

17th century

External peace and internal conflict

In the 17th century, the Confederation was beset by confessional tensions. Nevertheless, the cantons of the Confederation, unlike the Three Leagues, managed to stay out of the Thirty Years' War (1618-48). In the second half of the century, the policy of external neutrality developed from this experience. This change was associated with a new self-perception rooted in the idea of sovereignty which gradually spread after the Holy Roman Empire granted the Confederation exemption from the Imperial Chamber Court at the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. First France and later other powers interpreted this as sovereignty under international law.

However, Switzerland was by no means a haven of peace. Social and religious tensions erupted into armed conflict in the mid-17th century. In the bloody Peasant War of 1653, the peasant insurrection was defeated by the city authorities of Bern, Lucerne, Solothurn and Basel, while the first Battle of Villmergen in 1656 saw troops from Bern and Zurich beaten by the Catholic forces of central Switzerland. Many Swiss, especially those in the impoverished mountainous regions, left their overpopulated homelands to serve as mercenaries for France and later in increasing numbers for Protestant powers such as the Netherlands, England and Prussia. The wealthy Protestant cities remained popular destinations for religious refugees, such as the Huguenots who were driven out of France in 1685.

The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648)

The Thirty Years' War was a European conflict that took place on three levels: within the Holy Roman Empire between the Protestants (the Union) and the Catholics (the League), between the Emperor and the powerful Imperial States, and at European level between France and the House of Habsburg, both with their respective allies. The Emperor was a Habsburg, as had always been the case since 1438, and this dynasty also ruled over Spain and its colonial empire. Feeling itself surrounded, France was eager to put an end to this situation and, although Catholic itself, fought with Sweden on the side of the Protestants against the Catholic Emperor.

Most of the cantons in the Confederation had entered into alliances with foreign powers – in some cases shortly before the outbreak of war – which largely fell along confessional lines. It was therefore clear that, due to these alliances, any involvement in the war of individual cantons would lead to civil war and possibly pull the Confederation apart.

The situation was most dangerous in 1633, when Swedish troops – with the unspoken consent of Zurich – marched through Thurgau to lay siege to the town of Konstanz, which although situated to the west of the Rhine was aligned with Austria. War threatened to break out with the Catholic cantons, but the campaigners for peace prevailed in Zurich over the militant religious fighters. When the Swedes again advanced into the Lake Constance region in 1646, the Confederates responded by setting up a joint defence mechanism for the first time, defining cantonal quotas for a federal army deployment of 12,000 troops and setting up a joint military council. This agreement on joint national defence was known as the "Defensionale von Wil".

Precisely because war was raging, at times in the immediate vicinity, contemporaries were amazed and full of admiration at how unaffected Switzerland – a deeply divided country in religious terms – was. “Compared with other German lands, this country seemed to me as foreign as if I had been in Brazil or China. I saw people going peacefully about their business; the stables were full of cows; chickens, geese and ducks ran around the farmyards; the roads were safe for travellers, the taverns were full of people making merry, no man was an enemy, none were in fear of losing their property, let alone their life... so that I regarded this land as an earthly paradise.”

Der Abenteuerliche Simplicissimus Teutsch (1668) by Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen (ca. 1621-76)

Graubünden in the Thirty Years' War

The Three Leagues, an Associated Place of the Confederation, were highly divided along religious lines. The valleys and judicial municipalities and sometimes even the individual villages were largely autonomous, determining their confession themselves. During the Reformation, they abolished the secular rule of the Bishop of Chur (Ilanz Articles of 1524 and 1526). This religiously, politically and geographically diverse region was of major strategic importance during the war years, because its Alpine passes in Graubünden formed a key link between Habsburg Austria and Spanish/Habsburg-controlled Milan. The Habsburgs wanted to secure this supply line for their troop movements, whereas the French wanted to break it.

When the Bündner Wirren (Confusion of Graubünden or Confusion of the Leagues) broke out, however, the trigger was the confessional conflict. The predominantly Catholic Italian-speaking subject territories to the south of the Alps rose up against the frequently self-serving administration of the Protestant Graubünden governors. The Valtellina Murders of 1620 saw residents of the Valtellina region massacre local and foreign Protestants.

This event caused the Great Powers to intervene. Spain occupied the Valtellina, while the Protestant League of the Ten Jurisdictions ended the Austrian rule during the Prättigau uprising. The infighting and foreign interventions reached their peak when French troops led by Duke Henri de Rohan marched into the Valtellina in 1634. Fighting for the Valtellina was Protestant pastor Jörg (Georg) Jenatsch. Later, however, he switched to the Spanish side together with a number of other officers, converted to Catholicism and was assassinated in unclear circumstances in 1639. In the same year, France handed the Valtellina back to the Three Leagues.

The Peace of Westphalia (1648)

Although the Confederates were not directly involved in the Thirty Years' War, they benefited greatly from the negotiations in Münster and Osnabrück and the 1648 Peace of Westphalia.

This was primarily thanks to the efforts of Basel mayor Johann Rudolf Wettstein (1594-1666), who had been elected in 1645. He travelled to Westphalia on his own initiative in order to bring about an exemption for Basel and Schaffhausen from the Imperial Chamber Court, at which foreign merchants had repeatedly appealed against rulings handed down in Basel. While the Catholic cantons were initially indifferent to this undertaking, the French supported Wettstein as they were keen to weaken the Empire's power. With their help and the support of all cantons in the Confederation, the mayor of Basel eventually managed to have the entire Confederation exempted from the Imperial Chamber Court. In strictly legal terms, this was merely a privilege under the laws of the Holy Roman Empire, but France in particular, later other European powers and finally the cantons themselves interpreted it as sovereignty under international law.

The Swiss Peasant War (1653)

The Thirty Years' War was a period of economic prosperity for those Confederates who were able to supply goods that were in short supply to the war-ravaged neighbouring regions. This held true not least for many peasants. However, the final phase of the war saw rebellions by rural subject territories in protest against the high taxes levied by the city cantons to finance national defence measures.

The end of the war also spelled the end of the economic boom and prices slumped. Finally, the conflict came to a head when the authorities in Bern, Solothurn and Fribourg devalued their currencies in late 1652, wiping out many people's savings. The uprising spread to the neighbouring region of Entlebuch in the canton of Lucerne. This was where the actual peasant war originated, with peasants from Lucerne and Bern joining forces with those from Solothurn and Basel to form a separate, cross-confessional league. Led by wealthy farmers, the rebels were not only aiming to have old laws restored, as had usually been the case in earlier peasant revolts, but also demanded changes to their cantons' constitutions.

However, the peasant uprising was put down militarily and the leaders severely punished, in many cases executed. The city authorities had already resumed control of all of their territories in June 1653.

The Villmergen Wars (1656 and 1712)

The social and religious conflicts persisted, leading to two further wars of religion. As the decisive battles were both waged in Villmergen (in the common lordship of the *Freie Ämter*, located in the modern-day canton of Aargau), they are known as the First and Second Villmergen Wars.

The first war, in 1656, was the result of an attempt by Zurich to unite the Confederation more closely by means of federal reform. The Catholic cantons feared this would result in a restriction of their independence. The actual conflict flared up when Zurich attempted to provide a group of clandestine Protestants in Arth (in the canton of Schwyz) with legal assistance. At Villmergen, the cantons of central Switzerland defeated the troops from Zurich and Bern.

The second war of 1712 was sparked by a dispute between the mostly Protestant population of Toggenburg and its ruler, the Prince-Abbot of St Gallen, over the construction of a road linking the central cantons with St Gallen and other Catholic areas in southern Germany. The Toggenburgers received support from Zurich and Bern, who this time defeated the Catholics of central Switzerland at Villmergen.

In the subsequent Peace of Aarau, the balance of power between the Catholics and the Protestants was altered in favour of the Protestants, and the confessions were accorded equal status in the common lordships. Bern's position in particular was considerably strengthened, at the expense of the Catholic cantons.

Administration



Scene from the Landsgemeinde, or people's assembly (mural in Appenzell). © Roland Zumbühl

The Confederation of the early modern period consisted of thirteen fully entitled cantons and Associated Places which all saw themselves as small independent states and ruled over various, in some cases extensive subject territories. Depending on the constitutions and traditional laws, the inhabitants enjoyed differing freedoms, which were understood as group rather than individual rights.

The rural cantons of Uri, Schwyz, Obwalden, Nidwalden, Zug, Glarus, Appenzell Ausserrhoden and Appenzell Innerrhoden regularly held Landesgemeinden, or people's assemblies, at which fully eligible male inhabitants could decide on important matters in the canton. However, the most important offices and consequently the power itself were shared among a group of influential families. Similar systems of rule prevailed in the Three Leagues and Valais.

In the city cantons of Zurich, Basel and Schaffhausen and the associated cities of St Gallen and Biel, the government was in the hands of the guilds. Membership of guilds was available only to citizens of the city; most people from the countryside were merely subjects. In these cities, groups of merchants, businessmen, wealthy landowners and high-ranking officials could concentrate power in their own families and exclude the simple craftsmen.

In Bern, Lucerne, Fribourg and Solothurn, power was increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small number of families who were eligible to rule. The cities were dominated by patrician families, who based their lifestyle on that of the European nobility. In Bern, the rulers were known as "Their Excellencies".

The common lordships were governed by bailiffs, who were alternately sent from the various ruling cantons. Since the Catholic cantons were clearly in the majority, more Catholics than Protestants were appointed as bailiffs. This repeatedly led to tensions between inhabitants and bailiffs of different confessions, and as a result also between the Catholic and Protestant cantons. As these conflicts frequently ended in stalemate, the authorities' overall access to the common lordships remained limited. It was much more intense in places where one authority was the sole ruler, such as in the Bernese Vaud and the district of March, which was ruled by Schwyz.

The only permanent Swiss-wide institution was the Diet, which was attended by representatives acting under instruction of all cantons of the Confederation and the Associated Places (although the latter had only restricted rights). There were no binding majority decisions, and every canton was able to revoke joint decisions at a later stage. The administration of the common lordships was an important task of these assemblies, which were held several times a year and were supplemented by special confessional assemblies. In addition, the (mercenary) alliances, especially with France, and economic issues such as trade relations, coinage and court cases in the common lordships were discussed.