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A Contested Nation

History, Memory and Nationalism in Switzerland, 1761–1891

This book examines the ways in which the Swiss defined their national identity in the long nineteenth century, in the face of a changing domestic and international background, and it challenges both functionalist and constructivist approaches to the study of nationalism.

Its narrative begins in 1761, when the first Swiss patriotic society of national significance was founded, and ends in 1891, when the Swiss celebrated their 600-year existence as a nation in a monumental national festival. While conceding that the creation of a nation-state in 1848 marked a watershed in the history of Swiss nation formation, the author does not focus one-sidedly on the activities of the nationalising state. Instead, he attributes a key role to the competitive and contentious struggles over the shaping of public institutions and over the symbolic representation of the nation. These struggles, to which the nation-state and civil society contributed in equal measure, were framed increasingly along national lines. The principal actors involved in these public controversies often held a variety of beliefs (as manifested in the clash between anti-statist regionalists and proponents of a strong state), but all accepted the nation as the central moral and normative frame of reference.

OLIVER ZIMMER is Fellow in Modern History at the University of Oxford.

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Preface

When in 1857 the Italian radical democrat Giuseppe Mazzini presented his map of a Europe of nations, Switzerland did not figure on it. In Mazzini's vision, the small republican state in the heart of Europe did not constitute a nation. Mazzini may have been an unorthodox hothead, but his view of Switzerland was comfortably in tune with the most basic norm of nineteenth-century nationalism. The norm maintains that nations, to be viable economically and politically, have to be communities of shared culture, preferably in the form of a common language. They also had to be of a certain size. Thus Mazzini combined an emphasis on language with an insistence on what Hobsbawm has called the 'threshold principle' of nationality. So the Swiss nation-state, from Mazzini's perspective, was both too small and too culturally diverse.[1]

Scholars of nationalism, partly because there was little empirical evidence that suggested otherwise, often agreed that ethno-cultural homogeneity was a significant factor for the long-term survival of modern nation-states. Thus Switzerland, according to this logic, constitutes an anomaly. The Swiss should never have become a 'nation' in the first place, bound together by a set of institutions and a shared sense of national belonging. If they did somehow manage to acquire a 'national identity', then it should have dissolved long ago.

If Switzerland has repeatedly attracted the curiosity rather than the systematic attention of nationalism scholars, this is indeed because its very existence contradicts the nationalist doctrine that nations are essentially language communities. Those who have attempted to solve the Swiss puzzle have usually singled out one aspect, be it the crosscutting of cultural cleavages,[2] efficient

[1] See Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2nd edn (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 31–2; Denis Mack Smith, *Mazzini* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 156.

[2] Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 75–81. The relevance of crosscutting cleavages in Switzerland is discussed in André Siegfried, *Switzerland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1950), pp. 123–41.

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communication,[3] the alleged absence of nationalism before 1900,[4] or the political and territorial nature of Swiss nationalism.[5]

While all these explanations have something to recommend them, they also suffer from serious weaknesses. The structural model of the political scientists, particularly that of Karl W. Deutsch, tends to equate social and political with national integration. Yet, why should large-scale communication, in itself, produce a national identity within a multiethnic polity? Benedict Anderson's argument that nationalism came late to Switzerland, on the other hand, is historically inaccurate: republican nationalism made its first appearance in the late eighteenth century, gathering further momentum from the 1830s onward, realising its aspirations in 1848 with the founding of the Swiss nation-state. Equally questionable is Hans Kohn's assertion that Swiss nationhood was predominantly political or 'civic' in character. Although the significance of political voluntarism to Swiss nationalism is undisputed, it is more accurate to regard it as a blend of 'voluntarist' and 'organic' elements whose ratio changed depending on time and circumstance.

My main reservation about the above approaches is of a more general kind, however. It derives from the fact that the question of why Switzerland evolved against the odds of modern nationalism presupposes a static and holistic notion of national identity. Rooted in the ethnonationalist discourse that has been with us ever since the nineteenth century, this conception of 'nation' is analytically problematic because it fails to do justice to the dynamic and contested nature of national identity in the context of modern politics. That Swiss nationhood flew in the face of nationalism's normative parameters did indeed present a major predicament for successive generations of Swiss public intellectuals, politicians and members of civic associations. Yet it simultaneously provided a major incentive for fostering a national identity from the rich arsenal of available ideological resources – particularly history, geography, political institutions and culture – that was both distinctive and in accordance with nationalism's norm of cultural authenticity. The ability to display such an identity was a sine qua non for legitimate statehood in a Europe in which the national principle held sway.

This book thus examines the ways in which the Swiss defined their national identity in the face of a changing domestic and international context. It explores why the nation became a theme of public concern at particular historical junctures, how different social actors created and re-created Swiss nationhood

[3] Karl W. Deutsch, *Die Schweiz als paradigmatischer Fall politischer Integration* (Bern: Haupt, 1976).
[4] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 1991), p. 139.
[5] Hans Kohn, *Nationalism and Liberty: The Swiss Example* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1956).

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during these periods and why they embraced some definitions rather than others. The first chapter explores the emergence of a network of states and an allied Confederate identity during the pre-modern period. However, the book's main focus is on the long nineteenth century, on what might be termed nationalism's classical period. Its main narrative begins in the 1760s, which witnessed the genesis of an early national movement, and more specifically in 1761, when the Helvetic Society was established as an association that would bring together patriots from all parts of the Swiss Confederation. It ends in the 1890s, the decade in which the Swiss celebrated the 600th anniversary of their nation, an event that carried all the hallmarks of the modern mass nation of the late nineteenth century. In between these two major events lie a number of significant phases and developments that will be dealt with in separate chapters: the nation-making project of the Helvetic Republic (1798–1803); civil war and state foundation (1847–51); the state's cultural policy and the nationalist visions emanating from within civil society (1870–90); and finally, the rise of professional historiography in the second half of the nineteenth century and the ways in which this affected dominant perceptions of the national past.

The narrative of this book is cast chronologically because such a structure seemed more suited to accomplish its twofold task – to explore not only how national identity was represented in public discourse and symbolism and how such representations changed, but also why the nation became a topic of public concern during certain historical periods – than a strictly thematic framework would have been. If national symbols, discourses and representations are to be explained rather than simply described, then we need to pay attention – systematically rather than just in passing, in the form of a background chapter – to the conditions and constraints within which national movements have to operate. Above all, this means that we have to pay attention to social actors as well as to the domestic and international developments that partly determine how national identity is defined at a particular point in time. While the chronological approach may result in a certain degree of repetition with regard to how national identity is publicly defined, the historical recurrence of a particular conception of national identity each time asks for a new and detailed contextualisation.

Part of the reason why nations and nationalism constitute such a challenging topic is that their study has given rise to a number of thought-provoking conceptual debates to which historians, anthropologists, political scientists and sociologists have made important contributions. It is therefore no longer defensible, in my view, to write a book on nationalism without relating it to these debates, however selectively. This book not only locates Swiss developments within these discussions, but also uses specific interpretative schema and conceptual tools to throw light on the historical process. I drew particular inspiration from some medium-range concepts that struck me as suitable for concrete historical analysis, while I have severe reservations about the grand

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theories of nationalism, and particularly the evolutionist and diffusionist logic that often informs them. The two broader themes this book will address concern the interrelationship of historical memory and nationalist invention, and the role of voluntarist and organic conceptions of nationhood. If we conceive of national identity in this way, that is as a patterned (rather than structurally determined or purely contingent) process, then the argument about the Swiss national *Sonderweg*, indisputable as it may be at a purely empirical level, loses much of its apparent persuasiveness.

Nevertheless, this attempt to link the Swiss case to broader conceptual issues will not be pursued to the exclusion of more specific problems and questions. Rather, with these more general concerns in mind, individual chapters address a number of more specific issues. These include the emergence of an early modern public sphere and its significance for the spread of an ethnosymbolic narrative in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (chapter 1); the conversion, manifest in the debates of Swiss patriots of the Helvetic Society, from a cosmopolitan patriotism to a historicist nationalism that displays a preoccupation with 'national character' (chapter 2); the social and regional responses to the centralising and secularising project of the Helvetic Republic (chapter 3); the contributions of Radicals, Liberals, and Catholic conservatives to the politics of national identity in the 1840s (chapter 4); the dynamic relationship between nationalising state and civil society in late-nineteenth-century nationalism (chapter 5); and the controversy over Switzerland's 'national past' that erupted in the last third of the nineteenth century (chapter 6).

This study is not a comprehensive account of Swiss national identity; and I have severe doubts whether such an aim could be accomplished at all. Switzerland may be a small country by any standards but its cultural and political diversity precludes a reasonable answer to the question 'what does Swiss national identity consist of?' at any given point in time. Recent research on the public construction of nationhood in Germany and France, too, suggests that the concept of a shared national identity – in the sense of a common stock of values, beliefs and customs – presupposes a static notion of nationhood that bears little resemblance to real historical situations. What all these cases seem to reveal is a shared focus on the 'nation' alongside a great variety of interpretations about the specific meaning of nationhood.[6]

[6] See in particular Alon Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871–1918* (Chapel Hill/London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Caroline Ford, *Creating the Nation in Provincial France: Religion and Political Identity in Brittany* (Princeton University Press, 1993); James R. Lehning, *Peasant and French: Cultural Contact in Rural France During the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, under the direction of Pierre Nora, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996–8).

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Neither do I pretend to have given equal weight to all the linguistic groups that together make up Switzerland's population. The bulk of sources I have considered for this study – newspapers, pamphlets, minutes of patriotic societies, political dramas, government reports, sermons, speeches, historical accounts, poems and folk-songs, scholarly and other kinds of periodicals, and records of national festivals – pertain to the German-speaking majority. While attitudes of French-speaking Swiss will resurface throughout the account, the Italian-speaking public has received less attention. While this omission is regrettable, my aim was to examine the construction and transformation of Swiss national identity over a relatively long period of time. I felt that this could be accomplished only by essentially concentrating on one of Switzerland's linguistic groups.

I am deeply grateful for the financial and scholarly resources I have received from a number of organisations. Research for this book was generously supported by the *Erziehungsdirektion des Kantons Zürich (Abteilung Stipendien)*, and the *Janggen-Pöhn Stiftung*, St Gallen. An extended period of leave in 2001, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB), enabled me to complete the manuscript and prepare it for publication. My thanks are also due to the London School of Economics and to the History Department of the University of Durham for the provision of travel and research grants, which greatly facilitated the completion of this book. The staff of several libraries and archives went to great lengths to satisfy my requests. In London, I benefited from the vast resources of the British Library at St Pancras and of the British Library of Political and Economic Science at the LSE. My thanks are also due to the Library of the University of Durham and its staff. In Zurich, the *Zentralbibliothek* and the *Staatsarchiv* supplied me with important primary and secondary material. In Bern, I was fortunate to draw on the rich resources of the *Landesbibliothek* and the *Bundesarchiv*. The cantonal archives of Schwyz, Uri, Zurich and Aarau offered access to a wealth of material that allowed me to study the political and social responses to official nation-building, easily the most neglected aspect of modern nationalism yet the one I have come to regard as the most fascinating.

I thank the many people who have contributed to the making of this book. Anthony D. Smith supplied invaluable advice when this study was first conceived as a doctoral dissertation at the London School of Economics. His support, encouragement and incisive comments offered a constant source of inspiration. John Breuilly, though he was not directly involved in this project, has influenced my thinking through various conversations over the last two years. Eric Kaufmann has provided intellectual stimulation and friendship during the London years and beyond. Among my friends and colleagues in Switzerland, Gaetano Romano, Erich Wigger and Jan Baumann have read draft chapters and

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saved me from many an error. Some of the ideas and arguments developed in this book have been tested out in seminar groups and conferences at the London School of Economics (organised by the Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism), the McDougal Graduate Student Center at Yale University, the Institute of Historical Research (London) and the history departments at the universities of Manchester and Durham. I should also express my gratitude to Joanna Innes, Charles Philpin, Lyndal Roper, Chris Wickham and the anonymous referees for Past and Present Publications.

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