

The earlier language of the elites

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The spread of English in Zug has a historical parallel. In the eighteenth century, French was the language of the European elites. The patrician families of central Switzerland, including those of Zug, used it in their correspondence and their foreign service. The Zurlauben family, whose members served as officers in the French army and as diplomats, wrote and spoke French as naturally as German.¹ French was then the language of international careers, of mercenary service and of diplomacy, as English is today the language of international business. The parallel suggests that the dominance of a foreign language among the elites of a small canton is not new. It also suggests that such dominance can recede when the international environment changes. French lost its role as the language of the European elites in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when English took its place. The dominance of English in the international economy of Zug depends on the continued role of English as the global language of business, finance and technology. That role appears secure for the foreseeable future, but the history of French is a reminder that it is not permanent.

1 Notes

1. Urs Amacher, "Zurlauben", Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz, version of 2013, hls-dhs-dss.ch: 40 members of the family entered foreign military service, mainly in France, and from 1617 held the Zug company in the French Guards regiment. Urs Amacher, "Zurlauben, Beat Fidel", HLS, version of 3 September 2021: Beat Fidel Zurlauben (1720–1799) served France from 1735 and rose to lieutenant general; his works, including the *Histoire militaire des Suisses au service de la France* (1751–1753) and the *Tableaux topographiques ... de la Suisse* (1780–1788), were written in French; more than 3,000 letters of his correspondence survive. The diplomatic roles and the correspondence practice of other patrician families are not covered by these sources. ↩

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