Divide and Rule? Rival Factions and Prussian State Management in Eighteenth-Century Neuchâtel

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In November 1707, King Frederick I of Prussia formally took over possession of the Principality of Neuchâtel. The event came as a shock to the French crown. For more than two hundred years, the small territory located between France and the Swiss Confederacy had been ruled by princes du sang of the house of Orléans-Longueville. Strong political and commercial bonds between Neuchâtel and the French monarchy had been established during this period. Not at all inclined to accept the decision of the local estates of Neuchâtel to recognize the Prussian claims of succession as legitimate in the middle of the War of the Spanish Succession, Louis XIV immediately declared the borders closed to all commercial traffic, and sent the maréchal de Villars to Franche-Comté to prepare an invasion of the Principality. However, the snowy mountains separating France from Neuchâtel and the troops that had been deployed by the Protestant Republic of Bern to secure its allied territory made these plans too risky. In spring 1708, a neutrality agreement was negotiated, and in the treaty of Utrecht of 1713, the French king formally accepted the Prussian succession.1

This might have been the end of the story of Neuchâtel’s transition from French to Prussian rule. But as was true so often in the ancien régime, the situation was not as simple as the legal mandates and treaties would suggest. In fact, Frederick I of Prussia had already discreetly entered the political scene in Neuchâtel years before the death of the previous French sovereign, the duchesse de Nemours, and despite the Principality’s formal status after 1707, members of the French court nobility as well as French representatives in Switzerland maintained contacts with clients in the Principality. As in other comparable cases such as the Swiss cantons, the Roman nobility, or the courts of medium-sized powers, “factions”, “parties”, “cliques” and “cabals”, as these

1 For the events, see Adrian Bachmann, Die preussische Sukzession in Neuchâtel. Ein ständisches Verfahren um die Landesherrschaft im Spannungsfeld zwischen Recht und Utilitarismus (1694–1715) (Zürich, 1993), esp. 388–436. I use the following abbreviations for archival sources: AAE (Archives des Affaires Étrangères, Paris-La Courneuve); AdSM (Archives départementales de Seine-et-Marne, Dammarie-les-Lys); AEN (Archives de l’État de Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel); AN (Archives Nationales, site de Paris); GStAPK (Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin-Dahlem). I would like to thank Samuel Weber (Bern) for comments that greatly improved the manuscript.
networks were mostly referred to by their enemies, blurred clear distinctions between domestic and foreign relations.\(^2\) They at least temporarily split social groupings such as court nobilities and local elites, and linked various actors of different status and origin through personal ties and common goals. As this article will argue, the political and economic history of the Principality of Neuchâtel in the eighteenth century was decisively shaped by the fact that alternatives to Prussian patronage and rule continued to exist and had beneficiaries and supporters within the local elite.\(^3\)

By analysing factional networks instead of proposing a dichotomous opposition between central court and local estates, this case study aims at contributing to the reconstruction of the heterogeneous and fragile, but also flexible and cooperative, character of the eighteenth century Prussian

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\(^3\) This article is largely based on my study of the role of the Principality of Neuchâtel within the context of the eighteenth-century Prussian monarchy and its foreign relations. See Nadir Weber, *Lokale Interessen und grosse Strategie. Das Fürstentum Neuchâtel und die politischen Beziehungen der Könige von Preussen (1707–1806)* (Köln, Weimar, Wien, 2015).