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# The freedom to

In 1974, Jura voted to split from Berne and form its own canton. Fifty years later, what makes the most defiant corner of Switzerland the place it is now? The author got on his bike to find out.

JÜRG STEINER

Clinique Le Noirmont in the canton of Jura sits like a castle on the hill above the village from which it takes its name. Behind the building, the terrain drops steeply into the deep gorge of the River Doubs that separates Switzerland from France. In the other direction are the tree-topped highlands of Franches-Montagnes – one of Switzerland's more thinly populated regions.

Wedged in on the border, Clinique Le Noirmont is the biggest national rehabilitation centre for patients with cardiovascular disease. It is a good point from which to begin a tour of Switzerland's youngest canton, a place where the people have long worn their heart on their sleeve.

The canton has a history of defiant activism – one that inspires outsiders who recognise the generous, dissenting, freedom-loving instincts of the people who live there. Jura serves as a romantic counterpoint to efficient, precise, competitive Switzerland.

Bike at the ready; A stunning snapshot of Jura: Les Breuleux on the left, Le Noirmont somewhere through the mist on the right. Photos: Jürg Steiner (top), Keystone (below)



Fifty years since the high-water mark of Jura separatism, how much of this rebelliousness is now myth and how much still reality?

To find out, I set off on my bike from Le Noirmont and headed east to Jura's capital Delémont – a fitting thing to do. The canton of Jura came into being through people battling the political headwinds that came their way. And cyclists are buffeted by plenty of headwinds on the gusty Jura plateau.

## Marginalised and resentful

Sunday, 23 March 1974 turned out to be a historic day when the referendum results were announced. “Il pleut la liberté [It's raining freedom],” Roger Schaffter, one of the main figures of Jura's separatist movement, said poetically on the balcony of Delémont's town hall as it began to rain.



# be different

A narrow majority of voters in the seven districts of Jura had just decided that their canton would split from Berne, correcting an arrangement that dated back to the down-fall of Napoleon and the 1815 Congress of Vienna, when the territories of the Prince-Bishopric of Basel in the Jura mountains were assigned to the canton of Berne. Jura was a form of compensation for Berne, which had had to give up its territories in Aargau and Vaud.

Little Jura – Catholic and French-speaking – now found itself part of the big, Protestant, German-speaking canton of Berne. Longing for territorial autonomy and self-determination, many in Jura felt marginalised and resentful. Political experts now say that the strife surrounding Jura before the historic 1974 vote could even have led to a civil war.

This is no exaggeration. From the 1960s onwards, the separatist movement Rassemblement Jurassien and its young militant group Béliers often sailed close to the wind during a resistance campaign against Berne that was as furious as it was effective. In 1969, young demonstrators from Jura gathered at the Bundesplatz in Berne to burn the controversial "Civil Defence" booklet that the Federal Council had distributed to every household in Switzerland. Activists also stormed the National Council chamber in 1968. And radical splinter groups even carried out arson attacks.

Jura eventually voted for self-determination peacefully and democratically in June 1974, but in doing so created a new bone of contention: only Jura's northern districts – Franches-Montagnes, Porrentruy, and Delémont – wanted to establish a new canton. Its southern districts opted to remain with Berne.

## What democracy can do

Hence, Jura was divided in two when the eponymous canton was born and became part of the Swiss Confederation in 1979 – a hard pill to swallow. Battle lines remained and became even more entrenched in people's hearts and minds. Acts of vandalism and provocation followed, including the audacious theft of the legendary Unspunnen Stone in Interlaken. The stone, which weighed 83.5 kg, was traditionally thrown in competition at the Unspunnen Festival. But a lot of water has passed under the bridge since then, with the district of Moutier due to switch allegiance from Berne to Jura in 2026 – increasing Jura's population



Anti-Berne protests by Jura's separatists were loud and fierce. Pictured here: members of the separatist Béliers group on the streets of Berne in 1972, calling for an independent canton of Jura.

Photo: Keystone

by an extra 7,500. Maybe this will be the last piece in the Jura puzzle.

In an interview to mark 50 years since the 1974 plebiscite, Federal Councillor Elisabeth Baume-Schneider – who lives in the Jura village of Les Breuleux not far from Le Noirmont – said that Jura's birth as a canton was a reminder of what democracy can do. "The right to freedom and self-determination is something that Jura and its people hold dear."

Cycle through the remote Franches-Montagnes countryside in the direction of Saignelégier (against the headwind naturally) and you will notice that Baume-Schneider's definition of a free and unfettered Jura extends further than just politics.

Actor Shawne Fielding and the Unspunnen Stone in 2001. Separatists stole, hid and defaced the stone in 1984. After its whereabouts remained unknown for many years, the object was delivered, randomly, to Fielding, the then wife of the former Swiss ambassador to Berlin. Photo: Keystone



Switzerland has a population density of 214 people per km<sup>2</sup>. The canton of Jura has an average of only 88 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. Jura has very decent road connections, yet still more than enough space for people to live far enough from each other to tolerate differences of thought or deed.

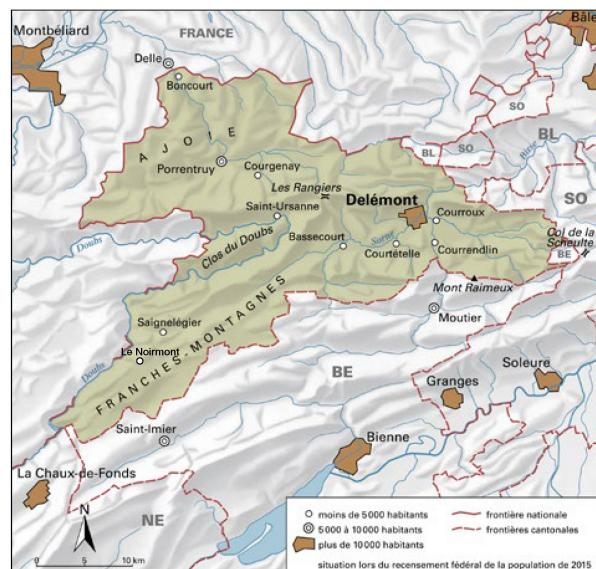
Café du Soleil in Saignelégier village square is steeped in the spirit of nonconformism. In 1980, the year after Jura became a canton, a group of like-minded friends transformed this old venue into a cultural hub. Their aim as stated in the founding manifesto was to create a “space conducive to critical analysis and to freedom”, where people would “reclaim autonomy for themselves and for their region as a whole”.

Today, Café du Soleil has lost some of the edginess that set it apart in those early days. On the menu, you can order vegetarian spring roll followed by a 200-gram rib-eye steak. Cultural events consist of exhibitions and concerts. Nonetheless, places like Saignelégier epitomise how Jura’s rebellious image persists to this day.

### A progressive constitution, way ahead of its time

Saignelégier’s camping site, situated not far from the stunning Etang de la Gruère lake reminiscent of the Scandinavian lake districts, is one of the few camping sites in Switzerland with no marked spaces or electrical access points. Or any booking system for that matter. There is enough space for everyone. “C'est ça la liberté,” say the site attendants.

I ride a little further before reaching the ostensibly sleepy Franches-Montagnes village of Les Genevez. Local mayor Anael Lovis, aged 23, is the most exciting thing going for Les Genevez these days. But the small municipality made a name for itself decades ago when its residents opposed the



Many Swiss associate Jura with wetlands like the famous Etang de la Gruère lake pictured here.  
Photo: Keystone



Café du Soleil in Saignelégier is a cultural hub steeped in the spirit of nonconformism.  
Photo: Jürg Steiner

Jura in its current form. The canton will increase in size at the beginning of 2026, when Moutier – situated on the map between Delémont and Grenchen – switches allegiance from Berne to Jura.

construction of a nearby military base that had long been in the pipeline, viewing the proposed complex as a threat to wetlands like the Etang de la Gruère. “A very important episode in the Jura psyche,” says Baume-Schneider.

And very important in affirming Jura’s progressive credentials in German-speaking Switzerland. Jura’s ambitious 1979 constitution, which was way ahead of its time (and the rest of Switzerland), helped to consolidate the canton’s forward-looking reputation, enshrining the right to strike, the right to work, the right to housing, the principle of gender equality, and the establishment of an office for women’s affairs. Non-Swiss residents in Jura are also allowed to vote in cantonal elections and referendums.

### The A16 motorway

The long ride down from the Franches-Montagnes highlands gives me time to take in the scenery. The weather-worn road has barely enough room to negotiate the



Members of the Béliers group wanted to block the entrance to Berne's city hall in 1971, but the police had other ideas.

Photo: Keystone



deep and narrow Pichoux Gorge. Warm air blows into my face, rising from the more densely populated, intensely farmed stretch of plain between Bassecourt and Delémont, where I discover a different type of Jura. One that is a little less bolshie and more business minded.

Ahead of me I see the A16, an 85-kilometre-long motorway that traverses the Jura, starting in Biel in the canton of Berne and ending in Boncourt on the French border. Also referred to as the 'Transjura', the A16 cost 6.6 billion Swiss francs to build not only because of Jura's complicated geology but also on account of the many bridges and tunnel portals aesthetically designed along the route by Ticino architect Flora Ruchat-Roncati. Construction began shortly after Jura's inauguration as a canton. It finished in 2017. The A16 was a federal project to connect the underdog border region with the vibrant economic hubs of the Central Plateau, or Mittelland.

There is no real statistical evidence to prove whether the Transjura now serves its original purpose. Switzerland's

The mood was fractious in November 1969, when young Jura separatists burned hundreds of copies of the controversial red "Civil Defence" booklet in front of the Federal Palace.

Photo: Keystone

population is booming, whereas Jura's is more or less stagnating. With higher-than-average unemployment, Jura contributes less to the Swiss economy than most cantons. The canton's finances are less than rosy. It makes you wonder whether the physical lifeline of the Transjura has actually encouraged a sort of brain drain.

Jura historian Clément Crevoisier would probably say it has. Crevoisier has been studying his canton for decades. Jura's linguistic and geographic isolation is a big problem, he says. Its population doesn't even feel much affinity with the rest of French-speaking Switzerland. Young people move away to university – often never to return.

But Crevoisier also believes that decades of separatist thinking has created a mental block that prevents Jura from realising its full potential. "Unfortunately, the ideological urge to view everything in black and white ignores Jura's multicultural roots."

### More myth than reality?

Jura's former cantonal government minister Jean-François Roth also worries about the inertia that has beset his canton. "Jura has calmed down quite a bit," he said on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the historic 1974 vote. "I'm not convinced our canton still embodies the idea that people had when it was founded."

But is that idea more myth than reality nowadays, buffeted by the crosswinds of economic growth? I arrive in Jura's capital Delémont and leave my bike in a small, unassuming pedestrian precinct opposite the station.

Writer Camille Rebetez is based in Delémont. Until recently, he was working as the art mediator at the ambitious Théâtre du Jura. His parents helped to open Café du Soleil in Saignelégier. Rebetez co-authored a comic called "Les Indociles" (The Troublemakers), which was adapted last year into a series of the same name for Swiss television.

"Les Indociles" follows the exploits of three friends in Jura's Franches-Montagnes district who, from the 1970s onwards, unshackle themselves from societal constraints to create a community based on equality. Their idealism makes painful acquaintance with reality and the frailties of humanity. "My characters are at the mercy of liberal economics," Rebetez told the press when the last comic was published. "They must learn how to lose without losing hope. They are unable to save the world but keep fighting for their chance to do so."

Fifty years after the 1974 vote, the same could be said about Jura.