

The Reformed Community of Locarno and the Exile of 1555 — overview and summary

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On 3 March 1555 a little over a hundred men, women and children left Locarno on foot and on horseback. Their route led through the Mesolcina and over the San Bernardino pass, still under snow at that season, and they reached Zurich in May of that year.¹ They were the members of the small Reformed community of the town. They left because the twelve cantons that ruled Locarno as a common lordship had decided, after two sessions of the Federal Diet at Baden in July and November 1554, that those who would not return to the Catholic Church had to go. The Italian-speaking south of the Alps therefore never acquired the Protestant congregations that Geneva, Basel and Zurich built in the same decades. Ticino remained Catholic until the nineteenth century, while the episode of 1555 became one of the founding memories of the Swiss Reformed churches, celebrated in Zurich in paintings, sermons and family histories long after the event.²

This chapter asks what happened in Locarno between the first appearance of Reformed ideas in the 1530s and the departure of 1555, how the decision against the community was reached, and on what legal terms the exiles left. It examines the humanist school in which the movement began, the disputation of 1549, the confession of faith of 1554, the confessional politics of the twelve ruling cantons and the arbitral decision that ended the dispute. It then follows the exiles across the Alps, describes the Italian congregation of Zurich under Bernardino Ochino and places the Locarnese in the wider network of Italian religious refugees that reached from Chiavenna and Poschiavo to Basel, Geneva, Strasbourg and Heidelberg. The economic history of the families in Zurich, from silk and velvet to banking and publishing, is the subject of Chapter B.II and is touched on here only where it explains the terms of the exile. The Catholic reform that followed in the south under Carlo Borromeo is treated in Chapter B.III.

The argument of the chapter is that the expulsion of 1555 was an act of public law with recognizable rules. The ruling cantons did not confiscate the property of the community as such and did not hand its members to the Inquisition, although several of the Catholic cantons and the papal nuncio wished to do so. They imposed a choice between conformity and departure, they fixed a date, they allowed property to be sold and they tolerated a long aftermath of claims, fines and negotiations. These rules were harsh and the losses real. They were nevertheless rules, negotiated between sovereigns who needed to keep their joint government of the bailiwicks intact. Those rules allowed a group of educated and propertied families to move their persons, their skills and part of their capital to a city that wanted them. The final section draws the line from these rules to the modern law of religious freedom, freedom of movement, the protection of property and the taxation of departure, which together determine whether a minority can stay, and on what terms it can leave.

1 Conclusion

The Reformed community of Locarno grew out of a humanist school, a group of educated families and the tolerance of individual governors. From the mid-1530s Giovanni Beccaria's Latin school brought Reformed theology into the households of the Orelli, the Muralto, the Duno and other families of the *Nobili* and *Borghesi*, while exiles from Milan and Piedmont joined them. The disputation of 5 August 1549 cost the community its teacher. Lay leaders, above all Taddeo Duno, Martino Muralto and Lodovico Ronco, kept it together until the confession of July 1554 declared its full agreement with the churches of Zurich, Bern, Basel and Schaffhausen. That declaration turned a tolerated minority into a federal problem, because the twelve cantons that ruled Locarno were divided by confession and bound by a peace settlement, the Second Landfrieden of 1531, that protected a return to Catholicism in the common lordships but not the formation of new Reformed congregations.

The two Diets of 1554 and the arbitral award that followed resolved the problem by a choice between recantation and emigration. On 3 March 1555 over a hundred Locarnese left the town, crossed the Mesolcina and the San Bernardino, and reached Zurich in May. They sold what they could, left administrators and claims behind, and faced fines and confiscations that the community's representatives contested at the Diet for years. In Zurich they formed an Italian congregation under Bernardino Ochino until his expulsion in 1563, joined a network of Italian exiles that included Vermigli in Zurich, Curione in Basel and Zanchi in Chiavenna, and began the economic integration that Chapter B.II follows into silk, trade and banking.

The episode shows how the confessional law of the Old Confederation worked at its limits. A divided sovereign could not tolerate a new church in a common lordship. It could, however, decide by procedure, allow departure with property and accept a negotiated aftermath, which distinguished the fate of the Locarnese from that of the Reformed of Arth in 1655 or the Protestants of the Valtellina in 1620. Modern Swiss law has turned the elements of that settlement into individual rights: freedom of religion under Article 15 of the Federal Constitution, the right to leave under Article 24 and Article 12 of the Covenant, and the guarantee of property under Article 26. Exit taxation remains as the modern successor of the early modern *Abzug*, now justified by the taxation of accrued gains and limited by legality and proportionality. The history of 1555 also explains a lasting feature of Swiss financial centres. Capital, skills and people move towards legal certainty. A jurisdiction that offers predictable rules, fair procedures and secure property attracts them, whether they come from Locarno in 1555 or from Milan four centuries later. Chapter B.II turns to what the Locarnese built in Zurich with the capital they brought.

2 In five sentences

Between the 1530s and 1554 a Reformed community formed in Locarno around the humanist Giovanni Beccaria and the noble and burgher families of the Orelli, Muralto, Duno and others, together with exiles from Milan and Piedmont. The disputation of 1549 and the confession of 1554 made the community visible, after which the twelve ruling cantons, divided by faith and bound by the Second Landfrieden of 1531, settled the dispute at two Diets in Baden by an arbitral award that obliged the Reformed to recant or leave. On 3 March 1555 over a hundred Locarnese departed through the Mesolcina and over the San Bernardino to Zurich, where they arrived in May, sold or administered their property from afar, contested fines and confiscations, and formed an Italian congregation under Bernardino Ochino. The exiles belonged to a network of Italian Protestants that included Vermigli in Zurich, Curione in Basel, Zanchi in Chiavenna and the congregations of the Grisons, and their departure cost Locarno human and financial capital that Zurich gained. The episode illustrates the value of procedure, the right to leave and the protection of property for minorities and for capital, which modern Swiss law guarantees through Articles 15, 24, 26 and 36 of the Federal Constitution and which define the conditions under which persons and assets can move to or from a financial centre today.

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3 Notes

1. Pablo Crivelli, "Duno, Taddeo", in Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz (HLS), version of 4 August 2004, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/010112> (departure on 3 March 1555 with about a hundred other Locarnese, route through the Misox and over the San Bernardino, arrival in Zurich in May 1555); Rosanna Janke and Rodolfo Huber, "Locarno (comune)", in Dizionario storico della Svizzera (DSS), version of 20 December 2022, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/002108/2022-12-20/> ("il 3.3.1555 oltre un centinaio di Locarnesi lasciarono la città diretti a Zurigo"). ↩
2. Danièle Tosato-Rigo, "Protestantische Glaubensflüchtlinge", HLS, version of 12 December 2014, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/026884/2014-12-12/> (the emigration commemorated in a painting of 1655); Miriam Nicoli, "Muralto, Barbara", DSS, version of 27 January 2026, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/062270/> (the exile of 1555 "profoundly shaped" Swiss Reformed identity and turned its protagonists into models of faith and sacrifice). ↩

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