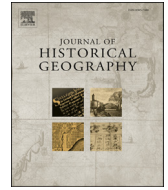




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Review

Géographie et impérialisme, Fabio Rossinelli. *De la Suisse au Congo entre exploration géographique et conquête coloniale*, Neuchâtel (2022). 748 pp ISBN: 978-2-88930-401-1

Switzerland's colonial history has received scattered attention by Swiss scholars until the early 2000s. With the postcolonial turn, a steadily growing group of researchers such as P. Purtschert, H. Fischer-Tiné, B. Veyrassat, A. Zangger, H. Fässler, P. Minder, T. David, B. Etemad, B. C. Schär, I. Lucas, and N. Michel, to name but a few, have examined to what extent and how Swiss individuals and companies were entangled in colonialism. Even without direct colonial rule a colonial past can exist as 'colonialism without colonies' or 'colonialism from the margins' proves. Fabio Rossinelli's *Géographie et impérialisme* contributes to this still understudied field, while also being one of the few pieces of Swiss research covering both the French and the German speaking parts of Switzerland (the Italian and Romansh ones did not join in the nineteenth century establishment of geographic societies). Rossinelli sets out to give a general view of the relationship between Swiss "associative geography and colonial imperialism", the main goal being to open up new paths of research by filling this gap (p. 63).

Rossinelli's work is substantial, running to nearly seven hundred pages, drawing on fourteen archives located in Switzerland, Belgium and Italy. It covers the founding histories and respective goals of various Swiss geographic associations from the mid nineteenth and early twentieth century, their joint projects as well as their clashes, their similarity to other European geographic associations, and their interest in European colonial expansion in Africa.

Géographie et impérialisme is divided into five thematic sections and subdivided by chapters. By way of introduction, section one defines the term 'imperialism' and its use in the book, describes what the study of geography meant and encompassed in the nineteenth century, and gives a comprehensive overview of the state of research in Swiss colonial history. How Switzerland's identity was shaped through transnational influences and collaborations is another core element of the study at hand (p. 54).

Section two introduces Swiss geographic societies, first contextualizing them and then zeroing in on their particulars. Rossinelli recounts the founding stories of seven geographic societies and sets them in the European context. The general mushrooming of geographic societies began in the 1870s. They served the purpose of connecting fellow geographers and bourgeois members with an 'overseas' interest. A strength of Rossinelli's account is that he

takes the time to introduce individual players to explain their leading roles in the various societies and their visions for the Swiss market and scientific progress. He also delves into the contested topic of ethnological museums, explaining how they became a flagship of sorts to show what the societies were doing, namely, to send members off to go explore the colonially-ruled world, collect by force or negotiation objects and knowledge, and then return to teach other members of the societies and the bourgeois public what they had learned overseas. Rossinelli soberly sums up this tour d'horizon by concluding that Switzerland was no different than the other European nations: colonial expansion was the main goal of the power and money holders in the country, and even though this was not possible on a territory-acquisitional level, much could be done on the moral, cultural, commercial, and scientific one. This thinking eventually led to the use of geographical societies as colony Ersatz (p. 248).

Section three delivers quantitative work for the ensuing analysis. Rossinelli presents meticulously collected data from the yearly reports, periodicals, and journals published by the geographical societies (p. 305). He draws on Swiss businessmen's own words as they mulled how best to integrate Switzerland in the global market. Well-known schemes such as exporting watches and fabrics, as well as lesser-known endeavors such as the exploitation of natural resources, are detailed via letters and in the reports that Rossinelli uncovers (p. 366).

Section four continues these observations and links them to the creation of the Belgian Congo. A feeling of shortcoming vis-à-vis other European nations, Rossinelli argues, explains why the Swiss gave seemingly unconditional support to the Léopoldian colonization of Congo. Rossinelli presents many pieces of evidence for the Swiss geographic societies' institutional, and even financial, support of the colonization of Congo on the grounds of charitable, scientific, and philanthropic missions (pp. 414, 454, 483). Swiss representatives of the geographic societies – also tied to the federal council – went along with the Belgian narrative of going to Congo mainly to build hospitals and to introduce "civilization." The narratives are studded with examples of Swiss self-congratulatory high regard for their Christian moral standards contrasted with their low opinion of the "savages" in Africa (pp. 555–56, 593). In this regard, Rossinelli could have contextualized the quotes with more care as they can make for disturbing reading in many instances throughout the book, especially in those passages presenting overtly racist language such as when the author addresses Switzer-

land's support for Belgian atrocities in Congo. While the French and British press called for action against the gruesome practices of mutilation, Swiss media and reports from Swiss men living and serving in Congo actively defended these crimes inflicted upon the Congolese (pp. 592–98).

Throughout his book, Rossinelli provides copious evidence for active Swiss participation in colonial exploitation and demonstrates how it was often veiled by the self-attributed traits of neutrality and philanthropy. Section five summarizes these activities and relates the limits of the research done. Although lamenting an absence of female voices, Rossinelli offers examples of influential women here. Why were these intriguing examples not included in the preceding chapters? They would have integrated well into the main account, giving women more than a side-glance at the end and thus making the analysis more balanced.

In sum, *Géographie et impérialisme* draws on a remarkable amount of new research. Rossinelli's archival work, his quantitative and qualitative analysis, and the thoroughness and diligence with which this was done is commendable. Rossinelli follows a very clear structure, introducing his goals and giving summaries of the most important findings. This makes the book not only valuable to future research in academia, but also accessible for students new to the topic. Rossinelli has written a convincing and meticulous piece of

research that deserves to be read widely. It can only be hoped that it is translated in the future for a broader reach.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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