

Swiss National Day

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SWISS NATIONAL DAY

1st of AUGUST 1291 - 1951

On Wednesday, the First of August, Switzerland will celebrate the 660th anniversary of the foundation, consecrated by the Rütli oath, of her existence as a free confederation:— the *Eidgenossenschaft*.

As throughout our homeland the solemn sound of the church-bells fills the air and the bonfires light up the evening sky, it behoves everyone who has Swiss blood flowing in his or her veins, to pause awhile, to give a thought to the implications of the memorable event that took place in 1291 on the shores of the Lake of Lucerne and to look back across the centuries, with pride and awe, to those remote days when our forefathers, freedom-loving and determined men, took oath to maintain their liberties and to fight and die for their independence, one for all and all for one.

A glance at the historical background against which the events in 1291 unfolded themselves shows an Europe in turmoil, Emperors struggling against Popes and the commencement of a widespread reaction against feudalism. It also shows the aggressive policy of the powerful and ambitious House of Hapsburg, the would-be masters of inner Switzerland and, in contrast, the spirit of independence displayed by that little world of the Waldstaetten, the Forest-Cantons situated around the lake which united them and near the recently opened route over the St. Gotthard by which contact with the outside world had been established. The exchange of merchandise and ideas by this route had put an end to their isolation.

The concept of personal and communal freedom was, by all accounts, deeply ingrained in the minds of those early Swiss. Already in 1231 they had secured from King Henri, son of the Emperor Frederick II, a charter by virtue of which Uri became directly attached to the Empire and released from the authority of the Dukes of Hapsburg. A similar charter was granted to Schwyz in 1240. It was at this period that some kind of alliance seems to have been contracted between Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden and Lucerne. The text of this first pact of confederation is lost but it is referred to in the 1291 document.

The Swiss, in fact, do not appear to have revolted against the authority of the Emperors. They accepted their position as direct subjects of the Holy Roman Empire (of which it was aptly said that it was neither Holy nor Roman) but refused to submit to the domination of any local overlords such as the Hapsburgs, and resisted at all times the latter's claim to the ownership of their land and the tyranny they sought to impose on the population.


These ancient charters were respected by the Emperors, even by Rodolphe III, himself a Hapsburg, from whom Uri received confirmation of their old franchises. But when, in July 1291, the Emperor Rodolphe died, the outlook for the Waldstaetten became precarious. The Swiss feared, not without reason, that an interregnum would begin during which the Hapsburgs would re-assert their domination and flout the old-established rights the Swiss had secured.

Now was the time or never to throw off the Hapsburg yoke once for all. And so it came about that on the First of August 1291 the leading men of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden met on the Rütli field to renew their earlier pact and to transform it into a permanent alliance, an act of confederation that would safeguard their autonomy and their liberties for ever.

It is a remarkable feature of this historical event that it occurred at a time when feudal customs and serfdom were the accepted order of the day. No less remarkable is the fact that this small community of men, shut off though they were from the outside-world in their mountain valleys, yet possessed a political awareness, a sense of freedom and a vision that one would scarcely expect to find in a primitive people and which was far in advance of their time. But what they built has stood the test of time: the Swiss, through all the vicissitudes of their checkered and stormy history, have in the end emerged one of the most progressive democracies the world has known. Deep down in their consciousness they are imbued with a spirit of liberty and an appreciation of human rights that can, without exaggeration, be traced back to its source in the Rütli oath.

Students of Swiss history need not be told that the proud Hapsburgs did not take the challenge of the Waldstaetten lying down. Within little more than twenty years it was to be put to the test. On a raw November morning in 1315 a large and well-armed force advanced through the defilé west of Morgarten on what they thought would be a simple punitive expedition, an easy "promenade militaire." The insolent peasants who had dared to oppose the power of their lords were to be taught a lesson. By the end of the day the flower of Austrian knighthood in all their armoured might had perished and their army put to flight. A crushing defeat had been inflicted on them at the hands of the men who had sworn on the Rütli field to fight and die for their freedom.

With the battle of Morgarten begins the epic period of Swiss history. It ended when, her freedom firmly established the Swiss bartered their magnificent fighting power in foreign service.



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There is nothing idyllic in Switzerland's early history. "Her freedom", in the words of M. D. Hottinger, "was won, not by the picturesque and untutored valour of a handful of peasants, but by the most ruthless and competent fighting that Europe had then seen. The Swiss of the epic age were the terror of their neighbours, the natural enemies of all law and order, the Bolsheviks of Europe".

Be this as it may nothing will lessen the glow of admiration every Swiss must feel when the great story of the Rütli is being told.

Let us therefore, on this First of August, give humble thanks to Providence for the gift of a homeland in which freedom of thought and speech, and respect for human rights form the basis of our national life. These privileges are the essence of the glorious heritage our fathers have bequeathed us. The Rütli pact is our Magna Carta and it is appropriate that we should pay homage, once again, to the men who made it. For they have put us on the road to personal and political liberty.

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