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Hervé Hasquin, *Louis XIV face à l'Europe du Nord: L'absolutisme vaincu par les libertés*. Bruxelles: Éditions Racine, 2005. 334 pp. Maps, illustrations, bibliography, and index. € 24.95. ISBN 2-87386-390-0.

Review by Erik Thomson, University of Chicago.

Hervé Hasquin pursues three different themes in this book. At its heart is a narrative of the diplomatic history of French relations from the Thirty Years War until the peace of Utrecht with the states of Northern Europe, from the Baltic littoral to the British Isles. Along with the diplomatic narrative he contends, as his subtitle indicates, that Louis XIV cursed France with a bellicose and sclerotic absolutist form of government that could not in the long run keep pace with the free and dynamic governments of the North. Finally, he argues that Louis XIV's attempts to win a universal monarchy not only provoked a grand Northern coalition to resist him, but also spawned a "counter-culture" of Enlightenment in the North that would usher in European modernity.

Drawing on secondary sources in French, English, Dutch, German, and Spanish, Hasquin brings together a wide range of material on culture, economic development and trade, domestic political affairs of many countries, the history of ideas and political theory, as well as diplomatic history. Indeed, his essay sometimes swells almost to the scope of a survey. His aspiration to synthesize these literatures is laudable, but unfortunately his conclusions seem marked by a teleological view of the past that flattens his treatments of individual themes.

Hasquin narrates the history of foreign policy as a story of states which sometimes take on the personality of their rulers, and sometimes seem to develop characters of their own. He rarely mentions diplomats, and only occasionally describes disputes about foreign policy among ministers and statesmen within a country or discusses the formation of counsels. The diplomatic stories he tells are familiar, though the emphasis on the Northern world is unusual in francophone historiography. In short sections, he discusses the rise of Sweden as a Baltic power and the Dutch as a commercial one, the factors limiting England's power, and the situation in the Spanish Low Countries during the decline of Spain.

The central decades of the century, for Hasquin, are crucial for Europe's future. He makes little reference to the old literature about the mid-century crisis, instead choosing to emphasize different governmental strategies engendered by the political changes of the first half of the century. The first Anglo-Dutch war, he argues, strengthened both Dutch republican institutions and the country's international stature, allowing the Dutch republic to frustrate the intentions of Charles X of Sweden to conquer Denmark. Hasquin implies that in this Dutch-imposed equilibrium, the northern states dedicated themselves to state-building, fostering commerce, universities, and a shared Protestant culture.

In France, however, Hasquin maintains that Louis XIV used these decades to perfect French absolutism. Although Hasquin briefly mentions the wars of religion and the *Fronde*, he presents Louis's "absolutism"—interpreted as a desire not to share any power with his subjects and to decide everything by his own judgment according to the logic of "reason of state"—as a personal choice. Hasquin displays a deep distaste for Louis XIV's style of rule, ranging from lack of consultation through bureaucratic centralization to propaganda and religious intolerance. He ignores the dominant thread of recent scholarship that views Louis as employing a flexible strategy of elite accommodation, choosing instead to adopt language first deployed by some of the king's Protestant opponents, calling Louis "a despot" (p.

91). It is not surprising, then, that the next chapter is entitled “the wind of liberties blows from the North,” and that he praises the Netherlands for its religious toleration and the British for the Glorious Revolution.

Hasquin argues that Louis coveted a universal monarchy from the time of his accession to personal power. While the King had some success with his goals when the Protestant countries could be set against one another, he compounded his ambition with wickedness and folly. Louvois’s savagery in the Netherlands and the Palatinate, Louis’s insistence that the Swedes recognize that he had saved them from suffering the consequences of their defeat, and finally the revocation of the Edict of Nantes alienated his allies from him, and prepared the way for the grand alliances against Louis. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Louis’s arrogance has gained a touch of pathos, as he and his kingdom—“the French mastodon”—remain “immobile,” while the real dynamism has moved elsewhere. Louis simply can not recognize, however, the changing shape of Europe, and thus brings the miseries of the War of the Spanish succession down upon his kingdom.

The English and the Dutch, though, had developed an acute consciousness of their superiority, developing not only the Enlightenment, but even the intellectual, political, scientific and industrial revolutions that would characterize modern European civilization. While pensioned poets continued to denigrate the English, Hasquin charges, honest and intelligent men like Voltaire needed only describe their accomplishments to form an Enlightened critique of France.

It is curious to see a classic English Whig history composed in French. Political and diplomatic history, I suppose, need not be composed as an ironic narrative, in which words change their meanings once uttered and accidents confound the most scrupulously devised plans. Yet Hasquin has written a diplomatic history in which ambassadors and events matter little, for Louis XIV’s wickedness brings its just punishment. Historians who doubt that the wind that carried William III to Torbay was providential will be frustrated by Hasquin’s book.

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