

The Brun constitution of 1336 and the political economy of the guilds — overview and summary

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On 16 July 1336 the citizens of Zurich gathered in the Franciscan friary and swore an oath to a document that would govern their city, with successive amendments, for more than four and a half centuries.¹ The document was the first *Geschworener Brief*, the “sworn letter”. The man who had drafted it, or at least caused it to be drafted, was a knight from an old council family named Rudolf Brun. It made him *Bürgermeister* for life and it admitted the craftsmen of the town, organised in thirteen guilds, to a share of the council. The event has been celebrated in Zurich ever since as the birth of the city’s guild order. Every April the members of the guilds still parade through the old town in costume at the *Sechseläuten*, in a ritual that the nineteenth century reinvented and the twenty-first has kept.

The subject of this chapter might at first sight seem remote from the business of a modern financial centre. Zurich’s banks, insurers, asset managers and trust companies do not operate under guild ordinances. The last constitutional functions of the guilds disappeared as long ago as the 1860s. Yet the guild order shaped the city for longer than any other institution except the church. It did so in precisely the domains that concern the student of a financial centre: who may enter a market, on what terms and at what price, who controls credit and capital, how the commercial elite relates to the state, and how political power is checked so that no single person or family can capture it. The answers Zurich gave between 1336 and 1798 were distinctive. They combined a strong corporate regulation of the crafts with a merchant and rentier elite that came, over time, to dominate the councils. Resting on oaths, rotation and collegial bodies, they were punctuated by two dramatic episodes, Brun’s coup of 1336 and the execution of Hans Waldmann in 1489, that taught the city to be wary of any individual who concentrated too much power in his own hands.

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The chapter proceeds chronologically and then thematically. It first sketches the council of knights and merchants that governed Zurich before 1336, briefly, since Chapter A.I covers the earlier period. It then examines Brun's revolution, the first Geschworener Brief, the Mordnacht of 1350 and the entry into the Confederation in 1351. It describes the Constaffel and the thirteen guilds and traces the revisions of the constitution in 1373, 1393, 1489 and 1498. The central sections analyse how the guilds regulated trades, prices, quality and admission, and what this meant for market entry, competition and credit, before turning to the merchant elite of the Constaffel and the guilds zur Saffran and zur Meisen and to the fall of Hans Waldmann. A final section follows the guild order to its end in 1798 and assesses its legacy, which survives in the collegial and consensual style of Zurich's public institutions and, more tangibly, in the guild houses on the Limmat where parts of the city's business establishment still dine together. Questions of coinage and money-lending, together with the trade routes over the Alpine passes, are treated in Chapters A.III and A.IV and are touched upon here only where they bear on the guild order.

1 Notes

1. Zunft zur Letzi, "Geschichte der Zünfte", <https://zunft-zur-letzi.ch/geschichte-der-zuenfte/>, which places the assembly at the Barfüsserkloster and dates the oath to 16 July 1336; the date is confirmed by the list of Zurich constitutional documents at [verfassungen.ch](https://www.verfassungen.ch/), "Verfassungen Zürichs", <https://www.verfassungen.ch/zuerich/leiste.htm>. ↩

2 Conclusion

The revolution of 1336 was a coup by a knight who used the craftsmen to overthrow a merchant oligarchy and to make himself mayor for life. Its immediate results were more modest than the later name of "guild revolution" suggests: the Constaffel held half the seats and Brun the decisive voice, which left the craft guilds with limited influence. Yet the constitution he created lasted, with revisions, until 1798. Its central principle, that the citizens took part in public life through corporations organised by trade, shaped Zurich for four and a half centuries. Besides regulating entry into the crafts, apprenticeship and mastership, quality and prices, the guilds defended the urban market against the countryside and against newcomers. They became holders and lenders of capital and provided welfare and military organisation. They also provided the

constituencies through which, after 1498, merchants and rentiers came to dominate the councils.

The relationship between merchants and the state that emerged from this order was one of fusion under restraint. The merchant elite governed, but it did so collegially, within a corporate framework, subject to rotation, consensus and an annual oath. Twice, under Brun and under Waldmann, a single man used the guild order to build personal power, and twice the city responded by dispersing authority. The Mordnacht of 1350 brought Zurich into the Confederation in 1351, but the city kept its freedom to conclude its own alliances, a combination of Swiss loyalty and independent external relations that would recur. The guild order's legacy is visible today in the Sechseläuten and the guild houses, which remain meeting places of the Zurich establishment, and less visibly in the collegial, consensual and self-regulating habits of the city's public and financial institutions.

3 In five sentences

1. In June 1336 the knight Rudolf Brun, supported by the craftsmen, overthrew Zurich's merchant-dominated council, and on 16 July 1336 the citizens swore to the first Geschworener Brief, which made Brun mayor for life and divided the council between the Constaffel and the masters of thirteen guilds.
2. Brun defended his regime against the exiles in the Mordnacht of 1350 and secured it through the perpetual alliance with Lucerne and the Forest Cantons of 1 May 1351, while keeping Zurich free to ally with Austria, as he did in 1356.
3. The guilds regulated admission, training, quality, prices and the size of workshops, defended the urban market against the countryside and, in the early modern period, became substantial lenders of capital, as the eighteenth-century balance sheet of the Saffran shows.
4. Successive sworn letters of 1373, 1393, 1489 and 1498 abolished the lifetime mayoralty, strengthened the Great Council, made the Constaffel a political guild and gave merchants and rentiers the free choice of guild, so that a commercial and rentier elite increasingly governed through the guild constitution until 1798.

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5. The fall of Hans Waldmann in 1489 confirmed a lasting distrust of concentrated power, while the guild order's legacy of collegial government, consensus and corporate self-regulation, together with the Sechseläuten and the guild houses as networks of the Zurich establishment, still marks the city and its financial centre.

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