

# **Reformer Huldrych Zwingli 1484 - 1531**

## **Zwingli's battle against the supplying of Swiss mercenaries Dr. Robert Joerin**

**Visit of Pfrn. Catherine McMillan and her guests from South Africa  
in Wildhaus, 8th of May 2019**

### **Outline**

- 1. Zwingli's concerns about the land cultivation in the Alps**
- 2. Crimes of the mercenaries against the civilian population**
- 3. Zwingli's concerns about law and justice in times of war**
- 4. The use of mercenaries today**

**The supplying of Swiss mercenaries is one of the most controversial issue in Swiss history. Zwingli fought all his life against the use of mercenaries. He had severe concerns. It is interesting to see what he wrote about his concerns. His texts shed light on his motives and beliefs.**

**Quotations of Zwingli in Edwin Künzli. Huldrych Zwingli. Auswahl seiner Schriften. Zürich 1962. p. 33**

**Huldrych Zwingli. Eine treue und ernstliche Vermahnung an die Eidgenossen. 2. Mai 1524.  
<http://www.irg.uzh.ch/static/zwingli-werke/index.php?n=Werk.34>**

**The Montreux Document. Federal Departement of Foreign Affairs FDFA and the International Committee of the Red Cross ICRC. Bern/Geneva 2009.**

## 1. Land cultivation in the Alps

Zwingli was concerned about the land cultivation when young men were sent abroad as mercenaries. They left the country and neglected their farms.

*People are no longer willing to cultivate the land. Farms perish in many places although there would be enough people to work on them. And moreover, the soil is good and could feed your people sufficiently.*

Zwingli's letter to the Politicians of the Confederacy, 2nd of May 1524

What was Zwingli's agricultural background?

- a. Democratic rural organisation: Land above the villages was common property. Farmers organised the cultivation of the common land democratically. One man one vote!
- b. Family background: Grandfather Zwingli was an important cattle trader. He bought cattle from the farmers in our region and sold them in Northern Italy. He brought back wine and rice. This kind of trade was a benefit for the rural people. Zwingli was convinced that agriculture and trade could feed the people. In contrast, the commerce with mercenaries was considered by Zwingli to have a negative impact on agriculture in mountain areas.

## 2. Crimes of the mercenaries against the civilian population

Zwingli knew that the mercenaries committed crimes against the civilian population. He was priest in Glaris and one of his duties was to accompany mercenary troops to Northern Italy. He could not ignore what happened to the civilian population. After the battle of Marignano 1515 he changed his mind and began to engage against the use of mercenaries.

He exhorted the politicians to put themselves in the place of the victims!

*What would you do if a foreign mercenary invaded and ravaged your lands, your meadows, your fields, your vineyards. If they stole your cattle, killed your sons and raped your daughters...*

In this text we can recognize the empathic capability of Zwingli. In other words, the ability to feel the emotions and physical pains of other people as intensely as his own.

What the Swiss mercenaries did was not compatible with his strong christian conscience.

Zwingli's exhortations to the politicians (Landsgemeinde) of the canton of Schwyz 1522  
(The Landsgemeinde or "cantonal assembly" is a public, non-secret ballot voting system operating by majority rule, which constitutes one of the oldest forms of direct democracy.)

### 3. Zwingli's concerns about law and justice in times of war

*The danger we face in times of war is that law and justice are strongly violated. An old saying reminds us: «In times of war, the laws falls silent». («Leges silent inter arma»). Therefore, the „Law of war“ means nothing more than violence.*

This law of war was a bad perspective for the Swiss Confederacy.

Zwingli's exhortations to the Landsgemeinde of the canton of Schwyz 1522

Zwingli's battle against the mercenary business was difficult because it was highly profitable to the upper classes. Many young men were sent, perhaps to a life of adventure. But it often ended fatally. Many came home with permanent injuries and sexually transmitted diseases. Zwingli's concerns about the negative social effects got him involved in Zurich politics. The opponents, mainly in central Switzerland considered the supplying of mercenaries to be essential for economic reasons. This conflict escalated on the battle field of Kappel/Albis in 1531 where the protestants of Zurich were defeated by the catholic troops. Huldrych Zwingli was killed. He lost the battle against the dirty mercenary business.

### 4. The use of mercenaries today

- a. We can see that mercenaries are used in many areas of conflict: Syria, Irak, Yemen... and the business with mercenaries is still highly profitable. There is strong evidence that mercenaries are rarely held accountable and brought to justice. They can get away with their criminal acts much more easily than regular troops.
- b. In political conflicts there are two possibilities: One is the **military intervention** and the other is the **diplomatic way to resolve conflicts peacefully**. The use of mercenaries often allows a regime to continue the military intervention.

*As a result, conflicts escalate and the efforts of diplomacy are weekend.*

**This explains why countries in conflict areas are far from a peaceful conflict resolution.**

**c. Attempts to limit the use of mercenaries: The Montreux Document 2009**

**The current situation is very problematic and dangerous. That's why Switzerland and the International Red Cross initiated the Conference of Montreux. An agreement was elaborated in 2009.**

**Goal: Compliance with the humanitarian international law and the respect for human rights. The agreement contains legal obligations and good practices. States should respect rules for operations of private military companies during armed conflicts.**

**Weak point: The Montreux Document contains no more than recommendations. Nevertheless, a first step has been taken.**

**I wish that Switzerland and the International Red Cross will continue their efforts toward stricter rules The use of mercenaries must be limited.**