as a subject worthy of attention. Following the methodological assumptions of Wolfgang Reinhard and his students, especially Hillard von Thiessen, early modern diplomacy and negotiations have come to be seen through a prism of network relations, patron-client dependency, and the coalescence of the private family interests of ambassadors with the public interest.[1] Andreas Affolter's book follows the path predetermined by this framework.

Affolter's book is based on an impressive array of primary sources (he lists twenty-one archives and libraries for his unpublished material), although his principal source is the correspondence of Claude-Théophile de Bésiade, Marquis d'Avaray (1655-1745), who served as the French ambassador to the Swiss Confederation from 1716 to 1726. The two main questions asked by Affolter concern the status of actors involved in French-Swiss relations and the practices and channels of their negotiations and communication (see pp. 20-31, 395).

The answers to this set of problems are divided into five chapters. After an introductory chapter, Affolter elucidates the complicated relationship between the French monarchy and the Swiss Confederation in chapter two. In contrast to early modern republics like Venice or the Netherlands, where the political centers were relatively clearly defined, it was extremely difficult for royal ambassadors to the Swiss Confederation to find an interlocutor who represented the whole republic. That is why the French ambassador resided at Solothurn, which was where the *Tagsatzung*, an assembly of all members of the Confederation, met. The ambassador regularly negotiated with different representatives from the most important cantons. Every canton, be it Bern or Freiburg, had a different political agenda and interest with France. To complicate matters further, confessional divisions between Protestants and Catholics within the Confederation had to be taken into consideration by Avaray, as did ceremonial questions on a public level, a problem that was solved by holding informal meetings between the interested parties. What made direct negotiations especially difficult was the hierarchy between the powerful French monarchy and the Swiss republic. In Paris, Swiss envoys were not considered to be representatives of a sovereign state but were seen as representatives of a specific canton, and consequently could not speak on behalf of the whole Confederation. After a serious

ceremonial clash on the occasion of a mission of Swiss envoys to France in the 1680s, the Swiss decided to maintain a permanent envoy at Versailles, while the French king was represented by an ambassador at the *Tagsatzung*.

Chapters three and four describe the personal network of Avaray and his practices of communication, be they written or oral. In chapter four Affolter analyzes the different “channels” of communication between the ambassador, the Swiss, and the French. Due to the tradition of Swiss mercenaries in French service (i.e., the famous “Swiss Guards”), representatives of the canton had many contacts that were well placed at the French court as they held high-ranking positions in the French army. Often these contacts belonged to the second or third generation of Swiss serving in France, although they still maintained ties with their families in the Confederation. That was the case, for example, with the Besenval family. Johann Viktor de Besenval II and his brother Karl Jacob served as colonel and major respectively of the Swiss Guards at Versailles (Johann Viktor was father of the Baron de Besenval, *favori* of Marie Antoinette), and were members of the government of the Swiss cantons. Here they provided an important line of communication between the French court and the ambassador in Solothurn. But the Besenval brothers were not alone. There were many diplomats of Swiss origin in the service of France, England, Prussia, and the Empire, and they all could be addressed by their cantons of origin and served as channels for more or less official negotiations. All these channels allowed the Swiss Confederation to maintain a permanent representative at the French court—a highly complicated affair, as the French consequently refused to treat representatives of the cantons as representatives of a sovereign state.

In chapter five, the discussion finally turns to “high politics.” At the center of Avaray’s mission stood the renewal of the traditional French-Swiss alliance, which had expired in 1716. For ten years, Avaray continued to negotiate this question, which was complicated by the fact that Protestant and Catholic cantons were divided over the character of the future alliance, as well as their pursuit of domestic political aims. In 1712 a short civil war broke out between Protestant and Catholic cantons ending with a crushing defeat of the latter. The Protestant cantons, especially Bern and Zurich, dictated a humiliating peace treaty. What rendered the negotiations with Avaray so difficult were the continued efforts of the Catholics to revise this treaty. They hoped that the French would support them by demanding a revision of the treaty as a precondition of a new alliance. By contrast, the Protestants were extremely distrustful regarding any efforts to modify the treaty. As such it took until 1777 to come to an agreement over a new alliance.

As already mentioned, Affolter’s book is founded on an impressive array of unpublished material. He provides a “thick description” of Avaray’s mission and especially of the practices of communication between the ambassador and the Swiss authorities. He is interested in the “fabrication” of documents (who wrote them) as well as the different levels of verbal communication. He also presents the patron-client relations between Avaray and his Swiss counterparts in a manner that is in keeping with his own theoretical interests. This, however, sometimes leaves the reader wishing that the author had kept a greater distance from the theoretical ideas that frame his study.

What do we learn from Affolter’s book on early modern diplomacy? This is difficult to say. Can Avaray’s mission and the conditions of his negotiations be compared to the situation of other diplomats—whatever their position within the hierarchy of envoys might have been—at any

European court in the early eighteenth century? One thing is certain. The longer a mission took, the better an envoy could build up a network of “friends” who could help him gather information. That said, the Swiss situation, in which Avaray never really knew if his counterpart spoke for the whole Confederation or only for a canton or even only a town, was unique. Official negotiations between a representative of a state and his “hosts” were already highly institutionalized in the early eighteenth century. The envoy first met with the “foreign minister” and his clerks to discuss political questions, whereas meetings with courtiers and other officials served mostly to gather further information.

Thus, even though the potential for drawing more generalized conclusions from Affolter’s study may be limited, it still gives us a broad and deep insight into the function of early modern diplomacy between a great power and a small republican power. His methodical and theoretical framework will also surely prove useful for all kinds of future research on early modern diplomacy.

NOTE

[1] See the programmatic volume of essays that opened the “Externa” series: Hillard von Thiessen and Christian Windler, eds., *Akteure der Außenbeziehungen: Netzwerke und Interkulturalität im historischen Wandel* (Externa 1), (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau, 2010). For the work of Wolfgang Reinhard see Wolfgang Reinhard, ed., *Römische Mikropolitik unter Papst Paul V. Borghese (1605-1621) zwischen Spanien, Neapel, Mailand und Genua* (Bibliothek des Deutschen Historischen Instituts in Rom 107) (Tübingen: Neimeyer, 2004). Examples of this approach include: Eva K. Dade, *Madame de Pompadour: die Mätresse und die Diplomatie* (Externa 2) (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau, 2010) and Tilman Haug, *Ungleiche Außenbeziehungen und grenzüberschreitende Patronage: die französische Krone und die geistlichen Kurfürsten 1648-1679* (Externa 6), (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau 2015).

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