

# On August 1st the world's oldest democracy

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## ON AUGUST 1st THE WORLD'S OLDEST DEMOCRACY, SWITZERLAND, CELEBRATES HER BIRTHDAY.

By Professor George Thürer, St. Gall.

A queer little country Switzerland is, with less than five million inhabitants and a surface of a mere 15,000 square miles. So she is less than one tenth the size of Ecuador, or 200 times smaller than Brazil. And yet this tiny dot of country is famous throughout the world. If you ask me why? the answer can only be "BECAUSE SWITZERLAND IS DIFFERENT". This small state in the heart of Europe has indeed a character of its own.

Everybody who has followed the political history of this century remembers that Switzerland during the two world wars, right in the middle of the wide battle fields, was able to keep out of the fighting and to maintain her independence inviolate, even though Hitler and Mussolini attacked all their other neighbours. If you ask the Swiss how they managed to survive the conflagration, they will tell you that it was all due to their old policy of *neutrality* and to the fact that they have a *strong and well-equipped army*. Though the tyrants hated democracy and reviled it as a most abominable thing, they knew that in Switzerland it was the very life force of a nation which was resolved to fight to the last man for its ideals and traditions. Hitler and Mussolini knew, because for at least twenty generations the Swiss have always been, as Machiavelli put it, "armatissimi" and "liberissimi", i.e. armed to the teeth and therefore most free.

The state which we now call Switzerland has grown from small beginnings in the middle of the 13th century, when a new way was opened, roughly between the valley of the Rhine and Germany on the north to Italy and Rome in the south. It was the *St. Gotthard Pass*, a very modest mountain path, but in importance quite a thoroughfare at that time. No wonder the German emperors, especially the Hapsburgs, whose oldest family possessions lay right across the northern approaches of the new short route to Italy, wished to get hold of the pass itself. But the people who lived there, and who gradually grew up into the Swiss nation, did not want to be puppets in the game of international politics. They were resolved to have their pass in their own control.

This was a radically new notion then, but it gradually grew into an important *political ideal* of the Swiss nation. Whilst in all other European countries in the Middle Ages people were ruled from above, by kings and feudal lords, things were already different in those parts of Switzerland which lie directly north of the St. Gotthard. There the inhabitants of the various valleys used to meet annually in general council to hold their "Landsgemeinde", a sort of township meeting, at which they elected their own government and magistrates and made their own laws. It was an early form of what we now call a *corporation* based on the same principles as the modern cooperative society. It was nobody's invention, it just grew of itself when people had to band together for the building of bridges and primitive roads. To help each other was a necessity, and the Swiss motto still is: "One for all, and all for one!" When these corporations began to expand and to form

alliances, they used to confirm their agreements by oaths and mutual pledges. The partners were called "Eidgenossen", which means "*companions of the oath*". For a long time this was the only name by which the Swiss leagues were known. Theirs was *democracy in its simplest, directest, and purest form*. True, the Greeks, too, had fine democracies. To them we owe both, the word "democracy" and its earliest definitions. But, as they still kept large numbers of slaves, even famous Athens at its best was in reality an aristocratic community.

In Switzerland, however, the pure form of direct democracy has held good throughout nearly seven centuries. Those "Landsgemeinden", or general meeting of all the citizens, are still held at least once a year in 5 out of the 22 Cantons of the present Swiss Confederation. The proceedings are conducted with so much earnestness and solemnity as to invite comparison with British coronation ceremonies.

Like every new form of government the Swiss democracies soon found themselves opposed by neighbours living under the old order. To defend themselves in common, therefore, three of the oldest of these mountain communities, in the middle of the 13th century concluded a defensive alliance, of which no written document is extant. But "the old league" is expressly mentioned in the new "*Letter of Alliance*", or covenant, which was sealed and sworn to at the beginning of August 1291. This venerable document is to the Swiss as dear as Magna Charta is to the English. Its purpose simply was a pledge between the peoples of the three Cantons of Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden to stand by each other "in



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view of the wickedness of these times", to keep the peace, to maintain order, and to "tolerate no foreign judges" or magistrates within their valleys.

The last stipulation was, of course, directed against the house of Hapsburg and Austria, which most ardently wanted to get hold of the Gotthard Pass, and which held the new democratic ideas of the Confederates in abomination. The tension soon led to conflicts and finally to open wars. In their struggle for independence the Confederates found natural allies in the equally freedom loving prosperous cities of Zurich, Berne, and Lucerne. Countries and towns combine their interests. The lively civil spirit of the citizens on the one hand and the sturdy character of alpine peasants on the other matched admirably both for peaceful politics and for war. After a period of heroic struggle the Confederates, or Swiss as they began to be called abroad, for a short period in the early 16th century even played the part of a Great Power among European nations.

They have long given up such ambitions. They have even, as is sometimes said, withdrawn from European politics. But, as everyone knows, they still occupy an important place in the economic field. Their products hold their place in all the *markets of the world*. In Science, Arts, Technics, too, Switzerland holds a front line place. Nine universities for a five million nation is certainly not bad. And she holds fifth rank with regard to the number of winners of the Nobel Prize. One of these was Henry Dunant, the founder of the *Red Cross*, which has long had its headquarters in neutral Switzerland. The first Geneva Convention even adapted for its international symbol the Swiss flag with colours reversed.

The success of Switzerland is still mainly due to her system of democratic government. The philosopher Unamano once described Spain as a nation of 18 million kings. The Swiss might make a similar claim with even better reasons. They are sovereign not only to choose their representatives to parliament, they even can say "yes" or "no" to *every bill or resolution* which is to be binding on the people, whether in municipal, cantonal, or federal matters. Such a system can only work where people are well schooled and well informed in all matters spiritual, economic, and political. It is so in the "Oldest of Democracies".

These are some of the ideas and facts which the Swiss celebrate and rejoice in on their National Day, when in the evening all the bells of all the churches peal in unison, and beacons and bonfires greet each other from a thousand hills and mountains. Remembering such scenes, the Swiss living abroad, and many foreign friends of the little country, let their thoughts wander back to the days of yore, the days of William Tell, the Swiss champion of liberty, and to the Rütli, where according to legend and tradition the founders of the first league met in the darkness of the night. This green meadow — another Runnymede — in the woods above Lake Lucerne, on the 1st of August, is still considered the very heart of Switzerland, more so even than Berne, which has been the capital of the country only since 1848, when the new Constitution was adopted, transforming the loose old alliance of 22 Cantons into a solidly organised federal state, "the Swiss Confederation", *Confoederatio Helvetica* as its name still reads in Latin on the Great Seal of the Republic, on all its coins, and on the plates of motor-cars. — Many happy returns to C.H.!

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