The Late Middle Ages and beyond

Overview

This mural depicts the Battle of Stoss Pass in 1405, which led to Appenzell winning independence from the Abbot of St Gallen. © FDFA, Presence Switzerland

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Since the end of the 19th century, the Federal Charter (Bundesbrief) of 1291 has been considered as the founding document of the present-day Swiss Confederation. In this ancient pact, the valley communities of Uri, Schwyz and Nidwalden pledged to keep the peace and to assist each other against any external threat to their freedom.

In the 14th and 15th centuries, rural and urban communities formed a loose federation. By the end of the 1400s, it was strong enough to affect the balance of power in Europe. Various wars were fought in which the Confederates displayed courage and ingenuity, and they gained a reputation as a formidable opponent in combat.

The Confederation was enlarged in various ways with some areas joining voluntarily and as equal or subordinate members while others were bought or conquered. Consequently, citizens' rights varied from one place to next.

The members of the Confederation mainly managed the affairs of their own regions but met regularly to discuss issues of common interest. Known as "Tagsatzung", these meetings were held in Lucerne, Zurich, Bern and Baden and were attended by one or two representatives from each member of the Confederation.

Rise of the Swiss Confederation

The Rütli Meadow overlooking Lake Lucerne: the mythical birthplace of the Swiss Confederation. © FDFA, Presence Switzerland

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1291 is traditionally regarded as being the founding year of the Confederation – this was when the three rural valley communities of Uri, Schwyz and Nidwalden pledged an oath of mutual support.

The death of the Holy Roman Emperor, King Rudolf I of Habsburg, coupled with the instability following his passing, most likely prompted the three founding cantons to enter into this pact of peace and mutual assistance. Similar alliances had been made previously, but the Federal Charter of 1291 was the first to be documented in writing.

Legend has it that the three founding members met on the Rütli Meadow above Lake Lucerne to swear their mutual allegiance ("Rütli Oath"). Since then, the meadow has become the symbol of Swiss freedom and independence.

The name of William Tell is associated with the events surrounding the Rütli Oath. He is supposed to have killed the wicked bailiff, Gessler, who had taken away the freedoms of the local people. Although the story of William Tell is a work of fiction, it nonetheless occupies a special place in the Swiss collective consciousness.

The Federal Charter of 1291

The Federal Charter from early August 1291 is Switzerland's oldest constitutional document. In this ancient pact, the valley communities of Uri, Schwyz and Nidwalden pledged to help each other resist any threat of violence or injustice. Foreign judges were not to be tolerated, yet the existing power balance remained intact. Procedures for criminal and civil cases and for disputes among the signatories were also laid down.

This Federal Charter has only been officially regarded as the founding document of the Swiss Confederation since the end of the 19th century. The Federal Council was primarily responsible for this, as, taking its lead from the charter itself, it organised national jubilee celebrations in 1891 and then in 1899 made 1 August the National Day of the Swiss Confederation.

Underlying this was the conviction that the democratic Federal State of 1848 represented a continuation of the Old Swiss Confederacy that existed before 1798, and that the historical nucleus of this Confederacy lay in Central Switzerland. This belief was linked to the legend that a group of freedom-loving men had sworn an oath of confederate alliance on the Rütli meadow above Lake Lucerne. This view of history has since been instilled in every Swiss schoolchild.

Invoking the Federal Charter as the most venerable version of the Swiss Constitution and thus establishing a centuries-old, binding tradition of a society sworn to uphold freedom helped to cement national cohesion in the democratic Federal State. Political developments after 1930 led to the Federal Charter being regarded as more than simply the basis for a defensive alliance, but as a resolute response to the threat posed by foreign powers.

Thus, through the practical application of this lesson in history, the public came to perceive this ostensibly inconspicuous document as a key element of Swiss historical and political culture in general. This also led to the Federal Charter Archive being established in Schwyz simply in order to house the Federal Charter. The Archive, renamed the Museum of Swiss Charters in 1992, was opened as a national memorial in 1936.

The Old Confederacy, however, was far less significant in the Late Middle Ages, and it was not unique either. It constituted a peaceful alliance of a type also found elsewhere at the

time. The Charter certainly did not amount to a revolutionary act of self-determination by the peasantry, but rather secured the status quo in the interests of the local elites.

For centuries, this alliance of the valleys of central Switzerland from 1291 received practically no mention, the document itself only being rediscovered in 1758 in the Schwyz archives. In the constitutional tradition of the Old Confederacy prior to 1798, the alliance of 1291, in contrast to the Federal Charter of 1315 (Pact of Brunnen), played no role.
In more recent times, the contemporary importance of this document from 1291 has probably been considerably overestimated. However, this does not detract from the enormous cultural value of this prominent document, which is still referred to regularly in present-day political debates.
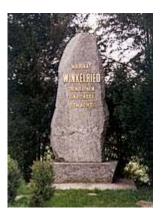
Consolidation and expansion

Battle of Morgarten, 1315: Mural in Schwyz town hall. © swissworld.org

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Even before 1291, the Habsburgs had succeeded in extending their power eastwards, becoming the Dukes of Austria. They did not want to relinquish their precarious territorial rights in parts of central Switzerland but rather strengthen and recapture those they had lost. In 1315, however, confederate troops defeated the Austrian-Habsburg army at Morgaten.

The Confederation gradually expanded during the 40 years after Morgarten. Lucerne joined the Confederation in 1332, Zurich in 1351, Glarus and Zug in 1352 and Bern in 1353. At this time the now familiar term "canton" had not yet been used. The members of the Confederation of 1353 were called "Orte" (places). From 1353 to 1481, this confederation of eight members remained unchanged.

Although there were other alliances in the Holy Roman Empire, the 'Swiss' Confederation was an exception: nowhere else were there alliances comprising both urban and rural areas. However, in Switzerland, the rural areas generally became subject territories of the cities.

The victories of the Confederation

Winkelried monument erected on the former Sempach battlefield. © FDFA, Presence Switzerland

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The competing claims to power were a source of tension and conflict between the Confederates and the Austrian Habsburgs, culminating in the Battle of Sempach near Lucerne in 1386 and the Battle of Näfels near Glarus in 1388. In both victories, the members of the Confederation supported each other.

The Habsburgs never quite recovered from their two defeats in Sempach and Näfels. The confidence of the Confederates, however, was bolstered considerably. The Battle of Sempach even produced a national hero: Arnold von Winkelried, who is said to have beaten a path through the enemy lines for the Confederates by throwing himself into the enemy lances.

The Confederation expands

Up until 1481 no new members joined the Confederation, yet the territory of the alliance grew in size through the capture and acquisition of land.

In 1415, the Confederates conquered Aargau, which up until then was part of Austria. Most of Aargau was divided up between Bern, Zurich and Lucerne, with the remainder being managed as "common lordships", whereby each member of the Confederation took it in turns to appoint a bailiff. The same fate befell the Austrian-held Thurgau, which became a common lordship shared by seven members of the Confederation (with the exception of Bern).

Appenzell and Toggenburg (which had been under the control of St Gallen monastery since 1467), the city of St. Gallen, Schaffhausen, Fribourg, Biel and Solothurn came under Confederate control as "Associated Places".

Subjects and "Associated Places"

Relations between the Confederates and the other parts of what is now Switzerland took several different forms, ranging from complete subjection to independence.

The least amount of freedom was enjoyed by the areas administered as "common lordships". Specifically, this meant that the Confederates took it in turns to appoint a bailiff to administer their shared subject territories.

The urban members of the Confederation also had their own subject territories of varying sizes which were located in surrounding areas. Yet, these territories (*Landschaft* in German) often enjoyed a considerable amount of autonomy, with some smaller towns even having the right to appoint local officials.

Other places were gradually incorporated under the terms of a "Burgrecht" alliance with a town, monastery or individual nobleman. In general, the ally provided troops in exchange for protection and access to town markets. As the city with the largest territory north of the Alps, Bern used this system to extend its power westwards.

Finally, there were areas known as "Associated Places" whose status varied considerably. Some eventually joined the Confederation as full members, others became protectorates, and a third group would later leave the alliance.

Internal conflicts

Brother Klaus, mural in the Flüeli-Ranft hermitage, canton of Obwalden. © swissworld.org

The taking of the Federal Oath during the Treaty of Stans of 1481. Part of a series of paintings by Humbert Mareschet, produced in 1586 for the Bern Council Hall. © Historical Museum Bern

The expansion of the Confederation did not run smoothly. Initially, the members were united by a common enemy, the Austrian House of Habsburg. But as the danger from the outside diminished, the members of the Confederation became more inclined to look after their individual interests. There were two occasions during the 15th century that the Confederation found itself fighting for survival.

Zurich vs the rest of the Confederation

After the death of the last Count of Toggenburg in 1436, conflict broke out between Zurich and Schwyz over his inheritance. Zurich refused to accept the verdict of a tribunal. Having suffered a first military defeat, it appealed to Austria for support.

In return, Zurich even ceded part of its territory to the Habsburgs. The dispute intensified and culminated in further defeat for Zurich in 1443, despite the backing it had received from the Austrians. In 1444 Austria convinced French mercenaries (the Armagnacs), led by the Dauphin of France, to fight on the side of Zurich. The French army defeated the Confederates at the Battle of St Jakob on the Birs in 1444, but then retreated again.

It was only in 1450 that a peace agreement was made: Zurich gave up its alliance with Austria and agreed not to make such alliances in future.

Aegidius Tschudi (1505 – 1572) recalled the Battle of St Jakob on the Birs in his chronicles: "The Dauphin forbade the whole army to abuse any of the Confederates who might lie wounded on the battlefield, and told the men of Basel that they could bury their dead, as is their custom, for their bravery had earned them the right to burial. He also gave permission for the injured, who could perhaps still be found, to be taken to town where they could receive the necessary care. Among the casualties was a man from Glarus, the only one of his compatriots to survive. He had suffered seven large wounds and cuts. He received medical care in Basel and later became the Landamman of Glarus. None of the Confederates from Unterwalden survived, while only one Confederate from Schwyz made it out alive. Because he had not been wounded, he was despised in Schwyz for the rest of his life."

Town vs country

A second threat to the survival of the Confederation was the simmering political and social tensions between individual members.

Members of the Confederation had always had the right to forge their own alliances, but after the conclusion of the Burgundian War in 1477 the city members made so many new alliances with other cities, that the rural members feared that the balance within the Confederation would be upset and they were particularly concerned by the growing power of the city of Bern.

Another bone of contention with the rural communities was the desire of the city members to upgrade the status of the Associated Places of Solothurn and Fribourg to full membership of the Confederation.

A compromise agreement, the Treaty of Stans, was finally reached in 1481. It was mediated by the hermit Nicholas of Flüe, popularly known in German as "Bruder Klaus", and, among other things, allowed for the inclusion of Solothurn and Fribourg as full members.

The Burgundian Wars

The Thousand Flowers Tapestry is the oldest surviving millefleurs tapestry in the world. Originally owned by Charles the Bold of Burgundy, it was seized after the Battle of Murten in 1476. © Stefan Rebsamen/Historical Museum Bern

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The Confederation was not the only power in Europe which was in the process of expansion during the latter half of the 15th century. The dukedom of Burgundy had been one of the wealthiest and most ambitious powers in western Europe since the 14th century.

By the mid-15th century, Burgundian territory stretched from the Netherlands in the north to the Franche-Comté in the French Jura, which is west of present-day Switzerland. Duke Charles the Bold, who came to power in 1467, undertook to link up his lands and form an intermediate realm between France and the Holy Roman Empire.

In 1476-7 at the battles of Grandson, Murten (Morat) and Nancy (Lorraine), the Bernese, with help from the other Confederates, defeated the Burgundian army.

The biggest winner from these battles was not the Confederates but the French king, who was finally rid of his greatest rivals and in a position to make Burgundy part of his kingdom again. Other estates of Charles the Bold were given to the Austrian House of Habsburg.

The relationship between Charles the Bold and the Confederates had always been tense. Before the battle of Murten, Charles had announced that any Confederates who fell into his hands would fight at his side in order that this brutish people would be wiped out once and for all. The victorious Swiss responded in kind: fleeing Burgundian soldiers were "skewered like Christmas geese," their skulls cracked open "as men crack nuts," if contemporary accounts are to be believed. The expression "as cruel as a Murten" passed into the local language. A type of algae which sometimes appears in the lake, turning its water red, is commonly known as "blood of the Burgundians".

Coin depicting the crests of the 13-member Confederation. The reverse side features the crests of the seven "Associated Places". In 1547 the Confederation presented the coin to Princess Claudia of France on the occasion of her baptism. © Stefan Rebsamen/Historical Museum Bern

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The Swabian War

As part of the reform of the empire, the Diet of Worms in 1495 decided on measures to secure lasting domestic peace, including the creation of an Imperial Court and the introduction of an imperial tax. The Confederates were unwilling to pay a tax for tasks that they thought they could do better themselves. They rejected the imperial reform but remained loosely integrated within the Empire.

In 1499 the imperial reforms indirectly led to the outbreak of war between the Confederates and the Swabian League, which was competing for power in the Lake Constance and Upper Rhine areas, and were already at odds with the Three Leagues (present-day canton of Graubünden). Referred to as the "Swiss War" north of the Rhine, this bloody conflict destroyed the border regions. Ultimately, it was the Confederates who emerged victorious, having defeated the Swabian forces at Dornach.

The subsequent Peace of Basel confirmed the status quo. In 1499, however, it was not the de facto independence of Switzerland which the Empire recognised but the delimitation of the areas of influence in the Upper Rhine of both alliances – the Confederation on the one hand and the Swabian League on the other. As a result, Basel and Schaffhausen joined the Confederation in 1501.

Retreat at Marignano, an exhibition poster by Ferdinand Hodler. © BPUG Zurich Graph. Anstalt J.E. Wolfensberger

Italian campaigns

The Swabian War came to a swift end in 1499 with the Peace of Basel. This allowed Emperor Maximilian to focus his energies on more important targets in northern Italy, which was ruled by the Duke of Milan, Ludovico Sforza, who also happened to be his wife's uncle. From the start of the Italian campaigns in 1494, the most powerful Italian states, France, Spain and the Emperor fought, in constantly shifting alliances, for supremacy in Italy. The Confederates initially served as hired soldiers in the French armies, though over time they increasingly fought as an independent power and member of the alliance. In 1503 they seized Bellinzona, followed later by Lugano and Locarno. At the same time, the Three Leagues acquired Valtellina, Bormio and Chiavenna which became common lordships.

In the long-running battle over the Duchy of Milan, the Confederates first supported France before switching allegiance to the Papacy in 1510. After the Battle of Novara (1513), they chased the French out of Italy. However, the administration of the Duchy and the large city of Milan proved too much for the Confederates, who had yet to agree on a set of shared political aims. In 1515 the French routed the Confederate troops at Marignano. This defeat showed that the Swiss, whose strength was their infantries, were no match for the new and costly military weapons (cavalry, artillery, firearms). Nonetheless, King François I granted the Confederacy a mercenary service agreement ("Soldbündnis"), which enabled him to enlist 16,000 Swiss mercenaries ("Reislaufer") in the French army. He also ceded the transmontane bailiwicks in Ticino, and granted trade privileges in France.

The Battle of Marignano is regarded (albeit somewhat inaccurately) as a turning point in Swiss history. In effect, the expansion policy of the Confederates ended only in 1536 with the capture of Vaud by Bern and Fribourg. The fact that the Confederates decided to renounce any further military forays has less to do with the painful lessons of Marignano than with the fact that the internal religious conflict since the Reformation made it impossible to devise a common external policy, much less fight a war. It had nothing to do with neutrality either. This term was still unheard of in relation to the Confederation of the 16th century. It was more that the Confederation at the start of the Early Modern Age was under the prevailing influence of France, which mediated internal conflicts in order to guarantee access to Swiss mercenaries. The regularly renewed alliances with the King of France remained, alongside the administration of common lordships, one of the few exceptions where Catholic and Protestant cantons stood united, although in the 16th century both Zurich and especially Bern avoided entering into an alliance with France.