



Panel report: „Rural Resilience to Disaster. Part II: Warfare“, 21. August 2013, Rural History 2013

Panel organizer: Bas van Bavel

Participants: Bas van Bavel / Guido Alfani / Matteo Di Tullio / Eric Thoën / Kristof Dombrecht / Lies Vervaeke / Tim Soens / Giulio Ongaro / Pedro Couceiro

Report by: Oleg Rusakovskiy

The impulse to the panel was given by the research network ‘Comparative Rural History of the North Sea Area’ (<http://www.corn.ugent.be/>) coordinated by Netherlands and Belgian scholars. Panel organizer, **BAS VAN BAVEL** (Utrecht University, Netherlands) emphasized in his short introduction that the presentations and the discussion should be focused on medieval and early modern rural societies confronted with warfare. The differences in their reliability in face of external hassles and disasters he supposed were caused by internal dissimilarity of their social, economic and institutional organization. War could be considered as the most obvious example of such hassles to be analyzed on many concrete instances. (Another examples of disasters discussed during the conference were epizootics [Panel 8.7] and climate anomalies [Panel 2.5])

The first paper presented by two Italian scholars from the Bocconi University was dedicated to the impact of Italian Wars (1494 – 1559) on the rural areas of Northern Italy. **GUIDO ALFANI** focused on general problems of the economic history of the Italian Wars. He stressed that the military conflicts not only had caused negative consequences but also had been a factor of redistribution of resources, economic stimulus or positive social and demographic changes at least for some areas where local economy had been constantly rising during the 16th century in spite of wars.

MATTEO DI TULLIO presented a detailed case study to the Geradadda, the boundary area between the State of Milan and the Republic of Venice in the 1st half of the 16th century. During this period rural population of the region experienced three different stages of disaster caused by warfare (fiscal difficulties, ‘hot war’ and post conflict recover). Demographic and economic decrease had arisen from wars. At the same time local societies had been able to perform communal management and fiscal system and to find the new sources of incomes in face of increasing taxes and expensive quartering of the troops. An innovative socio-economic institution (“schola”) was created to reorganize credit systems and redistribution of resources to communities and population.

GIULIO ONGARO (University of Verona, Italy) continued the discussion on the Italian wars presenting another case study to town Schio in the Venetian province of Vicenza at the same period. The scholar showed on this local example the evolution of the Venetian administrative and fiscal organization. Population and rural elites in Schio had had to answer the same challenges as their contemporaries in Geradadda: devastation because of ‘hot war’ and an extreme growth of military expenses. The authorities which should response these difficulties, firstly, had raised incomes by means of establishing of new taxes, secondly, had used the redistribution of expenses. As a result the most powerful rural families had become able to consolidate their positions within the local communities and economic importance of countryside



within the Venetian State had reached. These processes had given birth to the Corpi Territoriali, new institutions of representation of local communes and their elites at the province level.

ERIK THOEN (Ghent University, Belgium) reported the research results of the group of Belgian historians including **KRISTOF DOMBRECHT**, **LIES VERVAET** (both Ghent University) and **TIM SOENS** (University of Antwerp) which goal was to investigate the comparative impact of military conflicts on different regions within Flanders from 14th to 16th century. The main point of his presentation was to demonstrate, that the ability of agrarian societies to recover depended much more of long term economic structures than of immediate consequences of wars. In Coastal Flanders households of small and middle peasants had become inefficient and village communities declined in the Classic Middle Ages because of ecological problems, structural overpopulation and increasing of rent prices for small parcels. As a result the peasant society of coastal Flanders had been vulnerable in face of pestilences, bad harvests and wars and experienced since 14th century a long term crisis. In Inland Flanders, however, small and middle holders had used the favorable conjuncture of lease prices and had survived as a stable and commercial successful social group. This area had also experienced short term disasters during the Late Middle Ages, but had had higher chances to economic and demographic recover.

PEDRO COUCEIRO (Institute of Polytechnic Bragança, Portugal) concentrated in his presentation on the experiences of the rural population during the Napoleonic invasion in Portugal and the Peninsular War (1807 – 1814). Demographic and economic decline caused by campaigns French and British troops had shaken the social structures of the Old Régime. Central and local authorities had been unable to organize defense and protection of population, especially in isolated villages as well as to stabilize the governance of the state as whole. This had resulted to a long political crisis culminated in the Liberal Revolution of 1820.

The theoretical debate was focused on resilience and ability to evolution as two key characteristics of pre-modern agrarian societies. An ambivalent nature of resilience was lively discussed by Bas van Bavel, Guido Alfani, Erik Thoen and **MATS MORELL** (Stockholm University, Sweden). Situations of rural communities examined in the papers were compared with the principles of the classical theory of the peasant economy formulated by Alexander Chayanov in 1920s. As well as the efficiency of a peasant household and its ability to economic evolution were limited according to the Chayanov's model by lack of resources used for intensive development, the resilience of communities to external hassles was dependent on their abilities of using and redistribution of common recourses. On the one hand resilience managed by redistribution of material and demographic resources had made capacity for survival and adoption facing catastrophic disasters. On the other hand if a rural society had not succeed to reestablish its pre-crisis structures, conjunction of external calamities and internal long term social changes had stimulated evolution and given birth to new social structures. The main problem is, however, to find general indicators of these changes and their connections with military conflicts because of the multiplicity and diversity of situations caused by warfare. Probably demographic figures and especially death-rates could be primary used as such indicators, although another economic and social indexes should also to be examined.

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Panelübersicht:

Guido Alfani / Matteo Di Tullio: The impact of the Italian Wars (1494-1559) on the rural areas of northern Italy

Eric Thoen / Kristof Dombrecht / Lies Vervaet / Tim Soens: The effects of military destruction in late medieval Flanders: explaining regional differences

Giulio Ongaro: Venetian rural communities during the "Italian Wars": Institutional evolution and tightness of the rural economic system

Pedro Couceiro: Rurality and Warfare: Portugal in the context of the Peninsular War (1807-1811)