

The Sonderbund

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On 11 December 1845, seven Catholic-conservative cantons, Lucerne, Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden, Zug, Fribourg and Valais, concluded in Lucerne a protective alliance, the Sonderbund, with a war council in which each canton was represented by one delegate.¹ Zug joined for defensive reasons.² The alliance was a response to the confessional conflicts of the preceding years and to the fear that the liberal majority in the Diet, the Tagsatzung, would impose a centralised order on the Catholic cantons by force.

On 20 July 1847, the Tagsatzung decided by simple majority that the Sonderbund was incompatible with the Federal Pact and had to be dissolved. The Catholic-conservative cantons protested and demanded unanimity. The war that followed lasted from 3 to 29 November 1847. Fribourg capitulated on 14 November, Zug a week later. The battles of Gisikon and Meierskappel on 23 November decided the war. After the war council of the Sonderbund had dissolved on 26 November at Flüelen, the remaining cantons surrendered by 29 November.³ Zug surrendered without resistance.⁴

The Sonderbund war was short and, by the standards of European civil wars, restrained. The federal troops lost 60 dead and 386 wounded, the Sonderbund 33 dead and 124 wounded, which amounts to a total of 93 fallen and 510 wounded soldiers.⁵ The defeated cantons were ordered to pay the costs of the war, 6.18 million francs, until the outstanding balance of 2.2 million francs was waived in 1852.⁶

Zug's conduct in the Sonderbund war illustrates, once again, the political reflexes of a small canton. It joined the alliance of its confessional allies, but without enthusiasm. When the federal army approached, it surrendered without a fight, sparing its territory and its inhabitants the destruction that a battle would have brought. Its position on the border with Zurich and on the approach to Lucerne made resistance hopeless. The canton chose

accommodation. In the new federal state, it would again choose accommodation and find ways to turn the new order to its advantage.

The imposition of the war costs had a financial dimension that deserves notice. The defeated cantons, among them Zug, had to raise considerable sums at a time when their public finances rested on narrow foundations. The waiver of the outstanding balance in 1852 was an act of reconciliation by the new federal state towards its defeated members.⁷ The pattern of competition followed by solidarity, of conflict followed by financial reconciliation, recurs in the history of Swiss federalism and forms the background to the modern system of fiscal equalisation, in which Zug stands on the paying side.

1 Notes

1. HLS, "Sonderbund": founded on 11 December 1845 in Lucerne by seven Catholic-conservative cantons (Lucerne, Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden, Zug, Fribourg, Valais) as a protective association with a war council of one delegate per canton. ↩
2. HLS, "Zug (Kanton)": Zug joined the Sonderbund defensively. ↩
3. HLS, "Sonderbund": dissolution decision of the Tagsatzung on 20 July 1847 by simple majority; war from 3 to 29 November 1847; capitulation of Fribourg on 14 November and of Zug on 21 November; battles of Gisikon and Meierskappel on 23 November; war council dissolved on 26 November at Flüelen; remaining cantons surrendered by 29 November. The HLS article "Zug (Kanton)" gives 22 November 1847 as the date of Zug's capitulation without resistance. ↩
4. HLS, "Zug (Kanton)": Zug capitulated in November 1847 without resistance. ↩
5. HLS, "Sonderbund": 60 dead and 386 wounded among the Tagsatzung troops, 33 dead and 124 wounded on the side of the Sonderbund, in total 93 fallen and 510 wounded soldiers. ↩
6. HLS, "Sonderbund": war costs of 6.18 million francs imposed on the defeated cantons; 2.2 million francs outstanding in 1852 were waived. ↩

7. HLS, "Sonderbund": waiver in 1852 of the outstanding war costs of 2.2 million francs. ↩

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