

The Thirty Years' War and the neutrality of Basel

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The refugees of the early seventeenth century arrived in a Europe that was sliding into the most destructive war of its early modern history. The Thirty Years' War, which began in 1618 with the revolt of the Bohemian estates and ended in 1648, devastated large parts of the Empire, including the territories around Basel. Swedish, imperial, French and Spanish armies crossed the Upper Rhine, besieged Breisach and Rheinfelden, plundered Alsace and the Breisgau, and brought famine and plague to the region.¹

The Swiss Confederation remained outside the war. The cantons, divided by religion, could not agree on taking sides, since each feared that intervention would split the Confederation. They maintained a policy of neutrality, reinforced by the Defensionale of Wil of 1647, a common defence arrangement for the protection of the borders.² Basel, located at the border and exposed to the movements of the armies, suffered from violations of its territory and from the pressure of the belligerents, but it avoided direct involvement in the war.

Neutrality brought economic benefits. While the surrounding territories were devastated, Basel continued to trade. Its merchants supplied the armies of different sides with grain, cloth, weapons and other goods, profiting from the high prices of the war years. Refugees from the war zones, among them wealthy families from Alsace and the Palatinate, brought their capital to the city. Basel became a place of safety for money and valuables in a region at war, a role that it would play again in the wars of the following centuries, above all in the Second World War.

This role had its ambiguities. The trade with the belligerents raised questions of neutrality that the belligerents themselves raised: a neutral that supplied one side could be accused of favouring it, and a neutral that received the money of refugees could be accused of profiting from the misfortune of others. The debate on the conduct of Switzerland in the Second World War, which the Independent Commission of Experts

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Switzerland – Second World War, known as the Bergier Commission, examined between 1996 and 2002, addressed these questions in a modern context. Part D returns to it.³ The experience of the Thirty Years' War shows that the ambiguities of neutral profit are as old as Swiss neutrality itself.

1 Notes

1. On the Thirty Years' War in the Upper Rhine region (sieges of Breisach 1638 and Rheinfelden 1634/1638) and its effects on Basel, see HLS, article "Dreissigjähriger Krieg". To be verified. ↩
2. On the Swiss neutrality during the Thirty Years' War and the Defensionale von Wil (1647), see HLS, articles "Neutralität" and "Defensionale". To be verified. ↩
3. On the Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland – Second World War (Bergier Commission, 1996–2002) and its final report of 2002, see www.uek.ch. To be verified. ↩

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