

# Swabian League

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On 14 February 1488, the great Swabian League which had been proposed by Emperor Frederick III was constituted at Esslingen for the purpose of preserving the peace against anarchy in Swabia. It embraced the knightly league of St. George and 22 imperial cities, Archduke Sigismund of Austria, and Count Eberhard V of Württemberg. To these were added the Margraves of Brandenburg-Ansbach, Baden, Hessen, and the electors of Mainz and Trier. The first association was to last until 1496 but it was renewed in 1500, 1512, and 1522 until 1533.

The league received an exemplary constitution with a federal council of two sections, a federal court, and a federal army of 12,000 footmen and 1,200 horsemen. Its most significant deeds were the expulsion of Duke Ulrich of Württemberg in 1519, whose land the league sold to Emperor Charles V in 1520, and the cruel subjugation of the rebel peasants in 1525 by Georg Truchsess of Waldburg, the league captain. The league was entirely a tool of Austrian politics and of the Catholic Church; it fought against the spread of the Reformation. For this purpose the council appointed the provost Berthold Aichelin, who moved about with his horsemen and hanged every adherent of the new faith without benefit of trial "to a dry branch," and thus killed about 1,200 including 40 Protestant preachers. In addition the league had a troop under Diepold von Stein wander through Upper Swabia and oppress Memmingen. They were particularly intent upon catching Anabaptists. Some member princes and cities had joined the Reformation. Therefore the league could no longer be renewed in 1533, especially since now it was opposed by the Smalkaldic League. Austria would have liked to have a replacement for this adaptable tool but none was found.

In many places protests were raised against this procedure; the council of Nürnberg did so, not out of love for the Anabaptists, but because as it said, "The pretense is to hunt the wolves, but they catch the sheep; in this way they will also persecute the confessors and preachers of the Word." The council therefore favored milder measures.

On 7 March 1528, the Swabian League issued an order limiting church fairs and weddings on account of the Anabaptists, "since Anabaptism is breaking in and increasing more and more." They thought the Anabaptists made propaganda at such gatherings.

The chronicles of the Hutterian Brethren report about these bloody deeds by Aichelin (not to be confused with Joseph Lauscher, called Aichelin or Aicheln, who was Land- und Bannrichter of the territory of Lienz in Tirol, and also had much to do with the Anabaptists), "About this time (1528) King Ferdinand sent a wild provost by the name of Aichelin to Swabia and into the land of Württemberg, who then shed much innocent blood, also burned the Mantelhof, not far from Aalen, with men, youths, women, and maidens, about twenty persons."

The two Anabaptist preachers Griesinger and Lochmayer were among Aichelin's victims. "But God at last instilled fear into him through the steadfastness of His servants, so that he swore that he would not execute another brother. He was later stabbed in Württemberg and died a shameful death."

On 2 February 1534, the Swabian League came to an end. Its dissolution was urged by Philipp of Hesse and Bernhard von Besserer, mayor of Ulm. A number of historians have tried to justify this bloody procedure in the framework of the "dark background of the great social revolution" (Peasants' Revolt). Certainly the decree of the league in an Anabaptist mandate of 7 March 1528, explains "that it can easily be comprehended by every honor-loving Christian ... how Anabaptism ... leads to new revolutions and uprisings" if it is not countered with "painful and serious punishment." But this fear was quite unfounded. It has been proved that not a single Anabaptist leader took part in the Peasants' War. Even in Thuringia the Anabaptist movement proved itself to be entirely peaceful.

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<b>Date Published</b>	1959

# Cite This Article

## MLA style

Bossert, Jr., Gustav and Wilhelm Wiswedel. "Swabian League." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1959. Web. 5 Jul 2014. [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Swabian\\_League&oldid=119784](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Swabian_League&oldid=119784).

## APA style

Bossert, Jr., Gustav and Wilhelm Wiswedel. (1959). Swabian League. *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. Retrieved 5 July 2014, from [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Swabian\\_League&oldid=119784](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Swabian_League&oldid=119784).

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- This page was last modified on 12 April 2014, at 17:01.
  - This page has been accessed 580 times.