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Christopher W. Close, *State Formation and Shared Sovereignty. The Holy Roman Empire and the Dutch Republic, 1488-1696* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). 369 p. ISBN 9781108837620.

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The complex political history of the Holy Roman Empire and its myriad polities of all shapes and sizes often defies clear analysis. Yet Christopher Close's impressive new book, by foregrounding the ever-present instinct to build political associations, provides a fresh and compelling way of interpreting the long-term development of the politics of not only the Empire, but of the Dutch Republic as well.

It does so by breaking through a number of barriers, in both time and space, that have limited our understanding of the constitutional development of the Empire and Low Countries. Central to this study is the argument that corporate alliances – temporary formal associations in which princes, states, and cities shared their sovereignty – continued to form an integral part of the Empire's and Low Countries political fabric throughout the early modern period. Though such coalitions were often seen as inherently unstable and at times lambasted as a sure way of bringing down the Empire and 'the German nation', they were continually resurrected in different forms and with different goals. Famous leagues and alliances, such the Swabian League, the Schmalkaldic League, the Catholic League, or the Protestant Union, have all been studied extensively before, but mostly on their own and therefore more as incidents or anomalies than as a structural feature of the constitutional landscape. Close, by contrast, shows that these famous leagues should be seen in the context of the many lesser-known leagues and unions that came and went throughout the early modern period. The experience of participating in such alliances and the weight of the successful associations of previous generations shaped the composition and operation of new initiatives. The realisation that polities kept resorting to the pooling of sovereignty to solve crises makes watershed moments in the constitutional history of the Empire, such as the Reformation, the Peace of Augsburg, or the Peace of Westphalia, appear much less pivotal. Though the Reformation, for instance, did encourage the formation of leagues based on religious identity, these associations very much followed the model and mindset of the non-confessional corporate alliances of earlier generations.

By foregrounding the politics of alliance, Close makes an important contribution to the historiography of state formation in the early mod-

ern period. His arguments represent a next step in the steady process of dismantling the traditional narrative about the inevitable emergence of the sovereign territorial state in the early modern period. Moving away from the notion that European states gradually built the institutions to facilitate political independence, the book makes a strong case for the continued importance of shared sovereignty. Moreover, it demonstrates convincingly that state formation was not simply a contest between the centralizing state and beleaguered peripheries, but that the Empire and Dutch Republic were moulded by shifting confederations of diverse political actors, great and small. As Close shows, the most successful corporate alliances had 'cross-status' appeal and incorporated a range of different types of members; the Emperor, princes, Imperial cities, small states and even monastic houses. Because smaller allies were relied upon by the leading powers to provide the bulk of the funding, their continued survival and significance was assured.

The book makes a similarly important contribution to the historiography of the early modern Netherlands by placing the constitutional development of the Dutch Republic in its broader historical and geographical context. Rather than seeing the emergence of the Republic as an exception in Europe's political landscape, he shows that the Imperial tradition of league-building also profoundly shaped the course and outcome of the Dutch Revolt. This started long before 1568 through such initiatives as the Burgundian Transaction and attempts by the Duke of Alba to include the Low Countries in Imperial league building. Seen in this light, the Union of Utrecht, which came to function as the *de facto* constitution of the Republic, was essentially a remarkably successful and long-lasting reiteration of the leagues and associations that sprang up in the Empire and Low Countries throughout the early modern period.

The scope of this study and the sheer number of political players and institutions that feature in it make it a daunting prospect for the reader. Yet, the clarity of the prose and the consistent way in which the argument is presented make it a remarkably easy read. By pointing to the longevity of the instincts and rationale of corporate alliances, even decision-making processes during a murky conflict such as the Thirty Years' War suddenly make a lot more sense. This well-written book therefore provides a very useful framework for understanding fundamental political processes in the early modern Empire and beyond.

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