

Why the federal frame mattered

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Three features of this federal frame shaped the outcome. The first was that no single sovereign could decide. The Locarnese were not at the mercy of one Catholic prince, as Protestants in Milan or Naples were. Nor were they under the protection of one Reformed magistrate either. Their fate depended on a negotiated compromise between governments that had to continue to govern Locarno together for the next two and a half centuries. The second feature was that the confessional dispute was conducted as a dispute about the interpretation of a treaty, the Landfrieden, between parties who all claimed to respect it. The third was that the Confederation possessed a procedure of last resort, arbitration, that allowed a decision without a vote in which one side would simply outnumber the other.

The result was a decision that neither side regarded as just. For the Catholic cantons it was too lenient, since it allowed heretics to leave with their property. For Zurich it was a defeat, since it ended the only Reformed community in the Italian bailiwicks. A century later, when Schwyz refused to let the Reformed of Arth leave and refused to submit to federal arbitration, the dispute led to the First War of Villmergen in 1656. Bächtold sets the two cases side by side: in 1555 the Reformed Locarnese could still emigrate, in 1655 the Reformed of Arth could not.¹ The comparison shows that the right to leave, which looks modest from a modern perspective, was the product of a functioning federal procedure and could not be taken for granted.

1 Notes

1. Bächtold, "Landfriedensbünde" (above) ("Während 1555 reformierte Locarneser noch auswandern konnten, führte der Streit um die Neubildung einer Gemeinde von Reformierten in Arth und die Weigerung von Schwyz, diese ziehen zu lassen bzw. sich einem eidgenössischen Rechtsverfahren zu stellen, im Jahr 1656 zum Ersten Villmergerkrieg"). ↩

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