

Pensions, mercenaries and the moral debate

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The accession to the Confederation brought Basel into a political system in which the sale of military service was a central economic activity. The Swiss cantons concluded agreements, the *Soldbündnisse*, with foreign powers, above all the King of France, the Pope, the Duke of Milan and the Emperor, which allowed these powers to recruit Swiss soldiers in exchange for payments. The payments took several forms: salaries for the soldiers, paid through their captains; public pensions to the cantons, paid into their treasuries; and private pensions to influential individuals, members of councils and military entrepreneurs, who used their influence to secure the recruitment for their paymasters.¹

The private pensions were controversial from the outset. They were seen as bribes that corrupted the political judgement of the councillors and made the foreign policy of the cantons dependent on the highest bidder. In 1503, the Confederates adopted an agreement, the *Pensionenbrief*, which prohibited private pensions and the acceptance of gifts from foreign powers without the authorisation of the authorities.² Widely ignored, the prohibition was repealed a few years later. The debate continued throughout the sixteenth century. Ulrich Zwingli, the reformer of Zurich, made the abolition of the mercenary trade and of pensions one of the central demands of the Reformation. Zurich abandoned the mercenary alliances after its Reformation.

Basel's involvement in the mercenary trade was less intense than that of the inner cantons, whose economy depended on it to a greater extent. As a commercial city, Basel had other sources of income. Its merchant elite was more interested in trade than in war. Yet Basel participated in the system, from which some of its families derived income. The debate on pensions is significant for the history of finance because it raised, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the question of the influence of foreign money on the political decisions of a small state. This question remains relevant. The

rules on the financing of political parties, the transparency of lobbying and the prohibition of bribery of public officials, including the offence of bribery of foreign public officials introduced into the Swiss Criminal Code in 2000, address, in modern form, the problem that the *Pensionenbrief* of 1503 tried to solve.³

1 Notes

1. On the Swiss mercenary system (Reisläuferei, Soldbündnisse, public and private pensions) in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, see HLS, articles "Solddienst" and "Pensionen". To be verified. ↩
2. On the *Pensionenbrief* of 1503 prohibiting private pensions and its limited effect, see HLS, article "Pensionenbrief". Date to be verified. ↩
3. Art. 322septies of the Swiss Criminal Code (SR 311.0) on bribery of foreign public officials, in force since 1 May 2000; and the rules on transparency in political financing (Art. 76b ff. of the Federal Act on Political Rights, SR 161.1), in force since 23 October 2022. To be verified. ↩

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