CHAPTER 3

‘Enemies of their patrie’? Savoyard Identity and the Dilemmas of War, 1690–1713

Phil McCluskey

If Utrecht was a Peace with no obvious winners, one man stood apart as having achieved a spectacular success. By the time the negotiations were concluded, Victor Amadeus II, duke of Savoy (1675–1730) could pride himself on having wholly achieved his war aims: he had aggrandised both his territorial base and his dynasty, and had acquired the royal title of king of Sicily into the bargain. The House of Savoy’s rise through the ranks of European powers has been ably examined elsewhere.1 By siding with the anti-French coalitions in the Nine Years’ War and the War of the Spanish Succession, the duke kept the pressure on France’s vulnerable south-eastern frontier, draining French resources away from other theatres. The concessions he managed to win in 1713 reflect the importance of this contribution to the allied war effort. But what is less clear is how Victor Amadeus’ audacious diplomatic gambles affected his relationship with his states, particularly Savoy, which lay to the west of the Alps. From the beginning of his personal rule in the 1680s, the duke had forged a new, more authoritarian, relationship with his Savoyard subjects. If the strains of this situation were already beginning to show in 1690, the ensuing years of French military occupation that ended in 1713 would only complicate matters further. An investigation of the attitudes of the people of Savoy, along with those of the rival Bourbon and Sabaudian authorities, therefore offers a unique perspective on the state of political allegiance at that time.

The duchy of Savoy formed the oldest part of the transalpine composite state belonging to the House of Savoy. Its dukes had, for most of the seventeenth century, enjoyed close relations with France, and the duchy’s economy,

nobility and church were closely linked with the neighbouring French provinces. But all this was to change as, from the 1680s, the young Victor Amadeus II became increasingly frustrated by Louis XIV’s vice-like grip over his states and sought an opportunity to free himself. The Franco-Sabaudian alliance came to an abrupt end in 1690, leading to a French invasion of Victor Amadeus' states and the loss of Savoy, which remained under occupation until peace was concluded in 1696. The French occupied the duchy a second time from 1703–1713, after Victor Amadeus again broke his alliance with Louis XIV and joined the allied powers during the War of the Spanish Succession.

Very little has been written about the reactions of occupied populations to foreign rule during the early modern period. By contrast, for the Revolutionary era there have been several important studies, such as T.W. Blanning’s work on the French occupations of the Rhineland. Other studies of more recent occupations have focused on the face-to-face interaction between occupier and occupied, at the levels of both lived experience and symbolic representation. These works have highlighted the importance of attempting to reconstruct attitudes in order to understand the way occupations progressed. Yet historians of the ancien régime have largely failed to adapt to these methodological developments. This is due in part to a paucity of source material relating to the largely illiterate non-elite sections of society at this time; and where sources do exist, they are often totally impressionistic. It is therefore difficult to be exact about the distribution of popular allegiances. But equally, there has also been a widely held perception among historians of the limited role of ordinary people in determining policy. More recent scholarship has demonstrated that in fact popular views were important in times of war when the ability to mobilise resources and win public support was of great consequence. Low-level violence and confrontation can therefore reveal much about policy formulation on the part of both the French occupiers and also of the usurped duke.

---

5 J. Black, European International Relations, 1648–1815 (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).