Switzerland in the 19th century

The founding of the Swiss federal state ushered in a period of greater stability as regards both domestic and foreign affairs. The revised Constitution of 1874 extended the powers of the federal government and introduced the optional legislative referendum. Switzerland developed its system of direct democracy further and in 1891 granted the people the right of initiative on the partial revision of the Federal Constitution. That same year the Catholic conservatives – the losers of the Sonderbund war – celebrated, for the first time, the election of one of its representatives to the federal government.

The federal state used its new powers to create favourable conditions for the development of a number of industries and service sectors (railways, machine construction and metalworking, chemicals, food industry and banking). These would become the mainstays of the Swiss economy.

Not everyone in Switzerland reaped the benefits of the economic upturn. In the 19th century poverty, hunger and a lack of job prospects drove many Swiss people to seek their fortunes elsewhere, particularly in North and South America. At home, industrial towns and cities saw an influx of rural and, increasingly, foreign migrants. Living conditions for many members of this new urban working class were often precarious.

Foreign policy

During the wave of revolution that engulfed Europe in the early 1850s, relations between Switzerland and Austria, which also ruled northern Italy, were extremely tense. Many Italians, who wanted to see a united and independent Italy (Risorgimento), sought refuge in liberal-run Ticino. The local community sympathised with their cause, some even fighting alongside their Italian comrades or smuggling weapons for them. To avoid any conflict breaking out with Austria, the Federal Council sparked outrage when it cut off aid to the people of Ticino who sympathised with the Risorgimento supporters.

In 1856, Switzerland narrowly avoided a war with Prussia, whose king was also the Prince of Neuchâtel. A failed coup by Neuchâtel monarchists led both states to mobilise their troops. Ultimately, a peaceful resolution to the conflict was reached: the captured putschists were released and the Prussian king renounced his claim to Neuchâtel (the "Neuchâtel crisis").

In 1860, Geneva and the Radicals sought to absorb the region of Haute-Savoie, which had become a neutralised zone in 1815 when the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia handed over the rest of the Savoy region to France. Neither the major powers nor the people of Haute-Savoie supported this move by the Swiss. A plebiscite was held and the public voted in favour of annexation with France.

Founding of the Red Cross (1863)

Bust of Henry Dunant (1828-1910). © FDFA, Presence Switzerland

The Bourbaki Panorama in Lucerne depicts one of the first aid operations carried out by the Red Cross: the transport and care of the wounded following the defeat of French troops in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71. © Bourbaki Panorama Luzern

The Battle of Solferino (Lombardy) in 1859, which was fought during the Italian war of unification, left more than 10,000 dead. One eyewitness was the Geneva businessman Henry Dunant, who helped the villagers care for the wounded. When he returned to Geneva, he called for the creation of a special committee that would come to the aid of all those wounded in battle. In 1876, this organisation was named the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Although the ICRC is a private association and all members of its governing body are Swiss nationals, it is recognised as an international organisation under international law.

Thanks to Dunant's actions, 12 states signed the First Geneva Convention of 1864 "for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field". This treaty led to the emergence of international humanitarian law. In 1901 Dunant, now bankrupt and penniless, was awarded the Nobel Prize.

The ICRC carried out its first official mission during the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), when 87,000 soldiers from the French Eastern Army, led by General Bourbaki, were surrounded and interned by German troops in Jura near to the Swiss border. At the same time, an ICRC delegation in Strasbourg obtained the consent of the Prussian commanders to remove old people, women and children from the city, which was under sustained attack from Prussian troops.

Parties and groupings in the 19th century

The federal state of 1848 had no established political parties. However, over the course of the 19th century the various ideological groupings gradually evolved and the Swiss political party system eventually began to take shape.

The fundamental conflict between the conservatives and the liberals had its roots in the Helvetic Republic and the Restoration. The conservatives initially wanted a partial return to the privileges and inequalities of the society of estates (Ancien Régime). From the 1830s conservatives of both denominations were primarily concerned with protecting the sovereignty of the cantons and the role of the church and religion in education from liberal rationalism. After 1848, the conservatives opposed the push towards centralisation championed by the federal authorities and, particularly, the Radicals.

The "free thinkers", as the liberals and radicals called themselves, were in favour of a strong national state, which was precisely what the new Swiss Confederation became. Drawing inspiration from the Enlightenment, they called for equality of rights and civil liberties. While the moderate wing sought a representative government with census suffrage, the Radicals wanted to extend the right to vote to all adult citizens. The liberals advocated free enterprise without state intervention. In contrast, the Radicals took the view that a strong national state should not only intervene in the economy but also devise a welfare policy which addressed the social problems caused by industrialisation.

The Democrats, who emerged from the Radical movement in the early 1860s, championed direct democracy (legislative referendums and popular initiatives) and actively campaigned against the power-conscious, liberal "Bundesbarone" (federal barons). They believed that it was the people, not their political representatives, who should have the final say when it came to political decisions. They also lobbied for the direct election of the government, judiciary, teachers and head officials.

Initially, workers in Switzerland were poorly organised and their concerns were largely overlooked, except by the Radicals. Living conditions in the new industrial towns and cities were often tough. Protests and strikes, which became increasingly common from 1870 onwards, were put down by the police or led to lockouts. However, from 1838 the Grütliverein acted as a self-help group for workers. Other groups later emerged, often supported by political refugees and migrant workers from Germany and Italy.

The first national trade union was founded in 1858 and was renamed the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions in 1880. Various workers' groups and unions were involved in the founding of the Social Democratic Party of Switzerland (SPS) in 1888, which was modelled on the German Socialist Workers' Party.

In 1894 the Free Democratic Party (FDP), whose members were mostly drawn from the ranks of the liberal and Radical movements, became a national party. Basel-Stadt and the three Protestant cantons of Western Switzerland (Neuchâtel, Geneva and Vaud) formed a stand-alone Liberal Party, which was to the right of the FDP. In contrast, the more left-wing Democratic Party emerged in Eastern Switzerland.

In 1881 the Conservatives founded the short-lived "Conservative Union", which would later become the "Catholic People's Party" (1894). However, it was not until 1912 that the "Conservative People's Party" (KVP), as it was now known, became a truly national political party.

Two factors contributed to the emergence of the political party system in Switzerland. First, direct democracy (collecting signatures for initiatives and referendums, referendum campaigns) required national structures. Second, Swiss trade unionism was, from the outset, a national movement, and led to the establishment of economically and politically influential structures which operated in parallel to the federal administration. Even before the founding of the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions, there was the Swiss Federation of Commerce and Industry ("Vorort", renamed Economiesuisse in 2000), which had been active since 1870, as well as the Swiss Chamber of Commerce and the Swiss Farmers Union, both of which were founded in 1897.

The new Federal Constitution of 1874

The Democrats enjoyed considerable success in a number of cantons, particularly Zurich which had overthrown the liberal economic system introduced by the powerful businessman and politician Alfred Escher. The party set about winning national support for their causes, such as direct democratic rights for all and the adoption of a factory act.

Radicals and business circles also wanted to revise the Federal Constitution. They believed that the armed forces, whose decentralised structure was found wanting during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71, should be a federal responsibility, as should national economic growth, as well as large parts of the law and the education system. Everyone, including Jews,

should enjoy unrestricted freedom of trade and industry, and communes and cantons should afford the same treatment to Swiss citizens as they did to cantonal citizens.

After a first draft was rejected in 1872 due to opposition from the Catholic conservatives and the French-speaking federalists, the Swiss people finally accepted the revised Federal Constitution in 1874. The text remained practically unchanged, although the "Kulturkampf" (culture wars) led, with the backing of the French-speaking federalists, to the inclusion of provisions on secular measures against the Catholic Church (civil marriage, authorisation for the establishment of bishoprics).

The nationwide introduction of the optional referendum came in 1874. As a result, the people of Switzerland now had the right to demand a popular vote on many parliamentary decisions and thus curb the expansion of the federal state. In 1891, following a proposal by the Catholic conservatives, the people of Switzerland were granted the right to call a referendum on amendments to the Federal Constitution.

Agriculture

There were wide-sweeping changes in agriculture. Farming practices became more efficient, and the allocation and privatisation of common pasture were abolished. To meet the demands of a burgeoning market, land was made freely available and owners were no longer bound by feudal obligations or the interests of the village collective in how they used it.

The construction of the railways also had an impact on agriculture in the latter half of the 19th century: grain could be imported cheaply, which led farmers to increasingly convert to the more lucrative dairy farming. Many farm labourers had to find new work and moved either to industrial towns or emigrated.

In the early 1850s some 60% of the population still worked in the agricultural sector. By 1888, the share had fallen to 36%, and to 25% by 1914.

The advent of industrialisation

In November 1832 home workers fearing for their jobs set fire to the new Corrodi & Pfister factory in Uster. Many had ploughed much of their money into buying weaving looms and now found themselves in debt. © Zurich Central Library

Around the turn of the 19th century Switzerland, thanks to its cottage industries, was well on the way to becoming an industrialised nation. It was far ahead of many other countries, and at the time had the second-largest cotton industry after England. Machinery, however, only came into common use in the first third of the 19th century.

The cotton industry was one of the first sectors to be mechanised. The mechanical spinning mill was first used in 1801. At the same time, the first spinning machines entered into operation in eastern Switzerland and elsewhere. Mechanical looms were commonplace by the early 1830s, but their introduction was met with resistance, such as the Uster factory fire in 1832, due to workers' fears that mechanisation would lead to a permanent loss of jobs. As the water-driven machines used by the textile industry became increasingly sophisticated, factories began to be built in areas where there was an abundance of water, such as the Alpine foothills and upland regions like Glarus and Zurich Oberland.

The industrialisation of the textile industry and the know-how of watchmakers helped to drive the development of the machine and metal industry (Escher Wyss, von Roll, Sulzer), which began manufacturing mechanical looms and steam engines in the 1830s.

Construction of the railways

The first half of the 19th century saw the expansion of the Swiss road network. Many Alpine passes were now also accessible by horse-drawn carriage, which greatly facilitated the transalpine movement of people and goods. However, the greatest driver of economic growth in Switzerland was the railways. The first railway line in Switzerland was opened relatively late in 1847. To begin with, the federal state oversaw the design of the nationwide rail network, while the fast-growing metal and machine industry supplied the material to build it.

In the early years of the federal state, there was much debate as to whether the construction of the railways should be managed by the state or by private companies. In 1852 Parliament voted in favour of private management, a victory for its leading advocate, National Councillor Alfred Escher (1819–1882) from Zurich. As the architect of the Swiss Northeastern Railway, with Zurich as the hub, and as the driving force behind the Gotthard railway line and the Gotthard Tunnel, which opened in 1882, Escher earned the nickname of "King of the Railways". He also founded the first major Swiss bank, "Schweizerische Kreditanstalt" (today Credit Suisse) in 1856, which played a key part in financing the construction of the railways. One year later, he founded the life insurance and pension company "Schweizerische Rentenanstalt" (now Swiss Life).

Between 1854 and 1864, the rail network grew from 38 to 1,300 km. In 1900, it covered 3,789 km (2007: 5,107 kilometres).

Despite the important role that the railways would soon play, stiff competition and a lack of coordination left many of the private companies involved in dire financial straits. Following a popular referendum in 1898, the Confederation bought the five largest companies and in 1902 founded the Swiss Federal Railways (SBB).

New sectors

Henri Nestlé (1814-1890). © Chocosuisse

The second half of the 19th century saw the emergence of new economic sectors in Switzerland. These were often spin-offs from existing industries. Demand for fabric dyes led to the growth of the chemical industry, which built its factories along rivers (Basel) and, in turn, facilitated the development of intensive farming (artificial fertilisers) and the expansion of the paper industry (cellulose and bonding agents).

The food industry became a major player during industrialisation. As many women worked in factories, they had little time to prepare elaborate meals for their families, and so the demand

for ready-made products grew. Nestlé, which today is a global concern, was founded by a German expatriate and pharmacist, Henri Nestlé, in Vevey in 1866. In 1867, he developed a breast milk substitute made from flour and milk, which would help transform the fortunes of the start-up. The Maggi company (today part of Nestlé) was founded by Julius Maggi, the son of Italian immigrants, in 1880. It became famous for its range of instant soups made from peas, beans and lentils.

Factory working conditions

Between 1840 and 1900 real incomes in the industrial sector doubled, while the share of income needed to cover basic needs like food and rent fell dramatically. However, many workers paid a high price for this rise in disposable income: they worked extremely long hours, factories were noisy, smelly and dangerous places, and living conditions and sanitation in many urban working-class neighbourhoods were lamentable. Child labour was also commonplace.

Buoyed by the democratic movement, a number of cantons, with Glarus at the vanguard, enacted laws which set down maximum working hours. Despite protests from factory owners, the first national factory act came into force, lowering the working week to a maximum of 65 hours. Yet, there were also owners who felt that it was their responsibility as an employer to ensure the welfare of their workers. They built homes and canteens for their workforce and provided health insurance cover.

Tourism

The development of the tourism industry went hand in hand with the growth of the railways, which made it easier for foreign visitors to travel through the country and take in its scenic landscapes and sights. By the end of the 19th century, some 350,000 foreign tourists – predominantly British – visited Switzerland each year. The development of summer and winter sports resorts was also thanks to these foreign guests.

Although foreign trips remained beyond the means of most people, prosperous members of the middle class, like the nobles and the upper middle class, could and did travel, at least within Switzerland.

Banking

Reproduction of the "Woodcutter" (painting by Ferdinand Hodler), which featured on the back of the 50 Swiss franc bank note issued in 1911. © Swiss National Bank

The economic and social developments of the 19th century led to the rapid growth of the Swiss banking system. Before then, Switzerland had only a handful of private banks, which managed the financial affairs of city patricians and merchants.

The construction of the railway network and, later, the electricity grid as well as general industrial expansion necessitated high levels of investment. The second half of the 19th century saw the arrival of commercial banks, such as Swiss Credit Bank (Schweizerische Kreditanstalt), Union Bank of Switzerland (Schweizerische Bankgesellschaft) and the Swiss Bank Corporation (Schweizerische Bankverein). Because that they raised their capital from

private shareholders, these institutions had the necessary wherewithal to fund business ventures.

Given that the large commercial banks were interested only in managing substantial sums of money, savings and cooperative banks were set up for workers and farmers. The democratic movement championed the creation of cantonal banks to ensure that small and medium-sized businesses could also access capital.

The Swiss National Bank was founded in 1907. It alone has the right to issue bank notes and conducts the monetary and exchange market policy in the interests of Switzerland.

Education

The village school built in 1875 in Les Cullayes, canton of Vaud. © FDFA, Presence Switzerland

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"Enlightened" thinkers and, later, liberals campaigned for public schools. They considered education as both a prerequisite for responsible political co-determination and a provider of the skills needed by an increasingly specialised and market-driven economy.

In the 18th century most places in Switzerland had a primary school. However, parents and the business community opposed compulsory state schooling, as they preferred to see their children at work than stuck behind a desk. There was also opposition from many members of the Protestant and Catholic clergy who mistrusted secular education.

The Federal Constitution of 1874 obliged the cantons to offer classes publicly and free of charge, and to oversee the provision of education. Attempts to set up a standardised national school system failed due to federalist resistance and in 1882 a popular referendum rejected the introduction of school inspectors, or "school bailiffs" as they were disparagingly called by opponents.

Higher education was also a source of conflict due to the fact that the Federal Constitution of 1848 gave the Confederation the right to found institutions of higher education. The Radicals wanted to set up a national university that would not only provide an education but also help to forge a national identity. However, their plans met with resistance. The Conservatives slammed the idea as a centralist instrument of liberal indoctrination, the French-speaking community feared that the French language would be sidelined, and those cantons that already had a university were worried about the competition. For many years, the only national university was the Federal Polytechnic, founded in Zurich in 1855 (today the "Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich" (ETHZ)). The second federal institution of higher education - the "Ecole polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne" (EPFL) - was established over a century later (1969) following the takeover of the technical university of the canton of Vaud.
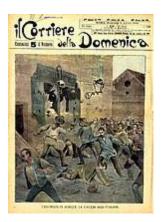
Emigration

America-bound emigrants in Le Havre. © Basel University Library, Illustr. 1.11.1884

Population growth, a dearth of job opportunities, famine and economic crises forced many Swiss people to emigrate in the 19th century. There were three main emigration waves – 1816-1817, 1845-1855 and 1880-1885 – which saw the Swiss settle in all parts of the world, especially in North America.

Frequently, groups from the same community or canton emigrated together. In some cases, they built settlements which bore the name of their homeland, such as New Glarus in Wisconsin, which was founded in 1845.

Not everyone left Switzerland because of poverty. Some, such as cheese makers, were invited by other countries because of their specialist skills; others emigrated simply out of curiosity and a sense of adventure.

Immigration

Immigration led to conflict. The "Italienerkrawall" (Italian riots) of 1896 between Italian immigrants and Zurich locals. Cover page of "Corriere della Domenica", 9 August 1896. © Swiss Federal Archives, Bern

Until 1888 Switzerland remained a country of emigration even though the number of immigrants was on the rise. As the economy continued to flourish, Switzerland would eventually become a country of net migration.

Historically, Switzerland had been a safe haven primarily for political refugees. In the early 1830s a wave of refugees, including Giuseppe Mazzini, arrived following the defeat of the revolutionary movements in neighbouring countries. The same happened in 1848 after the failed March Revolution in Germany. Some refugees, particularly Germans, found work as teachers. Many of the chairs in Zurich University, which was established in 1833, were occupied by liberal German refugees.

One of the driving forces behind the economic boom were the foreign pioneers who brought their expertise and liberal economic ideas to Switzerland, like the Englishman Charles Brown and Walter Boveri from Germany, who founded Brown Boveri & Cie. (BBC, today part of ABB).

Many other immigrants worked on large-scale projects, such as the construction of the Gotthard railway tunnel which opened in 1882. This building work, which was carried out mostly by Italian migrants, claimed 300 lives and left 900 severely injured.

Besides Italians, it was primarily Germans who emigrated at the end of the 19th century to Switzerland's industrial heartland. The share of the foreign-born population in these towns and cities was as high as 40%, and complaints about "over-foreignisation" grew. The situation came to a head in the 1890s with the Käfigturm riots in Bern and the Zurich protests against foreign workers ("Italian riots").

"It is terrible how Zurich is swarming with scholars and men of letters. One hears almost more High German, French and Italian spoken than our old Swiss-German, which was previously not the case. But we shall not lose heart; the first days of spring have been accompanied by national festivities, which will continue until autumn."

Gottfried Keller (1819-90) letter to Ludmilla Assing in Berlin, 21.4.1856

Outsiders

Therese Duardt, one of 200 homeless people photographed by Carl Durheim between 1852 and 1853 for a central police register. © Carl Durheim

Although the Helvetic Republic of 1798 had established civil equality, there were still social groups in the 19th century that remained socially ostracised and had few political rights.

The Jewish people

The Jewish people had suffered discrimination in Christian Europe since time immemorial and were repeated victims of persecution in many countries, including Switzerland. After the Black Death in the mid-14th century, they were accused of being well-poisoners and suffered pogrom-like persecution, were killed, forced to convert to Christianity or exiled. Prior to 1798 the Jewish community was tolerated in only two parts of Switzerland - Lengnau and Endingen (the common lordship of Baden, today the canton of Aargau).

Although the revolutionaries had granted civic equality to Jews in France as far back as 1791, neither the Helvetic Republic nor the newly minted Swiss Confederation could bring themselves to do the same. Swiss Jews were considered as foreigners and the Swiss Constitution of 1848 denied them the freedom of establishment, trade and worship. Thanks to foreign pressure, particularly from France, the Jewish community in Switzerland was finally granted unlimited civil rights in 1866, and a provision to this end was added to the Federal Constitution of 1874.

The homeless

Swiss national citizenship is derived from municipal citizenship. The communes were long solely responsible for their poor. Anyone who was not a citizen of a commune was homeless and lived on the margins of the village community or was left to wander the country as a vagrant.

Reasons for the loss of citizenship were many: child neglect, immoral lifestyle (e.g. "living in sin"), desertion from the army, deviant political or religious beliefs, or membership of a travelling community.

In a bid to combat the problem of vagrancy, the Confederation enacted legislation in 1850 which granted all homeless people citizenship of a commune. Not wanting this financial burden, a large number of communes tried to expel as many homeless people from their territory before the law came it force.

The bourgeois parties join forces (1891)

The dogma of Papal infallibility that was promulgated by the First Vatican Council was at the origins of the "Kulturkampf" (culture wars) which broke out in Switzerland between the liberal federal state, with support from several cantons like Bern and Geneva, and the Catholic Church. The main bone of contention was the control of the education system and the independence of the Catholic Church. However, the conflict was also a battle between Church and state for the loyalty of Switzerland's Catholic community, whom the liberals still viewed with suspicion.

Finally, a compromise was reached but the Catholic conservatives nonetheless remained on their guard. While they had little influence at federal level, they were the dominant political force in the former Sonderbund cantons. Over time, they became important political players in other cantons, owing to their presence in industrial towns where they actively campaigned for the social welfare of the migrant Catholic population.

The federalist stance of the Catholic conservatives enabled them to form alliances regularly with linguistic minorities. In 1874 they deployed the instruments of direct democracy instruments to block the legislative mechanisms of the Liberal-Radical parties. In 1891 Joseph Zemp from Lucerne became the first Catholic conservative to be elected to the Federal Council.

The integration of the Catholic conservatives in the national government, which had previously been the exclusive domain of Protestants and a handful of Catholic liberals, led to the formation of the "bourgeois block", in order to hinder the rise of social democracy. In keeping with a national ideology of freedom, the year 1891 became the first time that 1 August 1291 was celebrated as the date of the founding of the Swiss Confederation. In this interpretation of history the Catholic-conservative founders, Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden took centre stage, thus helping to bring the Catholic conservatives into mainstream national politics.