Jeffrey D. Burson and Jonathan Wright, eds.

_The Jesuit Suppression in Global Context: Causes, Events, and Consequences._


Until a few decades ago research on the history of the Society of Jesus rested principally with the Jesuits themselves. For them the story of the suppression of the Society was considered off-limits. Clement xiv’s brief, _Dominus ac Redemptor_, expressly forbade the ex-Jesuits “to carry their audacity so far as to impugn, combat, or even write or speak about this suppression or the reasons and motives for it.” Just to make the point unmistakable, a little further on the brief insisted that those former Jesuits “shall not at any time be allowed to make any observations on our present letter, to attack or invalidate it, or demand a further examination of it, or appeal from it, or make it a matter of dispute.”

Until almost the present the Jesuits observed the prohibition, even though an argument could be made that Pius vii’s restoration of the Society invalidated it. That does not mean that the story of the suppression was left entirely untold. Ludwig von Pastor did not feel himself under the same constraints as did the Jesuits, and his extensive treatment of the suppression in his _History of the Popes_ can still be read with profit. Meanwhile, two things have happened. The first is the “renaissance” of historians’ interest in the Jesuits that has been underway for over twenty years and that has largely been furthered by historians who are not Jesuits. Never before have so many highly trained historians from almost around the globe turned their attention to the Jesuits and produced such a quantity of well documented and illuminating studies on such a wide variety of topics related to the history of the Society of Jesus. How could the suppression now escape their scrutiny?

The second is the two-hundredth anniversary, in 2014, of the restoration of the Society by Pius vii. As several recent international conferences have demonstrated, the anniversary has prompted historians to turn their attention to
the most neglected aspect of Jesuit history, the “New Society,” the Society of Jesus from 1814 to the present. It was inevitable that this new focus would raise questions about why there was a “New Society” at all, that is, raise questions about the suppression—Why? How? So what?

It is precisely these three questions that The Jesuit Suppression in Global Context takes as its remit—“causes, events, and consequences.” As the editors wisely confess, the volume does not pretend to be the last word on this rich and complex subject. It is, rather, among the first. But these first words are fine words indeed. The editors have chosen excellent scholars for the fourteen contributions the volume contains, and the scholars have lived up to their reputations. The quality is uniformly high.


As is clear from this listing, the contributions live up to what the title of the volume promises: the suppression “in global context.” Although the suppression was engineered principally in Europe, its impact was global, and, as the editors correctly state, it was “momentous” globally on a variety of levels (2). For all the merit of Pastor’s treatment, it was Eurocentric. As historians today try to grapple with global history, they will find few better fields to explore than the global reach of the Society of Jesus, with its complicated network of communication between center and periphery. This volume points the way.
What particularly struck me in reading the contributions was the concreteness of the data they present. The three “Tables” provided by Maurice Whitehead in his concise but rich piece on the Jesuit reductions are good instances of what I am talking about. R. Po-chia Hsia’s “Appendix: The Fate of Jesuits Arrested in Macau, 5 July, 1762,” 115–16) is another. But in this regard I hesitate to privilege these contributions over the others.

Hsia’s is far from being the only contribution that deals with the fate of the ex-Jesuits. The topic is in fact a recurring theme in the volume, and Part III is in large part expressly devoted to it. The contributions makes clear that, while some Jesuits suffered terribly, others fared well. Louis Caruana’s five case-studies of Jesuit scientists makes that case effectively. Information about ex-Jesuits was certainly not lacking before, but in the pages of this volume the reality is driven home by the force of the detail marshaled under one cover. Thomas McCoog’s discovery of an eye-witness account of how the suppression was carried out in Rome and how the Jesuits there responded to it is, moreover, indicative of the volume’s freshness.

The editors take care to say that they take no position on the debate about whether the suppression was the result of long-term causes or, rather, the result of new cultural and political situations that coalesced into an international network of forces opposed to the Jesuits. The three contributions of Part I would seem to favor the latter position, but that does not necessarily mean that even those authors would discount the former. Can we not agree that no great historical event comes out of nowhere, and yet none happens without specific and immediate catalysts? “Cleopatra’s nose” helps explain Actium, but more was surely at stake!

John W. O’Malley, S.J.
Georgetown University
jwo9@georgetown.edu
DOI 10.1163/22141332-00303008-01