

Swiss historic events

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1962)**

Heft 1407

PDF erstellt am: **27.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689655>

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SWISS HISTORIC EVENTS

The battle of St. Jakob a/Birs near Basle was the direct outcome of the first civil war in Switzerland, called the old Zurich war.

In order to refresh our memories it may perhaps not be out of place to focus our attention for a moment on a retrospect of the times directly preceding this battle.

Unity was, up to then, the watchword of the Confederates of the eight old cantons, which enabled them to overcome any external enemy. But suddenly the flames of rivalry broke out, causing disunity and eventually civil war. The main cause of this was the eagerness for aggrandisement by Zurich and Schwyz. At the head of the Council of Zurich was, at that time, the impetuous Burgomaster, Rudolf Stüssi, and the leader of the communes of Schwyz was the cool and calculating Ital Reding. Both were ambitious and craving for power. As each of them put the interests of his canton above the common interests of the Confederation, great misery and misfortune were the result.

The actual provocation for the old Zurich war was the death in 1436 of Count Frederick of Toggenburg, who had no children. He left large possessions, like the Toggenburg, the Obere March, Gaster and Uznach. Amongst the number of heirs who claimed a right to these possessions were Zurich and Schwyz. The Count, after a quarrel with Stüssi, applied for and was admitted into the citizenship of Schwyz, to which he promised that at his death the Obere March should become their property. No sooner had he closed his eyes for ever, than Schwyz took possession of that part of the country. Zurich appealed to the Countess, who gave them Uznach. But the citizens of that town refused obedience to Zurich, which threatened punishment, and the inhabitants of the Toggenburg and Gaster, together with the citizens of Uznach, entered into an alliance with Schwyz and Glaris. This so annoyed and upset Stüssi that he closed the Zurich market to the Schwyzer, thus depriving them of a great part of their livelihood and causing great misery amongst them. In their plight Schwyz called upon the unaffected cantons for assistance. Several attempts were made to settle the dispute and at the diet of Lucerne the verdict was in favour of Schwyz, but Zurich did not submit to it and, forgetting the old unity, Zurich and Schwyz eventually took up arms against each other.

The war started with an engagement at the Etzel, which resulted in a defeat of Zurich and an armistice was concluded. Both parties used this breathing space for further preparations, and in the following year the war broke out again. Once more the Etzel was the place of the rencontre, but this time the Glarner, Urner and Unterwaldner joined Schwyz. These forces approaching surprised the Zürcher so much that they even left their meals behind and took to their boats and retreated across the lake. From their boats they endeavoured to injure their adversaries by discharging their guns. For each shot fired by them the Schwyzer set a house in flames along the shore. The whole of the left shore of the lake fell into the hands of the victors and was thoroughly looted and devastated. Zurich had to surrender the districts of Pfäffikon, Wollerau and Hurden, as well as the island of Ufenau, and was compelled to reopen the market to Schwyz.

The defeat thus suffered caused Stüssi to induce the council and citizens of Zurich to enter into an alliance with Austria, the arch enemy of the Confederates.

This disloyalty of Zurich embittered all the Confederates who gradually took sides with Schwyz, and in May 1443 they declared war on Zurich and Austria and advanced across the Albis towards Zurich. A rather badly organised army of Zürcher and Austrians met the Confederates at the Chapel of St. Jakob o'Sihl and were defeated and fled in disorder towards the town, the Confederates hotly pursuing them. Stüssi lost his life on the bridge across the Sihl just outside the walls of Zurich. The town itself was saved from being ransacked by the heroic action of a woman who let down the portcullis on the Rennwegtor and thus barred the entry of the Confederates into the town. The few of those who had already gained entry were killed and to avenge the massacre of their comrades the others put the outskirts of the town on fire. Before long the guns on the walls of Zurich forced them to retire.

In Zurich the Federal Party obtained the lead and was able to make peace with the Confederates in Baden, but before it could be ratified by the Council, the Austrian party gained the upper hand and imprisoned the leaders who had arranged an understanding with the Confederates. Three of them — Meiss, Trinkler and Bluntschli — were, at the request of the Austrians, condemned to death and immediately executed.

This breach of the peace increased the embitterment of the Confederates and the territory of Zurich was occupied and devastated by fire and murder. Greifensee, which was ably defended, held out for four weeks, but had to surrender, and seventy-eight of the dutiful defenders were condemned to death by a court of the Confederates and were executed, an act which eventually revenged itself.

Zurich itself was beleaguered by 20,000 Confederates. To relieve it, Thomas von Falkenstein knavishly attacked the small town of Brugg, looted it for three days and afterwards reduced it to ashes, having imprisoned its leading citizens. When tidings of these happenings reached the Confederates outside Zurich, 1,500 Bernese and Solothurner immediately advanced to the Farnsburg in the Baselland, the property of Falkenstein, to where most of the incendiaries had retired.

In order to secure the victory of the Austro-Zurichian party, the German Emperor, Frederick III, himself an Austrian, called upon the King of France for assistance, who sent an army of unbridled mercenaries, called Armagnacs, mostly heavily armed horsemen, bow and crossbow men, under the leadership of the Dauphin. The object of the campaign was to loot Basle, free Zurich and destroy the Confederation. As this army advanced from the Sundgau towards Basle, the town sent messengers to the Confederates before Zurich, to inform them of the approaching danger. Immediately 600 of their men together with 600 from Lucerne were sent from the beleaguers to strengthen the besieging troops before the Farnsburg.

In the meantime the strong vanguard of the enemy had reached Muttentz and Pratteln and the captains before Farnsburg decided to undertake a reconnaissance raid. They sent 1,300 men, who were joined by 200 more from Liestal and Waldenburg, under the leaderships of Hans

Matter from Berne, Ulrich Hofstetter from Lucerne, Arnold Schick from Uri, Jost Reding from Schwyz, Rudolf Nettstaller from Glaris, Hans Seiler from Zug and Hermann Seevogel from Basle. They had distinct orders merely to observe the enemy and only at a favourable opportunity to attack, but in no circumstances were they to cross the Birs or engage the main body of the enemy. Three prebendaries from Neuchâtel, who were taking part in the Council of Basle, at that time still in session, being frightened by the approach of the French, were returning home, and on their way warned the troops of the Confederates of the tremendous strength of the Armagnacs. To these warnings Hans Matter replied: "We shall consign our souls to God and our bodies to the Armagnacs".

Divided into three groups, the Confederates attacked the enemy in the early morning of 26th August 1444, and defeated him, first at Pratteln and afterwards in very severe fighting at Muttenz. After these great victories they pursued the enemy on his retreat towards Münchenstein and advanced enthusiastically to the Birs. About 10 o'clock they saw some enemy detachments on the other side of the river, and expecting to deal with these as easily as they did with the vanguard, they disregarded their distinct orders, crossed the Birs and threw themselves upon the enemy. To their surprise, however, continuous new troops arrived and a battle in open territory against a twentyfold superiority began. The dangerous position in which the Confederates now were, was seen by the citizens of Basle and 3,000 of them went out to their assistance. But hardly outside the walls of the town, they were recalled, as the danger threatening the town of being attacked by the Dauphin, who observed this move and who was after the riches of Basle, was imminent. This recall prevented the attack on the town being made. The Confederates fought with ardent patriotism and with the courage of lions, but after fighting for four hours they were forced to give way to the enormously superior numbers of the enemy, both sides suffering heavy losses. The intention was to retire as far as the Birs, recross it and then retreat as far as Liestal. But the vanguard of the enemy which was thrown back to Münchenstein in the morning had advanced along the river and destroyed the bridge.

In their now desperate position the Confederates occupied the chapel and garden of the hospital for incurables (Siechenhaus) of St. Jakob, which was surrounded by a stone wall. They fought with absolute disregard and contempt of death and great acts of heroism are handed down to us, such as arrows torn out of wounds and shot back at the enemy, broken halberds used as battle axes, etc. Many sorties were made from there, causing death and destruction in the ranks of the Armagnacs, who, although constantly attacking, could not overcome the Confederates, but succeeded in setting the Siechenhaus alight.

The Dauphin's troops, realising the undauntedness of the Confederates, in sight of their destruction, intended to give up the fight when fresh Austrian troops under Hans von Rechberg arrived, who by their knightly oath to destroy every one of these peasants instilled fresh courage into the morale of the French and a new attack began. Heavy guns were brought into action by the Armagnacs, who were thus able to shoot some breaches into the thin wall. Before resuming the attack, however, the Dauphin requested the Knight, Burkhard Münch, from Landskron, who acted as guide to the enemy, to call upon the Confederates to surrender. When riding up to and looking

over the garden wall he disdainfully called out, seeing all the wounded and dead, "I am looking into a rose garden." Arnold Schick from Uri, with the words "Here, you dog, eat one of these roses," threw a heavy stone which hit him full in the face and felled him dead from his horse. On the refusal to surrender, fresh breaches were shot into the wall, causing terrible destruction amongst the Confederates. It was about 6 o'clock in the evening and from all sides the superior numbers closed in on the defenders, whose only aim now was to sell their lives as dearly as possible. Gradually the wall was completely demolished and the Confederates were now without any further protection against the fury of the revengeful hordes. Fighting to the last breath, one after the other fell a victim to the strokes of the halberds or the shower of bullets or arrows, a great number also finding their death in the flames of the Siechenhaus, where they retired to dress their wounds and to have a short rest before taking up the fighting again. Slowly, as the Confederates died a hero's death — not conquered, but tired of vanquishing — the battle drew to its end towards eight o'clock. "Oh, Greifensee, your revenge is hard", was uttered by many a dying hero. Only 200 of the 1,500 who entered the battle survived, most of them severely wounded. The loss of the enemy amounted to 8,000.

Respecting and admiring the heroic stand of the Confederates, the Dauphin ordered his army to retire, and concluded an honourable peace with them at Ensisheim in Alsace, much to the disgust of the Austrians. Although victorious, the Dauphin had no further desire to continue the war or to advance deeper into "this terrible and wonderful country where it required the whole of his might to destroy a handful of peasants".

When the news of the sacrificial death of their companions in arms reached the Confederates outside Zurich, they ended the siege and withdrew the troops from outside the Farnsburg. The war then developed into some isolated pillaging and destructive expeditions against Zurich and Austria, of which the last one was at Ragaz, where 1,500 Schwyzer and Glarner defeated an Austrian army of over 6,000. This victorious encounter was the last important incident in this deplorable civil war. As a direct result of the battle of St. Jakob on the Birs, Zurich had to relinquish its treaty with Austria in 1450 and the two parties of the Confederates, tired of fighting each other, shook hands and made peace. Zurich received back the lost districts, with the exception of Pfäffikon, Wollerau, Hurden and Ufenau, which remained the property of Schwyz.

Because the canton of Schwyz was the leading party in this war the Confederates gradually came to be known as Schwyzers and this later was the foundation of the national name of the "Swiss", which in time gave rise to the universal designation of "Schweizer".

The Editor.

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