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## Coercion, Conversion, and Counterinsurgency in Louis XIV's France (review)

Jamel Ostwald

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

**Reviewed by:**

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Historians of Louis XIV's France have long labored under the dual weight of English anti-French propaganda and the Sun King's own propagandistic claims of absolute rule. Over the past several decades scholars have revised their conception of French absolutism: conflict has been replaced by the Crown's need for consensus with local elites. Roy McCullough's new book extends this literature by examining how small a role royal troops played in Louis XIV's response to rebellion. He describes a spectrum of coercive activities available to the Crown, ranging from the financial threat of billeting royal troops on recalcitrant communities to physical imprisonment and violence. He then explores its application in a number of case studies, first by describing normal tax collection methods which often relied upon a number of paramilitary personnel for enforcement, then surveying several tax revolts early in Louis's reign (particularly in Brittany in 1675). Despite such challenges to absolutist rule, the Court wavered over whether to redirect regular troops from the front lines to put down tax revolts, with their intendants in the province warning them that such troops would only exacerbate the situation and decrease future tax revenues. On the rare occasions these warnings were ignored, the presence (or even threat) of royal troops was as likely to fan the flames of revolt as to extinguish them. Social scientists and broad generalists looking for frequent use of regular army troops as a royal tool of domestic oppression will find little support from these case studies.

**[End Page 1231]**

The second and more substantial part of the work examines how armed coercion figured in Louis's attempts to eliminate the remnants of Protestantism from his kingdom. Unlike the earlier tax riots, the revolt of the Camisards (peaked 1702–4) engulfed the province of Languedoc in a popular uprising against Louis's policy of recatholicization, begun in the 1680s. McCullough describes the Crown's early attempts to fiscally coerce local elites into converting, and the evolution of royal

counterinsurgency tactics when Huguenot rebels finally took up arms. Once again we find a tension between domestic and foreign demands on military manpower, and even the most extreme measures of depopulation, much debated at the time, did little to stem the tide. Only when the hard hand of war was fully funded and combined with the velvet glove of negotiation and amnesty was the revolt put down.

McCullough's conclusions buttress much of the existing literature on French absolutism, although he overstates the fragility of Louis XIV's rule. The one general weakness of the book is its lack of a broader view. A more general discussion of "coercion" and violence (royal and local, military and paramilitary) would have been enlightening as well as providing a better introduction to the many paramilitary positions and provincial institutions mentioned in the book. The reliance on case studies leaves the reader unsure as to how widespread (and damaging) wintering soldiers on civilian communities, the most frequent and least coercive use of royal troops, really was; the connection between Louis's ever-expanding armies and the domestic situation could also have been more explicitly detailed. The final chapter on the Camisard revolt will be of interest to those seeking an early modern example of counterinsurgency operations, but the lack of maps is a regrettable omission. As a result of these lacunae, scholars already familiar with seventeenth-century France will gain the most from this work, but all readers will come away appreciating more fully the difficulties of using royal troops as tools of coercion in the age of absolutism.

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Monocausal solutions have been foreign to Black's way of thinking for quite some time. In the past, he has expressed his doubts about the military revolution in his own province—Europe and its neighbors. Here Black expands the scope of his skepticism to match the global scale of the military revolution model. His verdict is that things look messy and complicated when one attempts to identify historical trends on a global level. Indeed the diversity of military cultures and experiences (even the diversity of military tasks within one military culture), which Black documents, arguably makes the quest for an effective and unified model explaining global phenomena such as European dominance a Sisyphean task.

Rather than trying to solve the problem of Europe's increased mastery of the globe, Black presents the problem and then questions and highlights critical facets of it. Essentially, he tells his audience that the solution is not in our grasp. This is why the book is peppered with illustrations of how current research has illuminated new problems, followed by calls for more research on a variety of regional and local topics. Rather than providing one universally applicable answer, Black finds less uniformity, more complexity, and more unanswered questions.

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*Coercion, Conversion, and Counterinsurgency in Louis XIV's France.* By Roy L. McCullough. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2007. ISBN 978-90-04-15661-6. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. vi, 265. \$128.00.

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