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INTRODUCTION

Making the Swiss

Time, myth and history

Modern nations are layered entities embracing geographical regions, their specific political systems, local populations and cultures, and the various communities within and beyond them. When the nation in question, like modern Switzerland, has clearly traceable roots that go back 500 years and more, the layers become complex, woven into a historical fabric that tenaciously influences how both insiders and outsiders view it. Such a fabric is a critical feature of Switzerland's history. We can say with confidence that people calling themselves 'Swiss' have lived north of, and to some extent in and even south of, the central Alps since the late 1400s. They took this name from Schwyz, which was just one of the *Orte* (places) that made up the Grosser Oberdeutscher Bund Stetten und Lender (Great Upper German League of Cities and Territories) – the political alliance that formed the core of what eventually became modern Switzerland.

This book traces a path that began among this loose network of relatively autonomous communities north of the Alps – among them Schwyz – that began joining into alliances by about 1300. These developed into a ramshackle but surprisingly durable Confederacy by the 1450s, and survived Europe's tumults to become the multilingual and multi-religious federal republic of 2013. Switzerland's relative political stability since its constitutional foundation in 1848, in a Europe otherwise much troubled by political crisis, led many observers to emphasize the continuity from those earliest associations to the present, and to pay much less attention to the many bitter conflicts that divided the Swiss, and to the ties that linked them to

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other regions no longer part of Switzerland. Modern historians have recovered the conflict as well as the continuity that characterized this region – not least the four significant internal wars between 1444 and 1715 – leading to a more nuanced picture.

For all of its durability, the Swiss political system throughout its evolution has also always been something of an outlier. In 1300, no one expected the various leagues that were forming among modest towns and thinly settled mountain valleys to replace the God-given order of aristocracy and Holy Roman Emperor, even locally. In 1600, an oath-bound Confederacy including both Catholics and Protestants seemed out of place among the divinely appointed kings ruling their (theoretically) orthodox subjects. And after 1800, the rising nation-states of Europe, shaped by supposedly natural borders and idealized ethnic unity, looked askance at the polyglot Confederation sprawled messily, but sometimes threateningly, across the Alps. Never has there been anything particularly natural about Switzerland. Neither dynasty, nor religion, nor language ever united Switzerland's denizens, leaving history – the human capacity to adopt shared stories and to imagine a community – as the primary foundation of modern Swiss identity as it emerged and thrived. Indeed, the emergence of Swiss identity around 1500 was specifically founded on the region's history as contemporaries understood it (but which, as modern historical research shows, contained a good deal of myth). That identity, once established, had important consequences for later developments, because it could be adapted and revived as a foundation for political and economic survival and success in the turbulent nineteenth and especially twentieth centuries. Though Switzerland was conquered and reconstituted during the Napoleonic Wars, and twice surrounded and isolated during the wars from 1914 to 1945, its history (both as a shared set of stories and as a long and legitimate political past) ensured that a recognizable Switzerland re-emerged from each European catastrophe, changed but not dissolved.

Understanding the modern nation-state of Switzerland therefore requires considering *both* the empirical history of events and institutions *and* the culturally embedded stories and myths that the Swiss themselves accepted, and which thus shaped their options and choices through the centuries. William Tell never existed, yet his actions repeatedly affected the course of Swiss politics, as shown in

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the chapters that follow. Each chapter addresses not only the dynamic events that characterized each period in the region that became Switzerland, but also investigates the changing ways in which the political actors understood their political world. That world changed enormously from the 1300s to the twenty-first century: not surprisingly, the Swiss people's understanding of who they were, politically, and what (if anything) held them together, changed as well. Myth shaped history for the Swiss, just as history (re)wrote their myths.

Before laying out the nine chapters through which this book traverses Switzerland's complex history, a double-edged question raised by Jonathan Steinberg deserves our attention: 'Why Switzerland?' We can ask, first, how and why it was that a separate modern nation-state – one characterized both by a lasting dedication to direct-democratic decision-making and by tenacious hesitation to follow the political norms of their neighbours – emerged in this region, equally distinct from the Italian city-states to the south, the French monarchy to the west, and the princely Empire that became Germany and Austria to the north and east. Neither dynasty, nor language, nor religion brought about a Swiss national identity that could bolster a Swiss political nation. Instead, modern Switzerland seems in an important sense the result of its inhabitants' own decisions – a *Willensnation*, a nation resting on its inhabitants' will – and of its own and its neighbours' willingness to accept its various forms through the centuries as a single and continuous political unit. In other words, although people often overlook this today, Switzerland was – and is – a real polity with real politics, and not an untroubled island set amidst spectacular mountain scenery.

Second, we can ask why modern readers might be interested in the many complex details of Switzerland's past. One reason might be that for thinkers from Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the eighteenth century to various political theorists in the twentieth, Switzerland seemed to provide a useful model for the political organization of an often violent Europe – although attempts to apply a Swiss model, from California to Yugoslavia, have met with mixed success. More modestly, we can say that in addition to appealing to those interested in understanding the – often ignored and misconstrued – Swiss of today through their past, Switzerland's history also helps us to

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broaden our understanding of the full range of political possibilities available to Europeans through the centuries.

The chapters that follow provide a history of Switzerland as a political entity and not just as a region. In consequence, the prehistorical, Roman and early medieval events in and around the Central Alps receive only the briefest mention in Chapter 1, along with a sketch of modern Switzerland's geography, since, as already suggested, no such entity can be discerned before the 1300s. Most of Chapter 1 thus concentrates on the period from about 1200 to the late 1300s, when a series of developments shared across Western Europe, but inflected by this region's location on a series of dynastic, linguistic and cultural boundaries, opened up new political possibilities. The decline of several major aristocratic lineages, most importantly the Hohenstaufen, allowed lesser political forces north of the Alps to flourish, including both regional families such as the Habsburgs (whose subsequent career forms an essential part of European history) and various urban and rural corporate associations. All of these, and further players too, participated in a bewilderingly complex landscape of feuds, alliances and ruptures that slowly consolidated into a new configuration. Although all communities in the Confederacy that began taking shape in the fourteenth century were Germanophone, many of them maintained comparable ties to Italian, French and Romansh-speaking neighbours, some of whom later became Swiss themselves. The various corporate and communal associations, including cities like Berne, Lucerne and Zurich, and rural valleys like Glarus, Uri and the Haslital, increasingly joined together to contain aristocratic violence and secure the peace. When the great demographic and economic crisis of the Black Death hit in 1348, the region's aristocracy suffered further losses, leaving alliances of communes as the primary political force for a critical half-century, during which they consolidated and worked out their first common laws.

In Chapter 2, we trace the series of internal and external struggles that transformed the loose alliance networks of the later 1300s into a more firmly constituted and militarily potent political actor, the Swiss Confederacy (known in German as the *Alte Eidgenossenschaft*) that came to dominate the Swiss region. First called 'Swiss' after military victories against Habsburg forces in 1386, the members of the emerging Confederacy expanded their territorial and political scope by

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purchasing or seizing territory from the regional nobility, but also faced bitter internal divides that reached a peak in the 'Old Zurich War' of 1436–50 that pitted Zurich and its Habsburg backers against most other members of the Confederacy, headed by Schwyz. Zurich's defeat demonstrated that individual members of the Confederacy were no longer fully free political actors. In the second half of the fifteenth century, Swiss infantrymen briefly dominated the European military stage, defeating and destroying the Dukes of Burgundy in the 1470s, repelling the Habsburgs and the southern German nobility in the 1490s and becoming arbiters of northern Italy in the 1510s. Victory allowed the Confederacy to grow both through adding new members – including bilingual Fribourg – and by buying or seizing control over neighbouring territories, many of which were French- or Italian-speaking. The Confederacy's success also encouraged the emergence of a shared set of stories about who they were, and why their alliances were favoured by God. These stories centred on the dramatic figure of William Tell and the 'three Confederates' who were thought to have sworn the first Confederate oaths in the unstable period around 1300.

The end of Swiss military predominance, dramatically demonstrated at Marignano in 1515 and Bicocca in 1522, coincided with a new wave of internal division triggered by Europe's religious schism, setting the stage for Chapter 3. The Reformation movement to reject the Roman church and its theology that began with Martin Luther in Wittenberg found a series of key protagonists in Switzerland, where first Ulrich Zwingli and then the French immigrant Jean Calvin contributed to the creation of a second magisterial church, the Reformed or Calvinist, in opposition to Rome. Some of Zwingli's earliest followers also helped found the movements we now call Anabaptist or Mennonite. Even as the Confederacy was reaching its modern borders through Berne's seizure of the Vaud in 1536, it was also becoming divided by religion, since only a minority of its thirteen full members accepted the teachings coming from Zurich and Geneva. In 1531, a first civil war over religion erupted in Switzerland: although Zwingli lost his life in one of its battles, the result was an unwilling stalemate between the religious parties. Since these were often bitterly divided, and attached to outside confessional allies as much as to one another, Switzerland's survival in this period owed more to its neighbours' corresponding weaknesses than to anything else. The religious

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status quo was tested in two further civil wars, and modestly revised in the Protestants' favour in 1715, but remained a lasting obstacle to further development of the Confederacy's shared institutions. Ever-narrower oligarchies monopolized influence and public revenue in the cantons, even as economic growth – accelerated by Switzerland's ability to remain outside the Thirty Years War and later European conflagrations – slowly transformed the countryside.

The uneasy balance that characterized Switzerland after the formal recognition of its political autonomy in 1648 persisted into the eighteenth century, as traced in Chapter 4. On the one hand, the political ossification of the Swiss Ancien Régime continued: the cantons became increasingly both oligarchical and liable to internecine struggles over power, precedence and profit. Nevertheless, neither absolutism nor princely rule ever emerged. Regular popular challenges to oligarchy, fuelled in part by the mythical history of liberation, represented one constraint: Francophone subjects of Berne in the Vaud found the story of William Tell just as inspiring as did anti-oligarchical rebels in German Switzerland. Equally, the patricians' occasional willingness to set long-standing conventions aside and to yield to some demands in order to preserve their positions, as in Geneva, was another. On the other hand, despite apparent stasis, change continued in the intellectual, patriotic and economic spheres, the last led by domestic textile production. Notably, Enlightment thinking flourished, including contributions from local patricians as well as both émigrés and Swiss who emigrated abroad. At the end of the century, change began to accelerate, encouraged by the spillover from the French Revolution. In the end, despite or because of its growing conservatism, the Ancien Régime could not cope with these challenges and abdicated in face of French arms and local agitation for political reform.

Chapter 5 opens with the French invasion of 1798, which led to an immediate revolution that replaced the old Confederacy with a French-inspired and French-dominated Helvetic Republic. The Republic's failure to win general acceptance opened a half-century of fluidity characterized by incessant constitutional experiments and contention over the validity of any new order. Lacking internal legitimacy and unable to fulfil French demands, the Helvetic Republic was replaced by fiat in 1803 by Napoleon's Mediation regime, which brought stability on sufferance, along with economic growth. Napoleon's military

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decline allowed supporters of the Ancien Régime to make a new bid for power, but full restoration of the Ancien Régime was blocked by the victorious Allies, leaving the country with an unstable compromise order in which all parties sought to legitimate their proposals, at times through appeals to the tradition of William Tell and the virtuous old Confederates – seen alternatively as patrons of restoration or forerunners of more democracy. Strengthening liberal demands for reform in the press and in public institutions led in 1829–31 to a series of quasi-revolutionary upheavals in the cantons, which wrote finis to hopes for a restoration of the Ancien Régime. This Regeneration did not end contention, however, because, on the one hand, pressures continued for reform at the national level and, on the other, demands for more radical social and political change came into conflict, sometimes violently, with emerging Catholic conservatism. In the end, the conflict led to civil war in 1847–8, triggered by religious and economic tension as well as by political disagreements. The victory of radical liberals allowed them to draft the first Swiss national constitution, creating for the first time a single sovereign federal republic out of the many quasi-sovereign cantonal states.

Chapter 6 traces the implementation of the new order and the creation of a functioning new state, with surprising lack of resistance from either the defeated conservatives or the continental powers. This success rested on the moderation of the new government and on the willingness of the defeated to use the new system to their own advantage. Switzerland's new order won international acceptance, while the country also developed a leading-edge industrial economy based on railways and factory production. The new federal politics faced a powerful challenge from a new cantonal democratic movement in the 1860s, which ultimately produced both a new federal constitution in 1874, making Switzerland a tighter federation, and also a new clash with the Catholic Church. Switzerland's uncertain place in an increasingly nationalist Europe also spurred renewed interest in the Swiss past: the pact of 1291 between Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden (lost until the eighteenth century and published only in the 1830s) became a new cornerstone of national pride and led to the creation of a national holiday on 1 August. This was part of an institutional development of Swiss identity, and helped to make the Swiss an increasingly nationally minded people. The economic

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depression of the 1870s stimulated the emergence of a socialist movement that helped to crystallize party structures across the political spectrum. By the turn of the century, Catholic conservatives had been brought first into the political process, and then also into government, thanks to the expansion of direct democracy in 1891 to allow partial constitutional revision by popular initiative. Broader inclusion helped develop a new overarching sense of national identity, and encouraged a new bourgeois alliance directed against socialists and foreigners.

Chapter 7 covers Switzerland's part in the European crisis from 1914 to 1945 and beyond. The newly self-confident and democratic Swiss nation found itself under an unprecedented triple pressure during the First World War, involving neutrality, linguistic unity and social harmony. The mishandling of the 1914 mobilization and its economic consequences led to a social outburst in the form of a General Strike in 1918, which in turn brought forward the introduction of proportional representation for national elections. The new voting system triggered a virtual revolution in the domestic political system in the 1920s, just as entry into the League of Nations revolutionized the country's diplomatic situation. New stresses emerged in the inter-war period, thanks to the post-1929 economic slump and the spillover of Europe's ideological conflicts, which all found resonance within Switzerland. Well into the 1930s, proto-fascist as well as liberal and socialist-communist groups remained active, though each had to adapt their programmes to the distinctive historical context and deep-seated democratic political culture of the Swiss system.

Late in the 1930s, the government also began to batten down the hatches because of the threatening European situation. Nonetheless, when the war came, the country still found itself encircled. Real fears of a German invasion provoked a radical new defensive strategy based on an Alpine fortress, the 'Reduit', and a newly self-conscious defence of Swiss traditions under the heading of 'spiritual national defence'. Nevertheless, the government also engaged in what many thought were dubious relations with the Axis powers. Hence, Switzerland found itself at odds with the Allies both during the war and immediately afterwards, leading to a renewal of its stand-alone neutrality in an increasingly interconnected global scene. This, and

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the country's ability to survive the war, boosted its self-confidence, encouraging the conviction that Switzerland represented a 'special case' of stability and democracy in a divided world.

The course of this 'Sonderfall' (as ideal and reality) occupies Chapter 8. The belief in Swiss exceptionalism expanded with the surge of prosperity that followed the war, further supported by the nation's increasing political and social harmony and by its successful new international role, facilitated by the Cold War. Only in the 1960s – as in other Western nations – was Switzerland's post-war satisfaction (and self-satisfaction) challenged by dissident intellectuals, the 1968 movement, women, youth unrest and (from the right) by opponents of migration and economic cosmopolitanism. The Swiss consensus overcame all these challenges, along with the two economic depressions, in the 1970s. Political and cultural polarization increased in the 1980s, however: even as the political centre moved somewhat to the right, more fissures opened up in the Sonderfall as the country was gripped by new movements against migration and UN entry on the one hand, and environmentalist and anti-army coalitions on the other. The Swiss state itself lost credibility on all fronts after high-profile cases of corruption and insider dealing, and by revelations that it had been spying on many of its own citizens.

Finally, Chapter 9 traces how, from the 1990s down to the present, these fissures became increasingly large cracks. The end of the Cold War and the acceleration of globalization forced the Swiss to rethink their neutrality, to deal with growing numbers of third-world asylum seekers, and to cobble together a new policy for relations with the EU, once Swiss voters had rejected membership in the European Economic Area. Pressure for new approaches grew when, for the first time since the war, the country suffered a significant economic slowing in the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s. Anxiety about Switzerland's place in the world helped foster the growth of a new populist movement, the Swiss People's Party, similar to, but more effective than, those found elsewhere in Europe. Such populist supporters of the old Sonderfall view of Switzerland seemed to gain the upper hand for a while after 2003, but from 2007 onward the forces of consensus and pragmatism began to reassert themselves. Even so the country remained divided between inward- and outward-looking communities,

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so that politics became increasingly polarized, as was the case elsewhere in Europe. In fact, in the last twenty years or so, the country has become much more of a normal European state.

Indeed, the tension between the sense of distinctiveness and the reality of Switzerland's deep and abiding connections to its European neighbours represents a striking element of continuity in the nation's history. Champions of Swissness have always been able to point to features that set the region apart, from its confederal structure and the dominance of communal institutions in the late Middle Ages – justified by the mythical bravery of William Tell and the idealized prudent and pious leaders who formed the first Swiss alliances – down to the current populist leaders who continue to point to events in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as the grounds for Switzerland's special nature. Claims to distinctiveness and claims to continuity have thus themselves been a conservative constant, and one that has deeply influenced historians' descriptions of Switzerland through the centuries. Yet historical events, from the bitter divisions of the Old Zurich War of the 1440s through the Reformation and the era of Revolution to the civil conflict of 1847–8 that finally produced a single Swiss nation-state, show that Switzerland was never separated from European events, and that conflict often broke the bounds of comity and stability emphasized by the conservative vision. The many ways in which William Tell has been mobilized, from conservative icon to revolutionary agitator, show that neither conflict nor continuity alone capture the Swiss trajectory: it is their intertwining, captured in history and myth, in institutions and in culture, that make modern Switzerland both a distinctive and a profoundly European construct, and one deserving of being better known.

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