Nations and Nationalism: A Global Historical Overview

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Chronology

1761	Founding of the Helvetic Society as a circle of Enlightenment thinkers.
1798	The Helvetic revolution. The Helvetic Republic is installed as a French sister republic until 1802.
1803	Act of Mediation by Napoleon. The cantons of Aargau, Grisons, St. Gallen, Thurgau, Ticino, and Vaud join the confederation as full members.
1814/1815	End of French period. Cantons of Geneva and Valais join the confederation. Congress of Vienna dismisses Swiss claim on Konstanz. Phase of conservative restoration starts.
1830–1831	Phase of liberal regeneration starts. Eleven cantons introduce liberal constitutions.
1839	Regime change (Straussenhandel) in Zurich leads to anti-liberal change in many cantons.
1847	Liberal forces defeat Catholic-conservative alliance in a civil war (Sonderbund War).
1848	Founding of modern Swiss nation-state.
1857	King Wilhelm IV of Prussia renounces claim on Neuchâtel.
1860	Savoy joins France. The option of joining Switzerland is seriously debated.
1861	Beginning of the democratic movement. Change from representative democracy to direct democratic system in many cantons until 1869.
1874	Revision of the federal constitution, change to semi-direct democratic system.
1882	Opening of the railway tunnel through St. Gotthard.
1883	First national fair held in Zurich.
1891	First national festival commemorates the alleged founding of the Swiss Confederation in 1291.

Situating the Nation

During the early days of August 1891, tens of thousands of Swiss citizens attended a festival in the town of Schwyz commemorating the 600th anniversary of the Swiss Confederation. The national event was accompanied by festivities throughout the country, while intense press coverage emphasized the extraordinary historical continuity of the Swiss polity. However, the first national festival of 1891 marked the accomplishment of a rather improbable process of nation-building. To follow Oliver Zimmers phrase, Switzerland was—and to a certain extent still is—a highly "contested nation."

Recent scholarship has accentuated a structural inability of the Swiss case to conform to classic nationalism. In fact, the Swiss nation could not grow out of the political self-discovery of an ethnic people nor could it essentially build upon

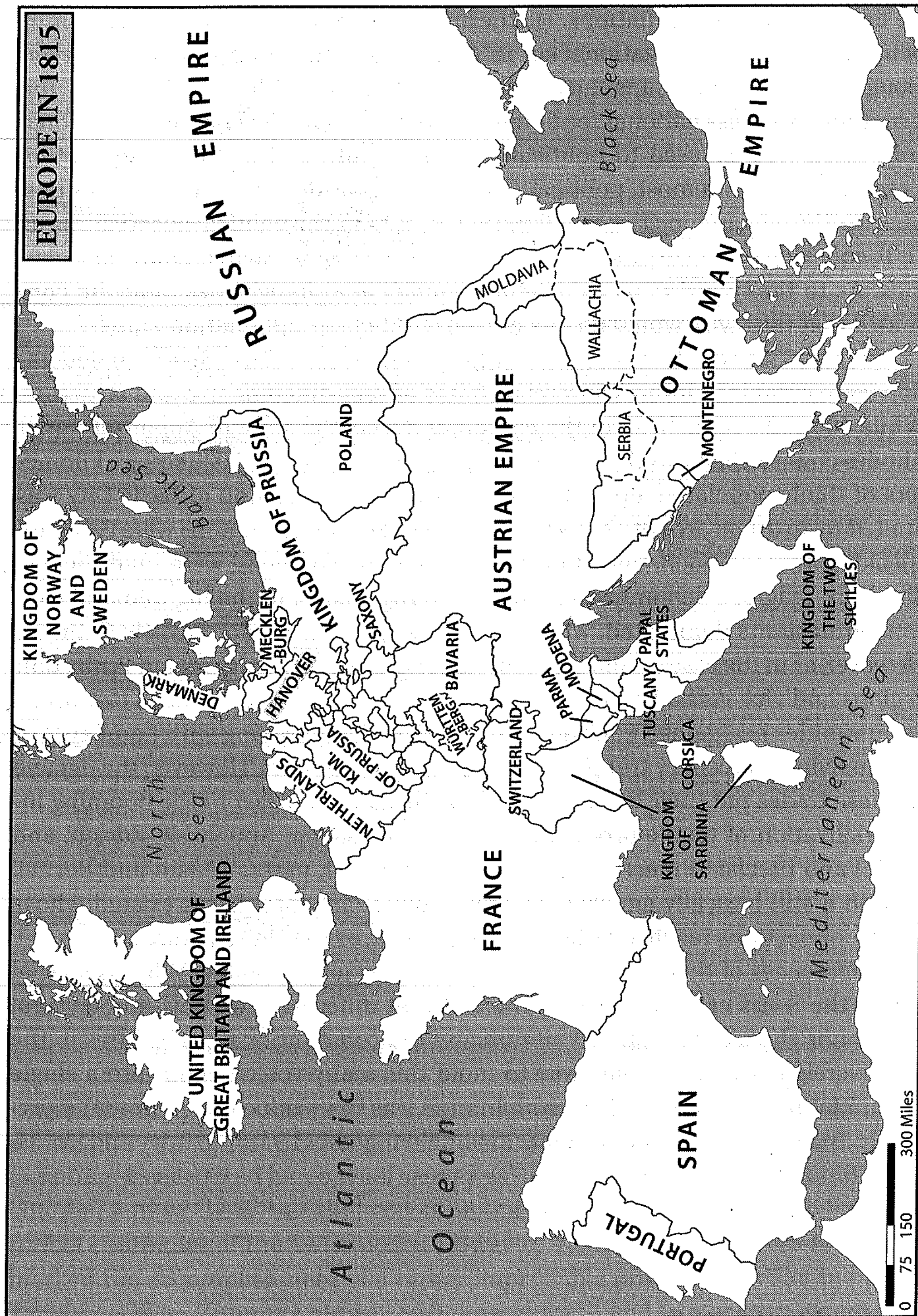
the denigration of other nations. Furthermore, it is not easy to discern any elites using the apparatus of nationalism to consolidate their domestic power, even though marginalized groups can be found. From the late 18th century onward, the formation of a Swiss national sentiment as well as the political process of national unification was exposed to politically, economically, and culturally separating forces. First and foremost, political power had evolved around regional entities, whereas the overarching ties remained weak. In 1836, the political observer Alexis de Tocqueville to his surprise remarked that there was no Switzerland—just cantons. As to the question as to whether a political unity was desirable, he concluded that the Swiss would do just as well without a proper nation-state.

In the 1830s the then roughly 2 million inhabitants of the Swiss Confederation were organized into 25 sovereign states of very different size and structure. While 400,000 people lived in the canton of Berne, the state of Appenzell Inner Rhodes counted just less than 10,000. Grisons covered some 7,000 square kilometers of thinly populated alpine landscape, whereas the canton of Basle City was limited to an urban area of 37 square kilometers. Seventeen cantons were German-speaking, three, French, one, Italian, and the four remaining were multilingual. Similarly, religious denominations were heterogeneous. In the big midland cantons Protestants dominated, while the alpine area was predominantly Catholic. However, as in the case of Glarus, Catholic congregations could exist in Protestant regions and vice versa. Economic differences also abounded. Some of the alpine communities had gained considerable wealth in cattle trading with Lombardy or by supplying mercenary troops to the big European powers. However, the decline in these trades put their economic outlook in sharp contrast to the booming industrialization of textile production (Glarus, St. Gallen, Appenzell, Zurich, and Basle) and precision mechanics (Geneva, Neuchâtel, parts of Vaud and Berne). Within a still basically agrarian society, commercial enterprises existed whose trade connections reached as far as India, Russia, or the United States.

Differences of this sort can be found in many nation-states. What is special about the Swiss case, however, is the fact that differing economic and cultural structures shaped the political culture and the constitutional procedures in the 25 sovereign states. The only way to mold this many-voiced choir into a single dominant interpretation of the Swiss nation was to imagine the community precisely as an alliance of diverse minorities, held together by its territory and its history. Thus, the exceptionality of the Swiss case itself could be used as a marker of national distinction. Such a construction successfully nurtured the first national festival of 1891.

Instituting the Nation

Switzerland presents an excellent example for what can be found in most nations: the longing for an impressive pedigree. While the Swiss nation-state was

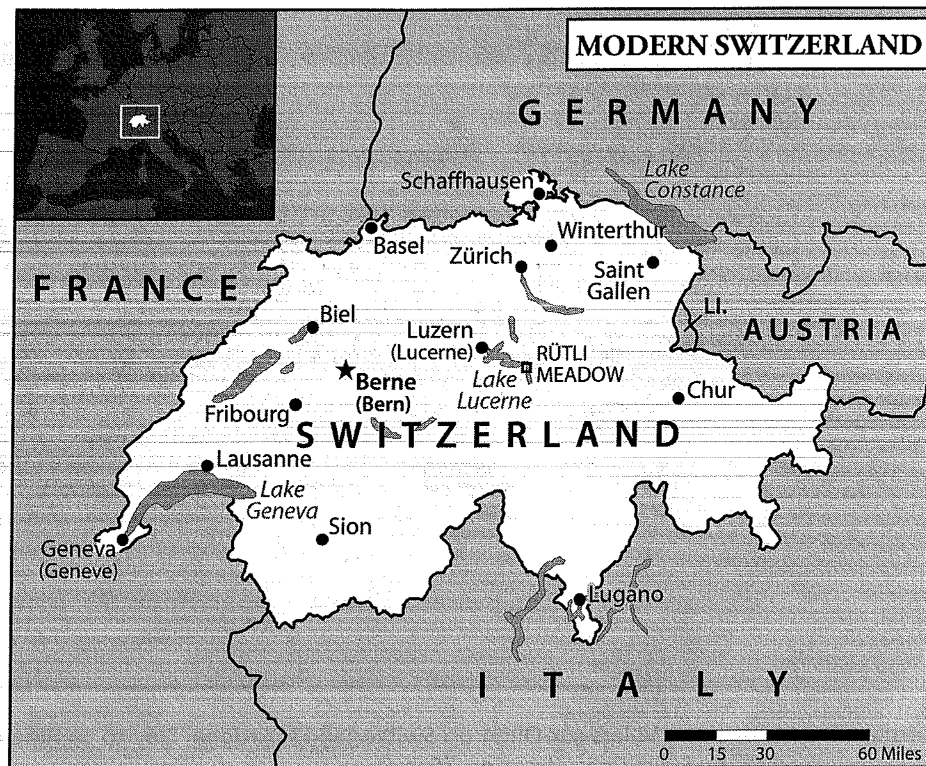


Halberdiers march through Villars-sur-Ollon on Switzerland's National Day to commemorate the founding of the Swiss Confederation. (Corel)

founded only in 1848, national historiography went back in time as far as six centuries and linked the modern polity to the medieval defensive alliance of the Swiss Confederation. To unravel this idea of a continuing saga, it is essential to recount the institutional history of the nation-state as a counternarrative to national discourse.

In a series of mostly bilateral treaties, the communities in the valleys of Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden (1291), the imperial cities of Zurich (1351) and Berne (1353), the cities of Lucerne (1332) and Zug (1352), and the valley of Glarus (1352) formed an alliance to enhance domestic security and to aid each other against the Habsburg overlord. In contrast to other such confederacies of the 14th century, the Swiss Confederation proved to be surprisingly long-lasting. By the end of the 15th century, the league was enlarged by treaties with Fribourg and Solothurn (1481), Basle and Schaffhausen (1501), and Appenzell (1513) and was supplemented by further alliances of lesser status with such diverse partners as the little village of Gersau, the Prince-Bishop of St. Gallen, the city of Rottweil, or the republic of Geneva, to name just a few. Along with the acquisition of mandated territories, this process ended up in a highly elaborate system of relationships, which existed until 1798.

In the course of the centuries, elements of state-building can be observed with all members of the alliance, but the confederation as such rather showed an



opposite development. Its only body was a regular conference of cantonal delegates called the "diet" ("Tagsatzung"). The meeting was held up to 20 times a year in the early 16th century, but the rhythm slowed down to roughly one meeting a year in the late 18th century. Because of its extremely weak institutional form, the confederation did not qualify as an agent of political unification. Moreover, it symbolized the inequality of the medieval social order.

By the end of the 18th century, wealthy inhabitants from the mandated territories and the subordinate countryside of the city states increasingly questioned the system. Uprisings in the Vaud, but also in places such as the Zurich hinterland, paved the way for revolution. When French revolutionary troops invaded the canton of Berne in 1798, these local movements quickly gained strength. Due to the French need for a reliable ally, the Helvetic Republic was instituted.

This first central state on Swiss territory was a representative democracy. Under the symbol of William Tell and a tricolor in red, gold, and green, its executive directory instantly began to modernize the country. However, strong resistance from the alpine valley communities and the old urban aristocracies prevailed. Lack of finance and programmatic differences between liberal reformers and radical democrats ended the project. In 1803 Napoleon prevented the escalation of the domestic conflict by once again turning the cantons into sovereign states and reinstalling their joint conference (Tagsatzung).

Democracy

National ideology considers democracy to be a Swiss invention. Indeed, direct democratic procedures had existed in the autonomous administration of the small alpine valley communities of the 13th and 14th centuries (Landsgemeinde, first documented for Uri in 1231). And in the larger city states like Zurich and Berne, representative democracies had evolved. But more often than not, the rural popular assemblies excluded a considerable number of people who did not hold the respective privileges. The indirect systems of the cities left the inhabitants of the hinterland without representation and showed strong tendencies toward aristocratic closure by the 18th century.

The ideal interpretation of the Swiss democratic tradition generously ignored these facts and depicted the history of the confederation in the terms of political freedom based upon natural law. But the traditional Swiss procedures fundamentally differed from modern political thought by not considering freedom to be a fundamental right of every human being. The introduction of mainly French and American democratic theory into the Swiss context was one of the important sources of domestic conflict throughout the 19th century.

However, the result of this difficult process was a political system that offered a degree of influence to the citizen unparalleled in the world. Cornerstones of Swiss direct democracy were the referendum (introduced in 1874) and the popular initiative (1891). While the first mechanism obliged the legislator to submit certain decisions to public vote, the second was more radical. The popular initiative enabled any group of citizens reaching a fixed quorum to demand a referendum on any matter, irrespective of parliamentary deliberation. Despite this level of participation, democratic rights for a long time remained restricted. The Jewish minority gained access to the national polity in 1874. Women suffrage, however, was introduced on the national level only as recently as 1971.

With this "Acte de médiation," a new confederation was instituted as an alliance of equal partners. The former mandated territories were turned into the five new cantons of Vaud, Aargau, Thurgau, St. Gallen, and Ticino. Allies of lesser status became either full members (like Grisons) or were dismissed (e.g., the city of Mulhouse). All cantons were obliged to draw written constitutions, freedom of trade remained widely guaranteed, and all citizens kept the new freedom of movement and settlement within the territory. The General Staff was formed to coordinate the cantonal troops.

These elements were basically confirmed by the confederate treaty of 1815 (Bundesvertrag). Geneva, Neuchâtel, and the Valais joined the league, giving it its modern territorial shape. Nevertheless, the end of Napoleonic rule had led to considerable turmoil. The restored aristocracies of Berne, Solothurn, Fribourg, and Lucerne demanded the liquidation of the new cantons. But their conservative aim was blocked by heavy pressure from Austria. Once again a leading European power interfered. Thus, after the collapse of the Helvetic Republic had made clear that forced centralization was not an option, now also the forced restoration of the old confederation proved to be impossible.

As after 1803, a de-centered process of nation-building gained momentum, which was well under way when de Tocqueville visited the country in 1836. Advocates of a strong central state could be found with the elites of the new cantons, who embraced radical democratic ideas. The same thinking was prevalent in the formerly subordinate countryside of the city states. But moderate liberals from the old aristocracy of economically booming cantons like Zurich adhered to a quick national unification. Contemporaneously with the French July Revolution, these forces achieved constitutional changes in 11 cantons by 1830/1831. Some of the new constitutions (e.g., Thurgau's in 1831) defined extremely modern democratic republics with a broad franchise. Public schools were introduced, and the cantons of Zurich and Berne founded universities. A series of multilateral treaties slowly homogenized administrative procedures. The concordat of 13 cantons concerning weights and measures in 1835/1836 is a case in point.

In 1832, the liberal movement culminated in the formation of a special league of seven "regenerated" cantons (Siebnerkonkordat), with the aim of turning the treaty of 1815 into a unified state. However, by this time, the conservative opposition to such unification plans had also gained clear contours. The elites of the small alpine cantons as well as conservative aristocracies (e.g., of the city of Basle) put forward a specifically Swiss notion of democracy, which differed from the universalism of the French Revolution. The advocates of this position also referred to a national spirit, but they refused any attempt at building strong central state authorities. Their cause culminated in the formation of another special league of seven "conservative" cantons (Sarnerbund). A stalemate resulted among the sovereign cantons when it came to the question of building a nation. It could only be overcome by military means in a civil war in 1847, in which the liberal cantons enforced their project of a modern Swiss nation upon the conservative cantons.

These political events were paralleled by a lively popular debate. Since the 1820s, some of the cantons (e.g., Appenzell) had conceded a level of freedom of the press that was exceptional in Europe at the time. It fostered the emergence of a domestic public sphere, in which the different stances toward national unification gained clear shape. Most importantly, the national project was divided into religious camps. Liberal thought and the will for quick unification of the cantons were increasingly identified with the Protestant denomination, while mistrust toward possessive individualism and the insistence upon local diversity more and more became Catholic positions. At the same time, two conflicting strands of liberalism developed. Put simply, one emphasized economic freedom, while the other stressed equality and called for direct democratic procedures.

Thus, the constitution of 1848 initially lacked support in Catholic and alpine areas. Moreover, the emerging state marginalized radical democratic positions until major reforms were carried out in 1874. The consolidation of the unified nation took several decades and was accomplished only by 1891, when for the first time a Catholic conservative was elected a member of the national government and new instruments of democratic rule were established.

Defining the Nation

The first attempts at defining a Swiss nation can be traced back to the center of Swiss enlightenment, namely to the Helvetic Society, which was founded in the early 1760s. Within this distinguished circle, members of the local elites from several cantons tried to strengthen the emotional ties among the different parts of the confederation. They did so by redefining the history of the medieval alliance in terms of political emancipation and freedom. Most renowned is Friedrich Schiller's drama *William Tell* of 1804. Authors like Jean-Jacques Rousseau idealized Swiss republicanism and merged it with their new aesthetic interest for the alpine landscape. The territory of the confederation and its physical appearance were thus imbued with national significance. Within this frame of time and space, the enlightened patriots set out to document the diversity of Swiss folk culture. Johann Kaspar Lavater's set of Swiss national songs (Schweizerlieder) of 1767 is a case in point.

As a private association, however, the Helvetic Society was anxious not to postulate a need for political action, although several of its members held executive power in their cantons. The club fostered nationalism as an individual sentiment and did not shape itself as a political party. Therefore, its utopian discourse could be used as a reference point by all later national movements. In the course of the following decades, a whole range of elements were created to define Swiss national identity. Six main aspects can be discerned, which were instrumental in binding together the religious, ethnic, and economic separating forces. These were (1) the freedom from foreign dominance, leading to the notion of democracy and self-determination; (2) the high autonomy of communes and cantons,

Pastoral Ideal

Swiss nationalism consists of a specific blend of historical and geographical imagination. In this, the idealization of simple rural life, as acclaimed in the pastoral ideal of the Baroque period, became a leitmotif. In the 18th century, intellectuals from all over Europe projected their vision of a pristine society upon the remote alpine valleys. Many visitors stopped at one of the villages on their tours to the classic Italian sites, enjoying the sublime landscape and marvelling at the customs of its inhabitants. Modern tourism heavily built upon these stereotypes.

As was the case in Scotland or in Tyrol, the Swiss themselves took up the image of the free herdsman and made it a centerpiece of a national identity. With industrialization, the percentage of farmers within the Swiss workforce quickly dropped to a level that was comparable to England. At the same time, the farmer became the prototype of the democratic Swiss citizen. He should be upright in character, distrust fashionable modernity, and cherish a deep love for the land. Displays of rural villages were highlights at the national fairs of 1896, 1914, and 1938. In the 20th century, the ideology of the pastoral ideal ultimately led to substantial government subsidies for agriculture.

leading to the notion of federalism; (3) the smallness and political marginality of the country, leading to the notion of neutrality; (4) the pastoral ideal of French Enlightenment, leading to a positive notion of agrarian society; (5) the hostility of the natural environment and its lack of resources, leading to notions of ingenuity and industriousness; and (6) the military tradition of mercenaries, making the confederation's army a key agent of unity.

These somewhat contradictory elements were combined in nationalistic interpretations of the confederation's history and its territory. With regard to time, Swiss national unity was presented as an historic act of will. Concerning space, the naturally separating mountain range of the Alps was turned into a national landscape and perceived as a source of unity. This succeeded, for example, by defining Switzerland as Europe's water tank.

Narrating the Nation

Freedom from foreign rule has always been the most important strand of the national narratives. Indeed, the medieval defensive alliance had granted its members a certain degree of political autonomy. The intervention of the confederation in the Burgundian wars during the late 15th century provoked bitter reactions with Habsburg aristocrats. They were quick to term the new force in a derogatory way as "Swiss cows" (*Kuhschweizer*) or to compare them to "wild Turks." Within the confederation's elite, an analogous process of collective identification was under way, however, in positive terms of peasant liberation. The *Chronicon Helveticum* by Aegidius Tschudi, which was composed around 1535, offered an emancipative account of the confederation's early history, including the legendary figure of William Tell, the destruction of Habsburg castles (*Burgenbruch*), and an alleged oath on the "Rütli" meadow on the shores of Lake Lucerne by representatives from Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden in 1307. The *Chronicon* saw a great revival in popularity in the 18th century. And from the 1870s onward, scientific historiography took up the theme.

Liberal historians like Carl Hilty composed an account that made the constitution of 1848 appear as the culmination of all earlier treaties and alliances among the confederate states. It strengthened an already existing narrative that drew upon an alleged tradition of democratic self-rule. It not only dismissed the deep internal conflicts that had dominated the early decades of the 19th century but it also mystified the direct democratic procedures that had existed in the autonomous administration of the small alpine valley communities since the 13th and 14th centuries (Landsgemeinde, first documented for Uri in 1231). In fact, national historiography tried to merge two distinct concepts of freedom. One concept started from the positive freedom based upon natural law. It included the emancipation from traditional customs and aimed at introducing certain rights

Swiss Army

Switzerland does not have an army—it is an army. This popular dictum brings forward a strong identification of the nation-state with its military organization. It has some truth to it, despite the fact that the Swiss army has never been involved in major war activities.

First, the old confederation knew a strong mercenary tradition. The Papal Swiss Guard, which goes back to the year 1506, is a case in point. Many articulations of nationalism in the 19th century, including the popular festivities of the Shooting Associations, drew upon this legacy and put the armed soldier at the core of national identity. When the Swiss National Museum in Zurich was opened in 1898, its centerpiece was a carefully displayed collection of arms.

Second, the General Staff was of considerable importance in representing the national idea. It was founded in 1803 to coordinate the cantonal troops. In 1815 it introduced the white cross on red ground as a coat of arms, which later became the national flag. Until the foundation of the modern national state in 1848, the General Staff was practically the only federal administrative body, and its budget was an equivalent to a federal treasury. It tried to homogenize military standards in the cantons; however, this proved to be difficult until the constitution of 1874 considerably augmented its power.

Third, the new military organization of 1874 successfully implemented the principle of general conscription. For young adult, male Swiss, the moment of military conscription soon became identical with an initiation ceremony into citizenship. Military training itself was repeatedly regarded as a "school of the nation."

and institutional rules—such as freedom of speech, popular sovereignty, or the separation of powers. The other notion of freedom was defined in negative terms as freedom from external interference. The two concepts had been roughly associated with the main conflicting parties in the Sonderbund War. Their integration was, therefore, an act of national reconciliation. It is no wonder that this account strongly emphasized the role of national mediators like Niklaus von Flüe, who had successfully arbitrated an internal conflict in 1481 (Stanser Verkommnis). A comparable role was attributed to General Guillaume-Henri Dufour, who had led the liberal troops to victory in the Sonderbund War without humiliating the conservative party.

In the course of the 19th century, a second narration arose that integrated national differences. It set out from the harsh conditions of alpine life and thus paid tribute to the mountain valley communities who were otherwise marginalized by the liberal project of nation-building. It did so, however, by emphasizing the moral duty of betterment, as put forward in enlightened philosophy, and it drew upon the notions of republican modesty, Protestant ethics, and technological excellence. Switzerland was depicted as a marginal country lacking natural resources, which could only be led to economic wealth by hard labor. In this narration, freedom basically meant freedom from natural constraints. Typically, in 1914, one author idealized the work of dynamite at the alpine road and railway construction sites as the gunshots of the modern Swiss liberation war. The heroes

in this account were engineers like Hans Konrad Escher, who completed a major irrigation scheme in 1816, or Louis Favre, who was responsible for the construction of the Gotthard railway tunnel in the 1870s.

Mobilizing and Building the Nation

Between 1803 and 1848, with the political perspectives blocked and a public sphere emerging, the main driving forces for instituting the nation were private associations. Many local associations joined forces in national federations, such as the Swiss Association for the Arts (Kunstverein, 1806). Some organizations, like the Confederate Shooting Association (Eidgenössischer Schützenverein, 1824) or the Confederate Gymnastic Society (Eidgenössischer Turnverein, 1832), were explicitly designed as instruments to strengthen the liberal unification project. Their annual festivities became bastions of republican nationalism. Other associations focused on the national heritage to overcome internal differences. They organized shows of traditional dresses, song contests, or sports events in rock throwing or wrestling. Most renowned is the "Unspunnen" festival, held for the first time in 1805 as an attempt at bridging the conflict between the formerly dominating cities and their hinterlands. The first national association of labor also took up the national symbolism. It was founded in 1838 in Geneva under the name Grütliverein, which referred to the alleged oath of 1307.

In the absence of a central government, some of these national organizations even took over state functions. The Swiss Association for Public Good (Schweizerische Gemeinnützige Gesellschaft, 1815), for example, was a key actor in the modernization and homogenization of poor laws and welfare politics. And the Swiss Association for Natural History (Schweizerische Naturforschende Gesellschaft, 1815) took up the initiative in making a modern map of the territory. This project was then carried out by the General Staff and completed in the 1860s after three decades of work.

Even after the foundation of the modern national state in 1848, central authorities remained extremely weak. Until a direct tax was introduced during World War I, federal income was restricted to a small number of tariffs and to import levies. Important domains such as monetary policy or the judiciary at first mainly remained cantonal concerns. Criminal law for example was homogenized only in 1898, while a national code of civil law followed in 1912. Public schooling still today is a matter of the cantons. The seats of the new federal institutions such as the Parliament (1848, Berne), the Polytechnic School (1854, Zurich), the Supreme Court (1874, Lausanne), or the Swiss National Bank (1905, Zurich) were carefully distributed among the most powerful cantons.

Apart from the military organization, the federal state lacked political instruments to mobilize the nation. Major events, such as the first national fair of 1883, were organized by private initiative. However, the federal government did offer

financial support and used these exhibitions, which were held again in 1896, 1914, and 1938, to display its growing presence. The first official attempt at coordinated national propaganda by the federal authority took place in the second part of the 1930s. This program was called "spiritual national defence" and can be considered the climax of Swiss national discourse.

To conclude, the Swiss development cannot be explained fully by internal forces. Instead, international trends have to be taken into account, most of all the rise of the modern nation-state as the dominant form of political organization. Especially after the German and the Italian unifications, the conservative project of carefully modernizing the Swiss Confederation completely lost its plausibility. As after 1848, national state structures slowly emerged out of an increasing interconnectedness of the sovereign cantons and converged with private national sentiment.

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