

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 13 (1948)
Heft: 7

Artikel: Switzerland one hundred years ago
Autor: Dürrenmatt, Peter
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-942544>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 09.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

HELVETIA

MONTHLY
PUBLICATION
OF THE



SWISS BENEVOLENT
SOCIETY IN
NEW ZEALAND (INC.)

GROUP NEW ZEALAND OF THE NEW HELVETIC SOCIETY.

WELLINGTON N.Z.
JULY 1948.

Volume 7
13th year.

SWITZERLAND ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

By: Peter Dürrenmatt.

Jubilees are occasions not only for individuals, but also for States and Peoples, to look back and survey a section of their life. Sixty years count for a lot in a man's life, but a hundred years are a short time in the life of a country. In this Year of Grace 1948, the Swiss Confederation celebrates the centenary of its modern structure. After political struggles which continued for a number of years and which finally attained their culminating point in a - fortunately - not too bloody civil war, known as the Sonderbund War, Switzerland was endowed in 1848 with a new Constitution, which transformed the country into a Confederation. Prior to this, it was a Federation consisting of loosely bound states. It is with this change that the history of modern Switzerland was started. It laid the basis for a development which proved that this small country, right in the heart of Europe, and which certainly could not be numbered among the Great Powers, possessed sufficient vital forces to be able to adapt itself to the requirements of a new age, without losing any of its particularities.

What a difference there is between the present Switzerland of 1948 and the old Switzerland of 1848! Let us try and see what the ancient Alpine Republic was like in those days. The twenty-five Cantons were united by the Federal Treaty of 1815 into a loosely bound Union. By virtue of this Treaty, these Cantons had remained Sovereign Republics, while, at the same time, they voluntarily undertook a small share of the powers of the Union, as a whole. At regular intervals, envoys from the Cantons attended the meetings of the Diet and discussed political matters. Each Canton, whether big or small, possessed only one vote at these assemblies. Among political matters appertaining to the Diet were treaties with foreign countries, decisions regarding war and peace and the maintenance of the Federal Army. The troops were instructed and supplied by the Cantons themselves. Moreover, the old Federation did not have any independent revenue at its disposal. It had to depend on what the Cantons allocated to it towards covering its expenditure. A hundred years ago, the political life of the country was chiefly enacted within each Canton. It was only when there was no other way out that the Federation was ceremoniously called in to deal with the matter.

From the economic and social standpoint, the Switzerland of that day was completely different to what it is now. Her population numbered 2,3 million inhabitants, who lived, for the greater part, in large villages and in small towns. The largest cities had, at the most, a population of from 50 to 60 thousand. That was about the number of persons living in Geneva. In Berne and Basle there were some thirty thousand souls, and in Zurich not many more. The principal industry was farming. Then there were the different crafts, and the small shopkeepers. Industry and commerce, on a large scale, were

still in their infancy, particularly the machine industry. The latter was unable to develop so long as the requisite raw materials, which had to be obtained from abroad, were subject to such high cost of transport and to the complicated conditions, which hindered free trade within the country itself. It took a long time for the railway to be adopted in Switzerland; the first railway line was laid down in 1847 between Zurich and Baden. Postal Revenue came within the competence of each individual Canton, so that there were a number of different postal administrations. All attempts to simplify the economic life of the country, to do away with excise duties and bridge tolls, and to introduce the unification of Swiss currency, proved a long and arduous business. The inhabitants of the central Cantons were far less susceptible to these difficulties, than were the more enterprising Swiss from the Eastern Cantons, as a result of which there was a considerable difference in opinion on these matters.

In comparison with other countries, Switzerland was, already then, from the social point of view, a well-to-do and well balanced country. Compared with her present situation, however, she was a much poorer country. Her soil was too sterile to provide food for her population, which was on the increase. Thousands of her children emigrated to overseas lands. Moreover, at that time, young men could still join foreign Armies in the capacity of mercenaries.

The King of Naples had several Swiss regiments in his service and young men who were unable to make good in their home-land, were only too glad to serve in them for a few years. There were beggars and poverty, and when the harvest failed there would be famine in many a village, up in the mountains, or down in the valley. The people were poorer than they are today, but, all the same, they were full of vital forces and intellectually alert. They were able to cope with the difficulties of that period and to make the best of it.

XX
XX
SWISS RED CROSS.
HELDEN - 8th MAY, 1948.
XX
XX

Today, the 8th of May 1948, marks the 120th anniversary of Henry Dunant, the founder of the Red Cross. On this same day, three years ago hostilities of the second world war came to an end in Europe. On this memorable day the

SWISS RED CROSS

sends a call to meditation upon the spiritual forces which have imbued the work of the Red Cross since the battle of Solferino, to all the Red Cross, Red Crescent and Red Lion and Sun Societies, and through them, to men, women and children of all nations, as well as to their governments. Today, the spirit and work of the Red Cross are more than ever in danger. The sinister aspect of this peril lies in the fact that until today the foundations of a veritable peace, so sadly needed by humanity, has not yet been laid.

The spiritual force, of which the Red Cross was born, is the feeling of kinship of all men; in our fellow-man we see ourselves, our value and dignity, our longing for justice and love, but also our weaknesses and shortcomings. The feeling of kinship of all mankind is the feeling of common origin and destiny, of common task and fate.

When we face suffering and death, our pride vanishes and racial, religious and social discrimination loses all importance. In its place there comes into focus the community of mankind, the responsibility of man towards man, irrespective of his position in life.

The Red Cross was created in order to alleviate suffering inflicted upon men