

Federigo da Montefeltro with his son, Guidobaldo, by Joos van Wassenhove, c. 1476,
Palazzo Ducale, Urbino

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he would take no such oath, because princes should not have to do this. In view of this action (and much else) João drew against himself the hatred of high churchmen and the great nobility. The result was a struggle to the death which would subside only after the public execution, in 1484, of the duke of Bragança and the assassination, carried out by the king in person, of the duke of Viseu e Beja, along with the execution of some lesser noblemen and the imprisonment of a number of churchmen. In this way, through administrative, judicial and, on occasion, arbitrary intervention, the neo-seignorialism of the reign of Afonso was destroyed. From now on, dispensing with the support of the councils, João II governed the country like an absolute lord. With him the Portuguese Middle Ages ended and the modern age, that of the country's great achievements, began.

CHAPTER 25

THE SWISS CONFEDERATION

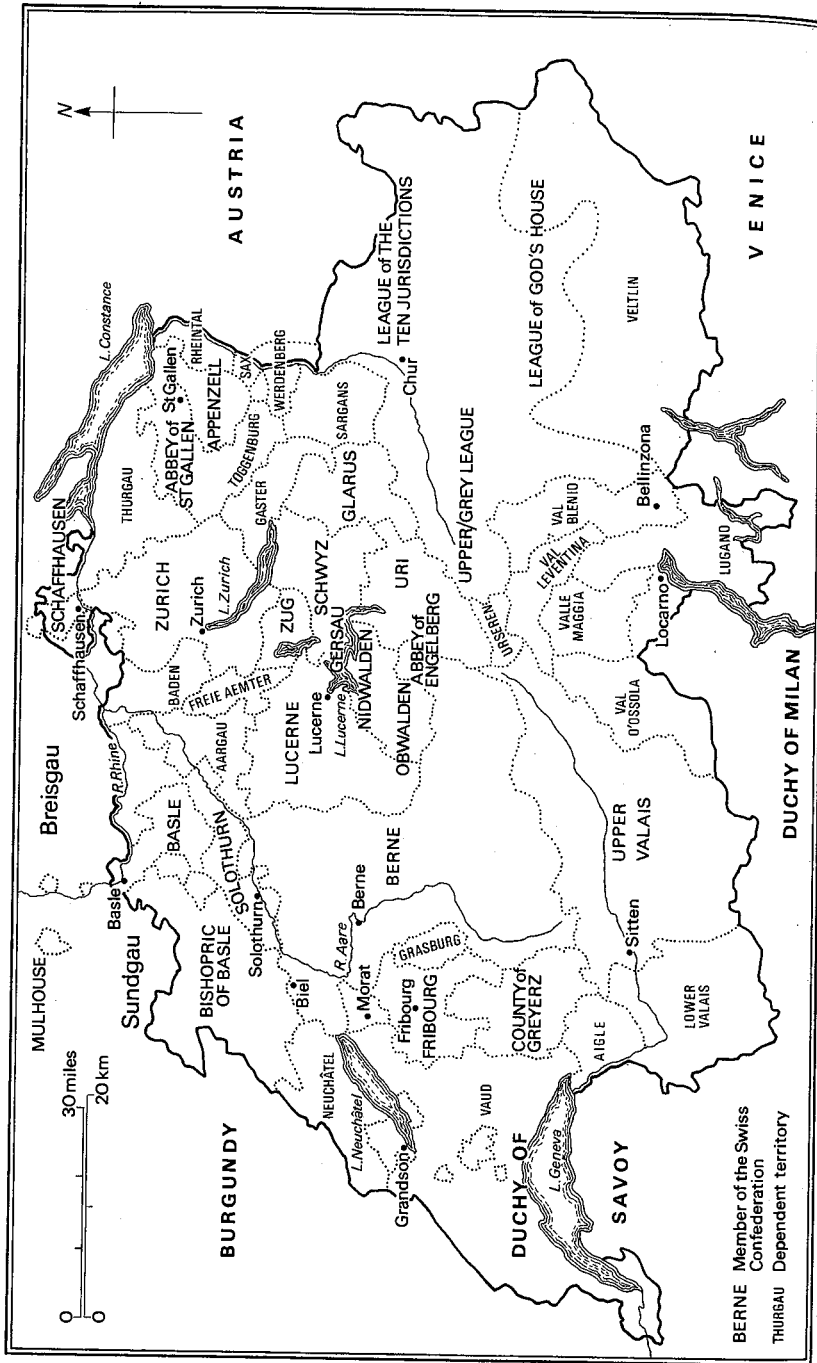
Roger Sablonier

INTRODUCTION

THE system of alliances among imperial provinces and cities in the area between the Alps, the Jura mountains and the Rhine, known as the Swiss Confederation (Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft), emerged about the year 1500 as a distinct political unit within the German Empire. The Confederation as a whole occupied no clearly defined territory. However, by 1500, the northern limits of its sphere of influence ran more or less along the Rhine as far as Lake Constance. In the east, its frontier with Graubünden was unclear; the west of what is now Switzerland was largely under the dominion of Savoy; south of the Alps, the hegemony of Milan persisted until shortly before 1500. Within the Confederation of cantons, or *Orte* (the traditional name for members enjoying full rights), with their widely differing structures and identities, each guarded its freedom of manoeuvre in both domestic and foreign politics, but, by 1500, did have a visible political cohesion.

The Confederation, at first just one of the numerous systems of alliances existing within the German Empire, had not succeeded in giving itself a more stable framework until after 1350, and then only hesitantly. Alongside the free imperial cities of Berne and Zurich, the centres of political power within the federation, the cities of Lucerne and Zug appear as early as the fourteenth century as full members of the Confederation. Fribourg and Solothurn already belonged to this circle well before the end of the fifteenth century, when their membership, like that of Basle and Schaffhausen, became more binding. Among the rural communes, important members of the alliance were the valley communities and imperial districts in the alpine region of central Switzerland; other rural members were Glarus and the hinterland of Zug. The three forest cantons (*Waldstätte*) of central Switzerland, Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden, had formed a closer alliance towards the end of the thirteenth century, and consequently are often found acting together.

By 1500 the subject hinterlands were also part of the Confederation. Some



Map 15 The Swiss Confederation and its neighbouring territories, c. 1500

were ruled by a single city – Zurich, Berne or Lucerne; others, like Aargau and Thurgau in the Rhine valley and (in part) Ticino, were dominated and governed jointly, as mandated territories (*Gemeine Herrschaften*), by more than one of the *Orte*. Moreover, around the geographical and political area of the confederal *Orte* was a whole network of more or less close alliances among a wide variety of partners. Among these associated members (*Zugewandte Orte*) were the Three Leagues in Rhaetia, the Upper Valais, the abbot of St Gallen, the count of Greyerz and some individual towns such as Rottweil and Mulhouse.

Most treaties among the *Orte* were only bilateral. Some of them went back into the fourteenth century and assured mutual assistance and supervision. The oldest extant agreements between Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden, dating from 1291 and 1315, were primarily concerned with keeping the peace and securing the privileged position of local elites; in this, they did not differ from other contemporary treaties. Only in modern times has the covenant of 1291, the *Bundesbrief*, been taken as the founding document of the Confederation. Much more significant, among the bilateral treaties, is the League of Zurich (*Zürcher Bund*) of 1351, by which the *Ort* of Zurich and the forest cantons promised one another aid against the Habsburg overlord. This became the pattern for other links between members of the Confederation.

Such bilateral treaties were regularly renewed, especially in the years immediately after 1450. By contrast, comprehensive alliances including many or all of the *Orte* were infrequent, thus highlighting the significance of the Compact of Stans (*Stanser Verkommnis*) of 1481. The lack of constitutional and conceptual unity within the league of confederate towns and provinces reflects the fact that very few such all-embracing institutions existed at all until much more recent times. Can we speak of the Confederation in 1500 as a 'state'? Only with the greatest reservations. Although the political elites may have had some notion of the Confederation as a self-governing political entity and even, in certain circumstances, some show of solidarity, the concept of 'state' has to be applied primarily to the individual territories.

How did this development of the state, unique in contemporary Europe, come into being? Our knowledge of political events is relatively good. The great merit of earlier Swiss historiography remains unquestioned, but the present generation of historians has assumed a certain critical distance from the nationalistic exuberance which led such writing to view the period as a time of 'great-power politics' and 'vigorous maintenance of independence'. Recently, horizons have been greatly extended by an increased awareness of the political and economic environment of the Confederation, and a comparison with circumstances in the rest of Europe. Discussions of the making of the modern state have become as prominent as the drive to relate political evolution to

structural changes in the economic, social and cultural environment, and in mental outlooks. Given the serious gaps in our knowledge, however, such links are often hard to make. Only slowly have historians come to realise the implications of the fact that other political developments and traditions existed in late medieval Switzerland (or in what we now call Switzerland) alongside the Confederation itself. There is still need for research into political relationships in the west and south of the country; into small 'non-confederate' states such as the abbey of St Gallen; and generally into the history of the former dependent territories. There are thematic gaps as well. What follows will concentrate on the changes in the old patterns of political power and on the emergence of new structures within the urban and rural communities. The consolidation of the state within the confederate communes brought integration, but it also led to internal conflict. Finally, the European role played by Switzerland, largely through its mercenaries, and the rise of national consciousness will be examined. In all this, how unique can Switzerland claim to have been?

OVERLORD, EMPIRE AND NOBILITY

As the Middle Ages began to decline, the most significant development within the German monarchy was the rise of small independent territories. In Switzerland, this development was already in full swing in the fourteenth century. Among a multitude of competing rulers, nobles, ecclesiastics and cities, the leading duchies had already clearly emerged. Since about 1250 Savoy, to the west, had been striving successfully to create a modern, and to a large extent self-contained, territory which was efficiently governed, even after the shift of Savoyard interests towards Piedmont. In what is now southern Switzerland, the Visconti dukes of Milan had become the dominant influence. In the east and north, from their hereditary territories as far as the Swiss midlands, the Habsburgs, despite setbacks, still enjoyed remarkable success. In between, and for the time being, some middle-ranking domestic nobility – for example, the counts of Toggenburg, Greyerz and Neuenburg, and the lords of Hallwil and Landenberg (local families owing service to the Habsburgs) – held their ground well. A substantial share of the variegated number of small and middle-sized domains and of fragmented and scattered sovereign rights belonged to ecclesiastical rulers such as the bishops of Chur, Basle and Sitten. About 1370, the small states of the Confederation, whose territorial expansion had scarcely begun, were no more than isolated dots on the multi-coloured political map of what is now Switzerland.

The rise of the Confederation at the turn of the fifteenth century was influenced very significantly, though not exclusively, by events in the Austro-Habsburg sphere of influence. The political activity of the Habsburgs, over

and above their imperial responsibilities, focused mainly on the possessions which they had inherited in the thirteenth century in what is now Austria. But in the years about 1360, in particular, and again after 1380, they strove, sometimes with great success, to extend and consolidate their power in the west. In 1363, for example, the Austrian Habsburgs gained possession of the Tyrol. Between 1375 and 1413 they took over almost all the territories of the counts of Montfort as well as those of the Werdenbergs in the Rhine valley, in particular the town and domain of Sargans.

The greatest contributor to this process was Duke Leopold III of Austria (1351–86), who turned his attention westwards after inheriting the Austrian Habsburg possessions in 1379, showing himself everywhere in his new territories as an ambitious, though not particularly skilful, local politician. His political clashes with the cities were further complicated by the ambiguity of his positions during the Great Schism. As a result, the cities to the south of the German Empire formed themselves into leagues which constituted a powerful opposition. Such leagues came into being in Swabia in 1376, in Alsace in 1379, and in the central Rhineland in 1381, while Zurich, Berne, Solothurn and Zug joined together with fifty-one other towns in the region to form the League of Constance in 1385. In the area of the river Aare, Leopold had to reckon with the imperial city of Berne, while in the alpine foothills he came up against the territorial and political interests of Lucerne. In 1386 localised conflicts over Lucerne's attempts to dominate her hinterland and the Entlebuch, where the Austrian duke also had rights, culminated in a threat of war on both sides. Leopold attempted a show of force with an army made up of nobles, mercenaries and contingents from the cities. It ended in disaster. At Sempach, on 3 July 1386, Leopold lost both battle and life when he met an army from Lucerne, reinforced by men from central Switzerland.

The defeat of the Austrian army of feudal nobles by the Swiss infantry has been set down as a remarkable event of military history. The great victory of Sempach, and the antagonists, Leopold and the legendary Arnold Winkelried, bulked large in Swiss historiography and national consciousness from the fifteenth century onwards. However, the impact of this single event on politically conducted territorial development should not be overestimated.¹ Dramatic clashes between opposing forces make up only a small part of the long series of changes which occurred in the years after 1380. Changes in social and economic structures played a part, as did military action in advancing political ends; so, too, did widespread, but initially submerged, unrest among the rural population. The difficulties faced by the cities in restricting the scope of the unrest among the rural population is revealed by the *Sempacherbrief*, a treaty

¹ Marchal (1986).

sealed in 1393 in which the confederate partners, acting under the pressure of events, agreed to suppress the waging of all feuds and wars uncontrolled and unsanctioned by their own governments.²

Only later did it become clear that the heavy blow to the prestige of the Austrian monarchy had also involved a real loss of power. At first it seemed that the peace agreed in 1389 between Duke Albert I (1349/50–95) and the Confederation (which was replaced by a treaty in 1394 and, in 1412, by a peace which was to last fifty years) had guaranteed the continuation of Habsburg power. However, the *de facto* absence of Austria from political and military affairs after 1395, which could not have been foreseen, had far-reaching consequences, especially for the lesser nobility which was politically and economically dependent on the Habsburgs. In fact, the sovereign's absence from politics was due much less to military misfortunes than to quarrels which divided the house of Habsburg after the death of Albert in 1395.

However, it was not long before an event occurred which really did weaken the position of the Austrian monarchy. This was the dispute between Sigismund of Luxemburg and Bohemia (1368–1437), crowned king of Germany in 1410, and his Habsburg rival. At the opening of the Council of Constance, Sigismund published a decree outlawing Frederick IV of Austria (1382/3–1439), who had received the Tyrol and the old western domains (*Vorlande*) as his portion of the 1400 inheritance. In 1415 the Confederation, headed by Berne, was summoned to make war on Sigismund's behalf; it seized the opportunity to occupy the Austrian Aargau with the minimum of military effort. Subsequently, the Confederation bought the Aargau as an imperial pledge, and thus legalised its *de facto* exercise of power. Only after 1440 did this lead in part to a new internal order within these territories, and the conquerors continued to quarrel over the captured lands for decades. While part of the land eventually became a common lordship of all the confederates, it was Berne, which acquired all Austria's rights in by far the largest part of the Aargau, which emerged as the real winner. In vain did Austria, for years to come, repeatedly demand the return of the Habsburg pledge. Not until 1474, in the peculiar political atmosphere engendered by the diplomatic manoeuvring prior to the Burgundian war, did Duke Sigmund finally renounce all former Austrian rights in the Confederation to the eight confederate *Orte*. This Austro-Swiss treaty (11 June 1474) is known as the Perpetual Accord (*Ewige Richtung*). Even this did not end the political and propagandist polemics over the legitimacy of confederate rule in the region, a fact which explains (among other things) why contemporary chroniclers placed such heavy emphasis on the enmity of the confederates towards their Habsburg rivals.

² Stettler (1985).

The events in the Aargau underline the importance of relations with the Empire for the ambitions of the political elite within the Confederation. They profited from Habsburg–Luxemburg rivalry then, as they had already done in the fourteenth century. Evidently Sigismund hoped to harness the Confederation to his own enterprises in Italy and against the Hussites; he was therefore more generous in granting it privileges than his predecessors, Charles IV (1316–78) and Wenceslas (1361–1419), had been. He also pursued a distinctly friendly policy towards the cities. For example, Wenceslas had granted Zurich the right to elect its own imperial governor (*Reichsvogt*) and through him to exercise high justice; in 1415 Sigismund converted the Austrian pledges into imperial fiefs, and in 1433 he sanctioned subinfeudation. At that time Zurich, temporarily at least, played the leading part in the Confederation's relationship with the Empire, although the city still felt a closer affinity with the towns on Lake Constance than with its confederates in central Switzerland. Moreover, during the years of the ecclesiastical council, Constance was to an extent the centre of the Empire's diplomacy. In this sense the relationship with the crown was of some importance, not only as the central source of legitimation but also, to the individual territories of the Confederation, as a political reality. Only at the end of the fifteenth century did such territories really begin to cut loose from the Empire.³

The overlord and the urban communes were keen competitors in their political pursuit of territorial aggrandisement and consolidation, but they did not compete only against one another. They shared the political aim, already pursued with considerable success throughout the fourteenth century, of ousting or controlling the lesser dynastic nobility. These nobles had traditionally based their independent rule on landed estates and bailiwicks, but by the end of the thirteenth century they were already demonstrably lacking in competitive power.⁴ Only the minor regional nobility, such as the lords of Hallwil, Landenberg and Klingenberg, who had risen in the service of the overlord, were able to strengthen their position thanks to their lucrative careers. When, in the first half of the fifteenth century, the house of Habsburg ran into difficulties, this posed enormous problems for those who depended upon Austrian support. Whether through loss of political position and social standing, extinction of the family line or migration, they rapidly disappeared from the scene. A number were to find their way into non-noble groups within the political elite of the Confederation.

This elimination of the nobility is a specifically local development found in no other region of the Empire. In the disappearance of the traditional forms of aristocratic rule, political factors were of great importance. This can be

³ Mommsen (1958). ⁴ Sablonier (1979a).

shown through a comparison with the still intact position of the nobility under Savoyard rule.

There were also economic and social problems behind this disappearance of the nobility, problems which had nothing to do with the hostility towards the nobility of which the Confederation would be later accused. Their difficulties arose in part from the lack of profitable career opportunities in royal service.⁵ Moreover, the income of the lesser nobility must have been sharply reduced by the crisis which undoubtedly afflicted the agricultural economy, particularly at the beginning of the century. Nor did the limited development of traditional feudal authority in the forest cantons help to maintain the influence of the nobility, whose ranks were also exposed to the burghers of the confederate cities who were all ready to step into their political shoes.⁶

URBAN AND RURAL COMMUNES

The transformation and decline of the political order built up by the Austrian dynasty and nobility were counterbalanced by the decisive progress in the constitution of urban territorial rule between 1370 and 1430. Compared with the situation in Savoy or Württemberg, the Habsburg overlordship was noticeably weak, and often failed to make its presence felt. The chief beneficiaries of this situation were the midland cities. Berne, Lucerne and Zurich were first in the rush for territories, while Solothurn and the Austrian city of Fribourg also took part, as did some smaller cities. Berne's traditionally good relations with her powerful neighbour, Savoy, enabled her to hold her own in the Aare region against political and territorial competition from the Habsburgs, particularly under Leopold III. Zurich's rapid succession of territorial acquisitions – the district of Greifensee (1402), the lordship of Grüningen (1408), the district of Regensberg with Bülach (1409) and, above all, the first acquisition of the lordship of Kyburg (1424) – led to the constitution of one of the largest territories in the Empire, after that of Berne.

This policy of territorial expansion was seldom pursued through military intervention. In some cases the mere threat of military force was enough; Berne and Zurich could count on getting mercenaries from central Switzerland. On the whole, however, the cities attained their aims by peaceful means, chiefly through money and skilful financial policy. They bought land and feudal rights, and often took noble ecclesiastical rulers, willing or not, under their 'protection' (*Burgrecht* or *Landrecht*), which led to rapid integration. Often against the will of their lords, the confederate cities also admitted people from the countryside into the urban citizenry, as 'external citizens' or

⁵ Bickel (1978). ⁶ Sablonier (1982).

Ausburger, a strategy for expansion that was employed throughout the Empire.

The success of this policy of acquisition was largely attributable to specific political circumstances, namely the weakness of the overlord's policy. However, it would have been unthinkable without the sharp increase in economic prosperity enjoyed by many cities in the first half of the fifteenth century. They profited directly and indirectly from the upsurge in trade over these years (Berne, for instance, did well out of the customs dues along the Aare), and from the increased commercial activity which can be seen, for example, in Fribourg from as early as 1350. Between 1430 and 1450 the volume of trade evidently dropped off, but the cities still managed to strengthen their leading role within the Swiss Confederation.

In the long run, the cities' territorial policy and bid for autonomy against the overlord's attempts to centralise rule were far more successful within the Confederation than in the neighbouring regions of Savoy and southern Germany. The same period saw a consolidation and expansion of the communal movement in the rural areas which is an even more strikingly exceptional element in the development of this region.

Of immediate interest here are the communes in the valleys of central Switzerland. The rural communes of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden, which had obtained exemption from all territorial jurisdiction save that of the king about the year 1300, developed a political autonomy which was unprecedented and astonishing. The reasons for this autonomy have been long and fiercely disputed among Swiss historians⁷ and are still controversial. Were they the result of a singularly precocious and successful drive towards autonomy by a rural community, a resistance to the feudal order?⁸ Or did local groups of the political elite in a very incompletely feudalised area succeed in establishing their own forms of organisation, based mainly upon parochial units and earlier institutions regulating common agricultural exploitation?⁹ In any case, the long-term consequences of events during the so-called founding epoch (*Gründungszeit*, 1291–1315) in central Switzerland have often been greatly overestimated on the basis of fifteenth-century historiography.¹⁰ Only after the middle of the fourteenth century, or even after 1370, can a decisive consolidation of these valley communities into a 'state' (*Land*) be observed, both from within and from without. Towards the end of the century this came to include Glarus, while the hinterland of Zug was able to preserve some elements of autonomy only by connecting itself with its eponymous town. At the same time the individual valley communities, especially Schwyz and Uri, engaged in the same active policy of territorial integration being pursued by the cities:

⁷ Guenée (1971), pp. 292–6; Eng. trans. (1985), pp. 212–16.

⁸ Blickle (1990), pp. 88–100. ⁹ Sablonier (1990). ¹⁰ Blickle (1990), pp. 27–8.

Schwyz in the rural district of Küssnacht, in the territory of the monastery of Einsiedeln and in the March, Uri in the Urseren valley. In the course of the fifteenth century territories subject to confederate control were added.

It is this development of communal autonomy in rural areas which gives the organisation of the late medieval Confederation its special place in modern constitutional history. Various aspects of this organisation represent a development towards statehood according to a 'model of communal solidarity' in a time of 'communalism', marked by attempts to 'construct a state on the principle of community, and the joining together of different communes'.¹¹ Throughout the fourteenth century and into the fifteenth, the rural communes of central Switzerland stood their ground against both the territorial claims of the overlord (although these were seldom pressed) and the much more menacing pressures of territorial aggrandisement and consolidation coming from their own urban confederates.

Not all the rural communes were by any means so successful in their striving towards independence, especially not in competition with the confederate cities. After 1380 Lucerne blatantly hindered the independence of the Weggis community and the Entlebuch, while Berne soon brought the valley of Hasli, exempt from all jurisdiction save that of the king, under its control; it was to do the same to the Saanen district (after 1403). In the subject hinterlands and the mandated territories, the confederate states took over the role of the former rulers, even if they justified and exercised their authority in different ways.

Another good example of these complicated procedures is to be found in eastern Switzerland. Here, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, the rural population of the Appenzell region was still striving unsuccessfully to free itself from the control of the abbot of St Gallen. With military help from Schwyz and the citizens of St Gallen, the Appenzellers had defeated two armies of mounted knights from southern Germany (in 1403 and 1405); but after a defeat in 1408 by the troops of the League of Knights and from Austria, the communal movement lost its way, and by the end of 1411 Appenzell, like the town of St Gallen a year later, was more or less obliged to accept confederate invitations to place itself under the protection of the Confederation (save Berne). The abbot's rights were acknowledged and, in 1421, the Confederation even strengthened them. In 1428, after fresh unrest, Count Frederick VII of Toggenburg staged a military invasion to restore order. The count who, by this time, had acquired, by pledge, almost all the Austrian possessions from Rheineck to Montafon, in addition to the lordship of Werdenberg from Sargans to the upper regions around the lake of Zurich, was among the major

¹¹ Blicke (1981), p. 114. On communalism in general, see Blicke (1985), pp. 165–204; on central Switzerland in particular, see Blicke (1990), pp. 93–111.

gainers from the conflict. Zurich, in open rivalry with Schwyz, also greatly increased its influence in the region at this time. Significantly, in 1436, when the peasants of Toggenburg asked the Confederation for support in their struggle for independence from the count, none was forthcoming.

The disturbances in the Appenzell were important not only for these shifts in political spheres of influence. The chronicle tradition, together with the founding of the league of nobles 'with the shield of St George' (*St Jörgenschild*) in neighbouring Swabia, proves that the nobility of this region had directed harsh polemics on the subject of class distinction against the peasantry – presumably in analogy to a phenomenon widespread in contemporary Europe.¹² The defeats in the Appenzell war, like that of Sempach in 1386, had caused profound disquiet among the knights and nobles of southern Germany. In their fear of the communal movement they successfully demanded that their enemies be excommunicated, stigmatising them as 'peasants' (according to the idea of the God-given three orders of society), although they must have known that many of them were townsfolk from St Gallen and other cities. 'The Swiss Confederation seemed a socially uniform union of "peasants" only to the lords' fearful and hostile eye.'¹³ As a result, 'peasant' strivings towards autonomy in southern Germany attracted the catchphrase 'schweytzer werden' or 'turning Swiss'.¹⁴

We must be very careful to distinguish between the ambitions of the political elite and politically motivated social movements among the peasants. This is important because traditional constitutional history has tended to imply that the people of Appenzell or Schwyz, for example, were acting on behalf of a national state. Only if we distinguish among the different political groups can we explain why this region, like the whole of central and western Europe, was affected by growing unrest among the rural population at the end of the fourteenth century, and why the revolt of Appenzell sometimes took on the appearance of a peasants' revolt against the overlord. The events in the Appenzell also saw another fundamental aspect of the situation before 1450: that political solidarity among the confederate *Orte* against claims made by the overlord would endure only so long as it did not conflict with their particular plans for expansion. There can be no question of selfless support for 'communalism' as a principle from the Confederation's political elite; nor, for that matter, did they intend to support 'peasant' resistance within their own spheres of influence.

In the same context we can situate the development of rural communes in the Valais and Graubünden, which also affected the Confederation. In the

¹² Lutz (1990), pp. 129–213.

¹³ The phrase is from Brady (1985), p. 32.

¹⁴ Brady (1985).

Valais, the seven upper valley communities or *Zenden* (Sitten, Siders, Leuk, Raron, Visp, Brig and Goms) had wrested a degree of independence from the bishop of Sitten and from Savoy; in 1435 they decisively strengthened this position by creating their own governmental and judicial system. Similarly, in Graubünden, rural communities had joined together in leagues. This had begun in 1367, when the cathedral chapter, officials of the bishop's household, the citizens of Chur as well as the communes in Domleschg, Schams, Oberhalbstein, Bergell and the Lower and Upper Engadine banded together to form the nucleus of what would become the 'League of the House of God' (*Gotteshausbund*). A large number of lords and peasants from the upper Rhine valley joined in the 'Grey' or 'Upper' League (*Grauer* or *Oberer Bund*), which had been in the process of formation since 1395, up to its solemn confirmation in Truns in 1424. The 'League of the Ten Jurisdictions' (*Zehngerichtebund*) of 1436, centred on Davos, included only rural communities. On the basis of these Three Leagues, Graubünden (Grisons) embarked on an independent and original path of statehood with a strongly communal character. Both the Upper Valais and the Three Leagues would prove to be faithful partners of the Confederation.

With the exception of the League of the Ten Jurisdictions, it is clear that all fifteenth-century associations in both Graubünden and the Valais are to be understood as unions of mixed estate. Collaboration among the estates – especially the representation of the 'common man'¹⁵ and the importance assigned to the interests of townfolk and peasants – was not spelt out as precisely as it was (for example) under ducal leadership in the Tyrol or in Savoy; nevertheless, Graubünden clearly differs on this point from the rural communities of central Switzerland. Such differences should be borne in mind when sweeping references are made to a widely disseminated and specifically 'alpine' form of communal statehood.

THE INNER CONSOLIDATION OF THE CONFEDERATE COMMUNES

From the end of the fourteenth century the drive towards political independence and territorial expansion in the cities and rural cantons (*Länder*) of the Confederation advanced alongside the beginnings of an institutional inner consolidation of the state. Within individual territories some of the conditions generated by specific developments in institutions and methods of government were to last until the nineteenth century.

We should first note the considerable constitutional differences between urban and rural cantons. From the beginning of the fifteenth century power in

¹⁵ Blickle (1973) and (1981).

the cities was increasingly centralised in small councils (*Kleine Räte*), independent of existing craft guilds, involving a small group of eminent urban families and those co-opted by them. Their rule, in particular the administration of justice, customs, taxes and military forces, was refined and extended into all areas. This consolidation of government generally proceeded faster in the towns than in the rural communities. The political disparity between urban and rural areas within the Confederation in the closing years of the fifteenth century was heightened by this growing inequality. Among the rural political elite it nourished some fear of being unable to compete, politically or socially, with the towns.

Nevertheless, during the second half of the fourteenth century the rural *Orte* had formalised their assemblies (*Landsgemeinde*), circumscribed offices such as that of the *Landammann*, appointed their councils according to a definite juridical concept and produced written constitutions: in fact they had emerged as stable, lasting, structurally well-organised political 'states'. It was first to these rural constitutions, rather than to the towns, that nineteenth-century historians turned to satisfy their modern ideas of a peaceful and democratic order. The widespread concept of a '*Landsgemeinde* democracy' was the outcome. This tradition is surely erroneous.¹⁶ At this time the *Landsgemeinde* was basically far more concerned to publicise and make effective the claims of oligarchies than to encourage egalitarian co-operation among the 'people'; there was still no such thing as a sovereign people of citizens with equal rights. None the less, it is undeniable that under these circumstances political decisions could be more strongly influenced from below than they were in the towns, and that the political and social position of the rulers was legitimised and exhibited in a rather different way.

In spite of these differences, recent research into constitutional history¹⁷ has rightly insisted on the essential structural similarities between the urban and rural communities. Both were communally organised republics, steered around 1490 by a ruling group which was still very unstable but in its structure fundamentally oligarchic. Towards the end of the century the political and social aims of these ruling groups became increasingly similar, in spite of their diverging political organisation. In the later fifteenth century they tended to become more aristocratic, a tendency which was to be institutionalised in the early modern period. To contemporaries from outside, the Confederation at least, and, by comparison with the elite of government elsewhere, the oligarchies of the Confederation, both rural and urban, were distinctive in respect of their origin, group consciousness and outward manifestation of power, these common characteristics becoming more evident after 1450.

¹⁶ Peyer (1978). Hence Blickle (1990), pp. 93–111, prefers to speak of 'communal parliamentarianism'.

¹⁷ Peyer (1978).

The process of state consolidation can only be partly characterised by the old-fashioned concept of a steady path to local domination through the build-up of comprehensive and undivided territorial and state controls over an ever more closely united group of subject regions. It is also inseparable from the development of new techniques of day-to-day government. Increased surveillance and control over its subjects, and a tighter grip on power by the ruling class, are important features of the 'early modern state'. A good example of this increase in governmental power, already well developed (by contrast with other parts of the region) before 1450, is found in Lucerne.¹⁸ Following the practical example of the increasingly powerful Habsburg monarchy, Zurich, with Berne and Fribourg, which were in close contact with the highly developed ruling machinery of neighbouring Savoy, also strove to make its government more effective. Besides effective judicial control, the exaction of taxes and military service from newly acquired subjects were central concerns. Indeed, the attempt to impose military service (the so-called *Mannschaftsrecht*) was a primary assumption of those wishing to monopolise the legitimate exercise of power. A new and highly significant way of demonstrating the domination of the urban ruling class over its subjects was to administer an oath of allegiance.¹⁹ It is interesting to note that no proper system of representation by estates was able to develop in the ruling towns.²⁰ The 'plebiscites' (the so-called *Ämteranfragen*), first introduced by Berne and later by other towns, did not constitute such a system. In the fifteenth century neither the urban nor the rural communes possessed a form of estate representation comparable with other European examples such as the Tyrol.

The tightening of territorial administration became manifest after 1450, particularly in the big city republics of Berne and Zürich. However, we should not overstress this process of concentration and consolidation of inner administrative structures during the fifteenth century, especially in comparison with contemporary royal states and principalities which were, to a greater or lesser extent, centralised. The institutional consolidation of individual territories, and the penetration and unification of state power which accompanied them, were long-drawn-out and precarious processes; even the great strides made in the sixteenth century did not quite complete them. The strength of local self-regulation was still structurally significant, as was the limited degree of administrative centralisation and the diversity of mechanisms for the exercise of state power, both *de facto* and *de jure*.

Nevertheless, in the late medieval Confederation there was no lack of indication that the political and social changes in the claims and practice of

government were beginning to have some effect. Witness, above all, the more or less chronic uprisings in the countryside which, under various forms and with various intensity, plagued the developing confederate oligarchies from the end of the fourteenth century. However, this widespread rural unrest must be related to economic and social developments. First, economic reasons may be presumed for the disturbances of the 1380s. Secondly, there are at least isolated indications that the Swiss midlands were affected by the widely known agrarian and demographic crises that marked the century 1350 to 1450. These difficulties, compounded in some regions by an upswing in the rural economy perceptible after the 1450s, may well have increased social tensions in the countryside. Thirdly, the increase in stock rearing in the alpine and pre-alpine regions of central Switzerland must have increased the potential for social conflict.²¹ And fourthly, a further probable reason for the conflicts after 1470 was discontent with the amount of money that the governing class was receiving from mercenary contracts, and possibly the socially unjust division of the enormous booty gained from the war against Charles the Bold.

A persistently unruly area was the Bernese Oberland, where there had been resistance to the monastery of Interlaken in the fourteenth century and, later, much opposition to Berne by the 'Evil League' (*Böser Bund*) from 1445 to 1451. In 1447 political disputes around Fribourg led to another substantial peasant uprising. In many parts of the countryside around Zurich, peasant resistance was never completely stilled after the beginning of the fifteenth century, and in 1440-1 the district of Grüningen formally demanded a return to the (evidently much milder) domination of Austria. While the subjects of Wädenswil rebelled (and not for the last time) against the town's tax demands in 1467-8, the revolt against Hans Waldmann, burgomaster of Zurich, in 1489 gave drastic expression to the widespread rural opposition to the centralising policies of the urban oligarchies which rode roughshod over the special and individual rights of rural communities.²² In Berne, in 1470-1, the question of competence to administer the countryside led to the 'quarrel of the Judicial Lords' (*Twingherrenstreit*), a serious dispute within the city's ruling class.²³ Overt peasant resistance also developed in the Entlebuch (the *Amstaldenhandel* or Amstalden affair of 1478), and in St Gallen in the attack on the monastery of Rorschach (*Rorschacher Klosterbruch*) in 1489-90; less violent, however, was the resistance to the oath in Thurgau in the 1470s. Peasant unrest prior to the Reformation was seen again in the unquiet years from 1513 to 1515 in the region of Berne; in the revolt of Köniz (*Könizer Handel*); in the hinterland of Lucerne (the so-called 'Onion War' or *Zwiebelkrieg*); in the upper bailiwicks of Solothurn (the 'Gingerbread War' or *Lebkuchenkrieg*) and elsewhere.

¹⁸ Gössi (1978); Marchal (1986).

¹⁹ Schorer (1989); Holenstein (1991).

²⁰ Peyer (1978), pp. 43, 69.

²¹ Sablonier (1990), pp. 154-66.

²² Dietrich (1985).

²³ Schmid (1995).

In 1489 the Council of Berne urged the governing council of Zurich to put an end to the disturbances in its countryside as soon as possible. This example shows clearly that the internal consolidation of individual *Orte* was related to the wider matter of consolidating the whole confederate system of alliances. A common interest in internal law and order, and in mutual interdependence (both of which had been, to varying degrees, powerful motives as early as the fourteenth century), without doubt fostered the integration of the whole Confederation. That process must now be considered.

INTEGRATION AND CONFLICT WITHIN THE CONFEDERATION

Well into the modern period the Confederation remained a league of independent states; but in the fifteenth century it increasingly took on the look of a political entity. To this picture, however, must be added the bitter conflicts among the *Orte* themselves.

In 1500, the 'Confederation' as a system was still unstable, although from the outside the organisation, albeit assembled by chance, uncertain of its frontiers and as yet poorly equipped with common institutions, appeared as a politically autonomous entity. Inside, however, there existed only a loose, mostly bilateral network of treaties, in which only the three cantons of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden regularly acted together. There were a few inclusive treaties such as the 'Priests' Charter' (*Pfaffenbrief*) of 1370, the 'Charter of Sempach' (*Sempacherbrief*) of 1393, the Compact of Stans (1481) and the 'Treaty of the Pensions' (*Pensionenbrief*) of 1503. These, however, did not amount to anything like a common constitution.

Nevertheless, the fifteenth-century Confederation, viewed as a whole, did show signs of institutional consolidation. This is shown, for instance, in the numerous renewals of alliances between all parties in the 1450s. While the aim of such treaties was always to keep the peace, they also ensured mutual help and control, or protection, within a completely open and flexible system of mutual obligations and guarantees. Newly admitted into the Confederation as equal members were Fribourg and Solothurn (1481), Basle and Schaffhausen (1501) and Appenzell (1513). However, any distinction between confederates such as the abbot of St Gallen (granted *Burg-* and *Landrecht* in 1451) was still vague and rather coincidental.

At the institutional level, the Assembly of representatives of all *Orte* of the Confederation (*Tagsatzung*), which had met regularly since 1415, was certainly a force for integration, even though there was no representation of different estates, no clearly defined authority, and no delegate might speak without the leave of his superiors. But the common administration of the subject regions, especially Aargau and Thurgau, was of great importance, and dealings with the

associate *zugewandte Orte* and treaty partners helped to keep the Confederation together even through internal disputes. Furthermore, joint deliberations over negotiations with neighbouring powers and the consequent conclusion of treaties (in particular contracts for the pay of mercenaries) became important, in particular during the years of disarray in Italy after 1495. Important in this connection, too, was the development of courts of arbitration and of mediators. Although unanimity seldom reigned in the Assembly, which showed little ability to deal with conflicts, it did attain a certain equilibrium. Unsteady as it was, it was none the less working towards some kind of integration.

However, differences in political and economic outlook within the Confederation remained significant throughout the fifteenth century. Berne had turned itself into the dominant political force in the Swiss midlands and, by reason of its traditionally close links with Savoy, looked chiefly westwards, towards the Upper Rhine valley and Alsace. Obviously, too, Berne had economic interests along the Aare and wished to keep open the trade route from Upper Germany to the west. The ambition of Zurich to gain greater hegemony in eastern Switzerland acquired greater political weight after 1400. Once again economic interests – control of the passes in Graubünden, still much more important than the St Gotthard route – should not be underestimated.

In fact, it was chiefly Milan that was concerned with securing the St Gotthard pass; and for the stockbreeders of central Switzerland the demand from the south was the decisive incentive to guard the route, rather than the interests of the north in securing a steady market. From an economic point of view the cantons of central Switzerland at this time are best described as Lombard alpine valleys.²⁴ From 1350 onwards, Uri and Unterwalden looked increasingly towards the Valais and Milan; the Valle Leventina, like the Urseren valley earlier, came within the sway of Uri. Lucerne succeeded, albeit on a small scale, in becoming the axis of trade between Upper Germany and Lombardy. In brief, the conditions and orientations of the confederate *Orte* differed from one another economically as well as politically. It is too early to talk of a well-defined Swiss commercial and economic domain in the fifteenth century.

Moreover, from time to time during the first decades of the century there were serious disputes among the confederates. This tendency showed itself early in the 'Raron affair' which, from 1415 to 1435, set Berne against central Switzerland over influence in the Valais. In 1436, when Count Frederick VII of Toggenburg died childless, the rivalry between Schwyz and Zurich for his inheritance led to an important political crisis. It was greatly intensified when, in 1438, the German Empire returned into Habsburg hands, completely transforming the political order in south-western Germany.

²⁴ Sablonier (1990); Vismara *et al.* (1990).

Characterised by sporadic outbreaks of violence, the 'Old Zurich War' or 'War of the Toggenburg Inheritance' lasted intermittently from 1436 to 1450. Older historians referred to a dramatic 'fratricidal war', but more recent research has clarified the actual objectives of Zurich and the complex relationship with events in a wider Europe. Zurich, a self-conscious and independent imperial city, was trying to come to an arrangement with Austria and with the imperial Habsburg government over power sharing in the whole of eastern Switzerland. The change in the political landscape brought about by the Treaty of Arras (1435), which led to a sharp increase in French and Burgundian pressure on the Upper Rhine and Alsace, may have played a part within the large framework; while, at a more local level, Zurich's well-founded fear of Schwyz's drive towards the north and the route to Graubünden was also important. The peace negotiations of 1450 brought Zurich back into the system of a balance of power within the Confederation.²⁵

Even after 1450 there were still conflicts over integration and severe political divergences within the Confederation. To this context belongs the warlike raid of 1477 carried out 'under the banner of the boar' (*Saubannerzug*). This involved a band of young people who had been celebrating carnival in central Switzerland and who, to the terror of the oligarchies (particularly in the towns), went storming through the Confederation as far as Geneva. The campaign, over which the state had no control, triggered a serious conflict within the Confederation. Underlying it was a series of fundamental disagreements between the urban and rural oligarchies over the constitution of internal law and order, the binding force of joint resolutions, the centralising of the league, and the granting of full rights to the towns of Fribourg and Solothurn. These now emerged into the light of day, and for a time quite directly threatened the survival of alliances between urban and rural *Orte*.²⁶

A compromise, the Compact of Stans, which later tradition endowed with strong religious connotations, was finally reached in 1481, but only through the intervention of a hermit, Niklaus von Flüe. In fact, many of its provisions, such as the banning of private war, reflect the efforts of the communal oligarchies to defend and secure their rule over the lower classes, over and above existing internal divergences. In this respect, as with the integration of Solothurn and Fribourg as full members, the urban oligarchies undoubtedly emerged the winners. Not surprisingly, the validity of the Compact of Stans was solemnly repudiated by Schwyz as early as 1489.²⁷

Conflicts over integration should not be overemphasised; they continued to characterise the Confederation well into the modern period. Despite them, after 1450 the situation changed in a way which looked certain – from the

outside – to lead to increased unity: in the second half of the century the Confederation slowly grew into a major factor in European power politics. This was to be a distinguishing feature of the troubled late fifteenth century, a period in which the Confederation experienced both the heights of political power and the depths of internal conflict. It was as early as 1424 that the Assembly had been first formally requested by a foreign power – Florence – to supply a large army of mercenaries.²⁸ By the end of the century, the Confederation's reputation as a huge reservoir of highly skilled mercenaries had become a decisive and recurrent factor in its policies.

EUROPEAN POLITICS AND THE MERCENARY

By about 1460 the Confederates had risen to be the most important political powers between the Rhine and the Alps. By this time the claims of Austrian overlordship scarcely posed any real threat, and coming events were to reveal new political directions: the southwards thrust from central Switzerland; the conquest of the Austrian Thurgau in 1460; Berne's political and economic contacts northwards towards Basle, the Sundgau, Alsace and the Black Forest. 'This fifteenth-century Swiss federation, or at any rate a large part of it, was dynamic, expansionist and aggressive.'²⁹ This was certainly true of the 1460s and 1470s.

For the Confederation's political situation, even more important than the perceptible pressure for expansion from within were the shifts in the European scene, since every aspect of its political development was strongly dependent on changes in its wider environment. By 1465 or earlier, a rejuvenated France, now the greatest political power in the region, had come up against the ambitions of Charles the Bold, duke of Burgundy. Whereas the Sforzas of Milan had succeeded in consolidating their power, Savoy, rent by internal dissensions, had become weaker and weaker, and greedy eyes were being turned on it from France, Burgundy and, soon afterwards, from Berne. Trouble with Burgundy was soon affecting Austria's western dominions (the *Vorlande*), while the cities of the Upper Rhine and Alsace feared for their independence and became ever more open to the influence of the Confederation, in particular that of Berne.

The 1470s witnessed the fateful conflicts known in history as the Burgundian wars. These precipitated the fall of Charles the Bold and his state, thereby deeply affecting the subsequent course of European history. The policies of the emperor, Frederick III, and (intermittently) of Austria had favoured the expansion of Burgundian power along the Upper Rhine, but the cities of this area, especially Basle and Strasburg, rapidly stiffened their resistance. The situation was calmed to an extent by the so-called 'Perpetual Accord' (*Ewige*

²⁵ Niederstätter (1995). ²⁶ Walder (1983). ²⁷ Walder (1994).

²⁸ Contamine (1984), p. 136. ²⁹ Vaughan (1973), p. 264.

Richtung) between Austria and the Confederation signed in 1474. Berne, however, was enthusiastically in favour of war against Burgundy; recent research suggests that French bribery was not the deciding factor.³⁰ As a powerful imperial city, Berne closed ranks with the cities of the Upper Rhine, fearing for its profits from free trade in central Europe. Burgundy's growing influence on the Savoyard Vaud also aroused deep suspicion from 1472 onwards.

The ensuing events are well known. In 1476, confederate armies inflicted severe defeats upon Charles the Bold before Grandson and then, even more spectacularly, at Morat (Murten). In January 1477 a great number of confederate mercenaries were in the army which defeated Charles outside Nancy, a battle at which the duke himself was killed. Shortly before this, Berne had made incursions into the Savoyard Vaud (and the Bas-Valais), a first sign of her ambitions in this area which were fulfilled when she conquered it in 1536. But the real fruits of victory after Charles's fall were reaped by others: by Louis XI of France and by Maximilian, son of Frederick III, who was to marry Mary of Burgundy, and so prepared the rise of the Habsburgs (and, later, of the Netherlands) as a world power.

In 1499, local territorial and political disputes led to open war between the Confederation and Maximilian, allied with the Swabian League of south German lords and cities. This 'Swabian' or 'Swiss' war was fought out on various battlefields from Graubünden to the Sundgau, but was resolved before the year's end by the Peace of Basle. One of its direct consequences was the entry of Basle and Schaffhausen into the Confederation in 1501. This detached the two free imperial cities, which had previously enjoyed a high degree of independence, from the structural order uniting the cities of southern Germany. The old view of the Swabian war as a struggle for independence against the Empire is no longer tenable; events in the south of the Empire played only a secondary role in Maximilian's wide-ranging political ambitions. The association of the Confederation with the Empire continued to act as a fundamental basis of its legitimation, especially in view of the growing particularism of the Swiss union of communal states when contrasted to the other parts of the Empire. This special position had now become more evident at the constitutional level as well. In an almost paradoxical manner, the ideological weight of the Confederation's association with the Empire was coming to correspond to a progressive loosening of ties between them.

In the decade up to 1500, Italy had taken centre stage in European politics. The cast consisted of the French crown, ambitious to capture Milan and to oust the Aragonese from Naples; Maximilian, now defending former

³⁰ Gasser (1973); Esch (1988).

Habsburg claims in the name of the Empire; together with the papal states, Venice, Genoa and Savoy. The Confederation's political interests were involved particularly in the political destabilisation of the duchy of Milan, which was only hastened, not begun, by Louis XII's attack in 1499. In that same year another contract to supply France with mercenaries was signed. This involvement in the struggle between major powers in Italy and, above all, its ability to supply mercenaries, made the Confederation (or, often, particular *Orte*) into a political factor of some importance.

Confederate mercenaries had been serving in Italy since the fourteenth century, more frequently since the Burgundian wars. The fortunes of war between 1495 and 1503 brought the whole of today's southern Switzerland and, after 1500, the important county of Bellinzona, under the control of Uri. However, the renewed and massive incursions by confederate troops after 1512 had no lasting effect. Except for Uri's claims on Bellinzona, and at times beyond into the southern Ticino and the neighbouring valleys (Val d'Ossola, Valle Maggia and Val Blenio), the Confederation had scarcely any discernible political objectives. This is true even though confederate troops were more than once in a position to establish a temporary military protectorate over the duchy of Milan. At no time were the confederates in agreement over which side they should support; seldom had disputes and open contradictions been as much in evidence as now. Mercenaries and commanders pitched into the war where wages were highest and the booty richest.³¹ In the upshot, the Confederation's political gains were extremely modest.

A number of factors explain the importance of the confederate mercenary. All the parties embroiled in Italy needed mercenaries, and, since the Burgundian wars, the military prestige of the Confederation had been high. Furthermore, this confederate military potential was subject to only a very modest degree of state control, and only in so far as the oligarchies' financial interests were involved. This is basically true of official mercenary contracts and pension agreements made with either particular *Orte* or with the Confederation as a whole, although it is in this context that important early stages of state supervision can be detected. The hire and broking of mercenaries had developed into an important business undertaking for many of the leading confederates, who profited both directly and indirectly.³² It seems that military careerism and the mercenary business were a growth sector which closely paralleled the developing livestock trade to the south.³³ As regards the common mercenary, a real labour market for his services was to develop, probably involving a high proportion of poor people, most from the rural population, but including many from the towns. Since the Burgundian wars

³¹ Esch (1990). ³² Sablonier (1979b).

³³ On Fribourg, see Peyer (1975); on Obwalden, see Rogger (1989).

there had been a perceptible mobility among large sectors of the population, among whom were many rootless young people, a factor remarked upon by contemporaries, and which was connected with the rural uprisings described above.

By the turn of the century the mercenaries had become quite professional. It was becoming ever harder to put a brake either on the greedy business dealings of rulers or on the work-hungry and self-perpetuating zest for battle of the increasingly professional mercenaries; the state had great difficulty in directing them into at least partly controllable channels. This restless mobility was further increased by the multifarious contracts, broken as often as they were respected, which were signed (with France in particular) and by the unscrupulous and unrestrained dealings of the recruiting officers from France, the Empire, the Papacy and Milan.

Mercenary potential, and military strength and prestige, were generally not a state concern, even though mercenary contracts always involved an element of state intervention. Hence the bloody defeat of a confederate army before Marignano, near Milan, on 13–14 September 1515, although prominent in European military history, was not a 'national catastrophe'. It was, however, an incontrovertible demonstration of French military superiority. The defeat laid the psychological foundations for the acceptance of existing political realities. The peace terms of 1515–16, dictated by France to the confederates following their withdrawal from Milan, were simple. France strengthened her hold over the Confederation's mercenary potential by the contract of 1521. This was the temporary conclusion to a development which had been in progress since the mid-fifteenth century. Henceforward France, with her economic strength and her rank as Europe's foremost power, would be the Confederation's protector and partner *par excellence*.

External factors were thus important in maintaining cohesion among the diverse partners in the network of confederate alliances. It has already been stressed that the evolution towards nationhood within these territories, and the degree of cohesion in the entire confederate system at the end of the fifteenth century, should not be overestimated. State control, even over the Confederation's military potential, although so important in terms of foreign policy, was only in its infancy. The prohibition of individual acts of belligerency contained in the Compact of Stans (1481) and the *Pensionenbrief* (1503), which aimed at preventing private recruitment and payment (*Pensionen*), expresses no more than a tendency. Nevertheless, after the Italian wars the consolidated political oligarchies tightened their control over the mercenary business with startling rapidity.³⁴

³⁴ Romer (1995).

What happened to the Confederation in the second half of the fifteenth century had a great deal to do with wars and mercenaries. Hence any survey of the political history of the confederate 'state' must take these factors into account. But there must be no idea that this unusual state of affairs was created by a group of *Zapoletes*, the efficient 'Venalians' of Thomas More's *Utopia*. The confederate oligarchies did make attempts at political and social integration in the fifteenth century, and these should be placed on a par with the fostering of trade and specialisation in stock rearing. And in the cultural domain we should not fail to mention at least the importance of Basle, of the great ecclesiastical councils which met at Constance and Basle, and of the humanist movement. One important aspect of the cultural outlook connected with the peculiarities of the development of the Swiss state now deserves consideration: the development of a particular tradition of state evolution.

STATE FORMATION AND NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The Confederation undoubtedly represents an exceptional case of state development within the territory of the German Empire, and even in late medieval Europe as a whole. By 1550, this uniqueness was clearly recognised from the outside. At a constitutional level, all separate territories – both urban and rural communes – have to be regarded as states, in spite of the many differences between them. They were communally organised republics with oligarchies of self-styled aristocrats – political, social and economic in origin. In contrast with the rest of Europe, with its central, sovereign authorities, the confederate alliance had no such power. Its political system was characterised by a very limited degree of state integration, as is shown clearly in the military domain and in the great importance of local, communal autonomy even in the subject regions. These institutional characteristics go hand in hand with the distinct character of the political elites: instead of an aristocracy of officials of noble or bourgeois birth in the employ of the sovereign, there were local, rural potentates and urban aristocratic councils who showed increasing social similarity, and whose political and social cohesion was steadily growing.

Overall, the growth of a common foreign policy was fostered less by internal consensus than by political developments in the wider European environment. The mercenary contracts with neighbouring powers were, in part, an expression of this tendency to act in concert. At the same time, a military career was a very good way to improve social status, and 'foreign' (mercenary) service long remained an important field of activity for members of the confederate upper classes, the distinguishing mark of a confederate oligarch. So important was this fact that it induced local rural potentates to make common-cause with the ruling urban aristocracy in a far closer way than ever

happened in the monarchies. Careers like that of Hans Waldmann of Zurich – ironmonger, notorious ruffian and guild-master who rose to be a sought-after mercenary captain with a European reputation, burgomaster of Zurich and the town's richest citizen – were certainly not the rule, but they throw a revealing light on the peculiar political culture of the Confederation about 1480.

A further vital contribution to the specific character of this political culture was made by the construction and propagation of a unique and wholly individual tradition of statehood, an expression of the political self-consciousness of the elites. Political opponents often alleged that this non-hereditary, non-noble state lacked legitimacy, for it exercised power in defiance of the God-given order of estates. One aspect of this polemic was, initially, the well-known, graphic and unflattering description of the confederates as 'Cow Swiss' (*Kuhschweizer*). This referred not so much to their alleged immorality in the modern sense as to their supposed identity as heretics. Confederate publicists retorted that it was legitimate to place power in the hands of the 'peasant', the 'pious, noble and pure peasant' as he appeared in so-called historical folk songs; in any case, their military successes proved that they were a Chosen People. The idea of a legitimate 'peasant state' was part of a way of thinking which probably remained confined to the political elite;³⁵ it is hard to prove that it promoted solidarity among the common people.³⁶

On this level, alongside political propaganda, the rise of confederate historiography was also highly important.³⁷ It had to justify the existence of the Confederation as a state. Not until shortly after 1470 were tales of the 'original' freedom, legitimate resistance to wicked Habsburg bailiffs and the battles of the Chosen People woven into the first mythical narrative of early confederate history, the 'White Book of Sarnen'. The portrayal of William Tell and other heroes echoed notions widely held among the population at large.

Too little is still known about the popular dissemination of these legends at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The ties which bound together the 'common people' within the Confederation were almost certainly dependent less on notions of history and conscious statehood than on shared forms of social life, similar ideas about society and politics and the power of visible symbols; apart from a few points, this, too, has received too little attention.³⁸ Research into military history has indicated that among the common soldiers from the Confederation a fierce rivalry with the German *Landsknechte* may have fostered a certain popular solidarity. But in times of war the ordinary people would have found much more meaning in the simple expressions of piety, such as the special prayer 'with outstretched arms'³⁹ and the annual commemorative

³⁵ As Weishaupt (1991) believes. ³⁶ Marchal (1987a). ³⁷ Marchal (1987a) and (1992).

³⁸ Sieber-Lehmann (1995). ³⁹ Ochsenbein (1979).

services in honour of the fallen. Such traditions were already significant in the fifteenth century, and were to reach their zenith in the sixteenth.

The developments in culture and mentality towards the end of the fifteenth century are vitally important to any later understanding of the rise of the confederate state. The building of an independent tradition of statehood, subordinate to a wider process of construction of a specific political culture, must be seen as an important factor in the creation of a consciousness of political unity and communal uniqueness which became firmly anchored in the confederate mind.

Thus it was possible to talk about the construction of an independent political culture in the Confederation; and in the nineteenth century (in Switzerland, as elsewhere in Europe) such a concept could scarcely be understood other than as the birth of a 'nation'. In a country like Switzerland, lacking a common language or tradition, this meant a nation built on the will to freedom and on unique geographical and geopolitical circumstances. In the final analysis, it seemed to be a political destiny chosen by nature and by the people themselves. Since the eighteenth century, bourgeois and Enlightenment ideas of natural freedom and democracy had been particularly strongly associated with the 'mountain herdsmen' of the Alps. When this was coupled to a romantic and nationalistic harking back to medieval history, it was inevitable that Switzerland would soon be seen as the cradle of democracy and freedom in Europe. Not only was this the conscious message of liberal bourgeois historians in Switzerland itself; it was also the picture projected upon Switzerland from without.

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century notions of a medieval 'heroic age', which were strongly encouraged by national Swiss historians, contributed to a historical picture which found its way into socio-political discourse, and so strongly affected the national consciousness of wider sections of the population. Concepts drawn from this nationalistic and patriotic environment, and dating back to the time of nationalist upsurge, still have some influence on popular notions of the fifteenth century. Indeed, quite patently nationalistic admiration of the 'warlike strength' and 'glorious military achievement' of the early Confederation, and even the belief in the innate inclination of those 'peasants' towards 'freedom' and 'democracy' are still widespread – and not simply in ageing history books in Swiss schools. Against this background it is easier to explain the unusual prominence, unparalleled elsewhere in Europe, of the 'heroic age' of medieval history in modern Swiss state ideology. The so-called foundation of the Confederation in 1291, whose anniversary was first celebrated on a large scale in 1891, then in 1941 and again in 1991, is a metaphor of political discourse, not a figure of historical argumentation. To the historian it is clear, to the point of cliché, that the building of the Swiss state was a

long-drawn-out, complex process in which the overthrow of the *ancien régime* in 1798, and the federal constitution of 1848, were incomparably more important than anything which happened in 1291.

In conclusion, we must turn away from these features of the emerging Swiss tradition and ask the fundamental question: what were the real reasons for the unique state development which began here in the late Middle Ages?

Without doubt there was an interplay of very varied factors, political, social and ideological; but these cannot be assembled systematically, since so much happened by chance. However, some political factors can be considered to have been particularly important. First and foremost, the often aimless and sadly discontinuous policy of the Habsburg monarchy. This left the field clear for the developing communes, a field in which the imperial free cities of Berne and Zurich operated with deliberate purposefulness. The assertion of political autonomy by the valley communities of central Switzerland was basically due to the fragmentary feudal penetration of the area, its southward facing economic orientation and its early integration into a supra-regional context. At all times, and particularly in the fifteenth century, the changing political relationships among the Confederation's nearest neighbours, especially the rivalry over the German crown, the French incursions eastwards after the end of the Hundred Years War and the fall of Burgundy, had a decisive influence. The peripheral location of the Confederation within the Empire was also an important factor. Because its statehood was not yet highly developed, the Confederation posed no threat to the great powers, and its military potential, which achieved enormous prestige after the Burgundian wars, was and remained for hire. It was the French who first realised the significance of this, so that the link with France, firmly established in 1521, was to remain a decisive political element of Swiss statehood.

THE STATES OF SCANDINAVIA,

c. 1390—c. 1536

Thomas Riis

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TOWARDS the end of the fourteenth century the Scandinavian countries were recovering from the effects of two crises. The earlier of these was at least partially caused by a deterioration of the climate, c. 1300. As a consequence of this farms and even villages, often those situated on less fertile soil, became deserted. This happened in Norway and in Denmark, whereas Sweden, colonised later, only felt the crisis after the middle of the fourteenth century. The Black Death (1349–50) struck the whole of Scandinavia except Iceland; in Norway, in particular, its effects were aggravated by subsequent epidemics, smallpox in 1359–60, plague in 1371. In both Norway and Denmark the results of the agrarian crisis – deserted farms and redundant peasants – were counter-balanced by the effects of the diseases. In certain regions, however, they were to create a lack of manpower.

Other effects were the formation of large estates belonging to the Church or to the aristocracy, and an increase of the share of animal husbandry in the rural economy. In certain parts of Norway the desertion of farms could be avoided by supplementing rural activities with fishing or forestry. At the end of the fifteenth century water-driven sawmills were founded at many river estuaries in southern and western Norway; this was to become a source of economic growth during the early modern centuries.

In Finland, at least in the south-west, agriculture was sufficiently developed to offer a living to the peasant and his family; nevertheless, the change in climate rendered difficult the cultivation of certain cereal crops. In the interior and in Ostrobothnia, a complex economy prevailed, combining agriculture with animal husbandry, fishing and the hunting of animals for their furs. In the east, burnbeating was widespread, and here, too, subsidiary sources of income (especially from furs) were important. Although the epidemics did not spare Finland, the complexity of her economy facilitated its adaptation to the new conditions which were to develop.