

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1965)
Heft: 1480

Artikel: What is the Swiss sense of national unity? [to be continued]
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-692954>

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WHAT IS THE SWISS SENSE OF NATIONAL UNITY?

Lecture delivered to the London Group of the N.S.H.

by

DR. DANIEL FREI

(PART TWO)

Following on the rough outline of the historical context in which the Swiss sense of national unity has to be seen, we now go on to the moving forces behind and within events and facts. By saying the common feeling and the will to live together was not sufficiently strong in 1798 and strong enough since 1848, we only consider the outside of the events, the mere facts, the things, but not the soul and the spirit of the things. If we try to find out the very heart of those historic events and of the present national existence of Switzerland, we cannot be satisfied with a mere factual account, but we have to ask two important questions: What was and what is that common feeling and thinking that makes up Swiss patriotism? and: How was Swiss patriotism activated; how was it taught to the people and how was it propagated?

It is difficult to describe Swiss patriotism in a few minutes without over-simplifying it. Nevertheless, the sense of national unity as expressed in the writings of the great Swiss philosophers, politicians, historians and writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, can be classified in three great ranges of ideas according to the temporal dimensions of the past, the present and the future. This means that the Swiss sense of national unity gives first a certain view on the national history, secondly a certain interpretation of the present situation and characteristics of the nation, and thirdly a certain concept of the role and mission the nation has to fulfil in the future.

First, the national view of the past, not of history as it really was, but of history as seen through patriotic eyes. Rather than enlarging on the whole of Swiss history, emphasis will be put in general terms on the features of that peculiar national way of seeing the past. Its most outstanding feature is the strict division of history into bright and successful periods on the one hand and in dark and humiliating spans on the other hand. Of course, life as it actually was and is, always inseparably links joy and distress, but patriotic eyes nevertheless distinguish bad and good periods of history. As a bright era is considered the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century, the period in which the three Cantons in the heart of Switzerland joined for the first time. To a patriotic view of history, the period of the first federal oath appears as the most important epoch of Swiss history, and it is interpreted as an early example of patriotic feeling and as a model of national brotherhood, although the men of the Rütli hardly had any national ideas in a modern sense. On the other hand, the era after the Burgundian Wars and especially since the Reformation is shown as the dark age of national history. Swiss patriotism as it emerged in the last two hundred years, never sees the Reformation as a happy event. It is interpreted as the beginning of national discord and civil war. The age of the Religious Wars, the battles of Kappel and Villmergue, is described as a warning, a deterrent example of national fraternal strife. These few examples show the tendency towards a strict division of periods, which is at the same time a tendency towards moral evaluation: the patriotic focus on history draws a sharp distinction between good

and evil. As good periods are evaluated the years of collaboration and unity, as bad periods dominated by evil men, the time of cantonal preponderance, slackening collaboration or internal discord. The patriotic view of history is a very moralistic one and therefore very distinct from any scholarly manner of considering history. The standard of value underlying such a moralist approach is always the same: if we read popular histories and school books, we find that patriotic policies are called brotherly love, loyalty, honesty and fidelity. Cantonal or federal tendencies on the other hand are blamed as egoistic, selfish and treacherous. This leaning towards a moralising perspective is the second outstanding feature of the patriotic thought on the past.

The third distinctive trait is that phenomenon which could be called the process of reduction and concentration of history. Swiss history as taught at school gives particular emphasis on battles and heroes. Why did and do patriotic teachers prefer to talk about the martial aspect of Swiss history, about Morgarten, Sempach and Laupen, about Tell, Winkelried and Gundoldingen, and why don't they speak about the complicated political background and power constellations of those early times? Undoubtedly, because these impressive historical facts and figures are easier to keep in mind, and because they can be interpreted as examples and models of national self-sacrifice. They are easier to remember because they are now simplified and concentrated into perceptual images, and, having been made to look alike, they serve as useful models.

There is another reason for not showing these facts and persons in their extremely complex historical context: If the battles and heroes are presented separately, they can be interpreted according to the actual political situations of the historians' own time. William Tell, for instance, has been described in the eighteenth century as a Republican idealist, in the time of the French Revolution as Jacobin revolutionist and murderer of a tyrant, and in the nineteenth century alternately as a Democrat and a Liberal.

Winkelried, too, had several aspects: First he was interpreted as the man who shows how to gain a victory over an enemy who is stronger in manpower and armament, and he became, like David versus Goliath, a symbol of the will to defend the small and weak against the powerful and dangerous giant. Then, in the middle of the nineteenth century, Winkelried became the man who heroically sacrificed his life on behalf of the national community. He was painted as the model of a good Swiss citizen, as the example of national enthusiasm and even willingness to die if the fate of the nation requires it. And since the 'nineties of the nineteenth century, Winkelried has been interpreted as symbol of the emerging welfare state: The heroic aspect is no longer stressed, but the fact that his last words had been "Look after my wife and my children!". This exclamation is now considered a pointer to the obligation of the nation to help and assist the weak and the helpless. In this way, all important figures in Swiss history got, according to the point of view of the historian describing them, another interpretation, another

costume, in every period. These three characteristics — the strict division of history, the search for moral evaluation and the tendency towards concentration of historical events — are the main features of the past as seen through patriotic eyes.

(To be continued.)

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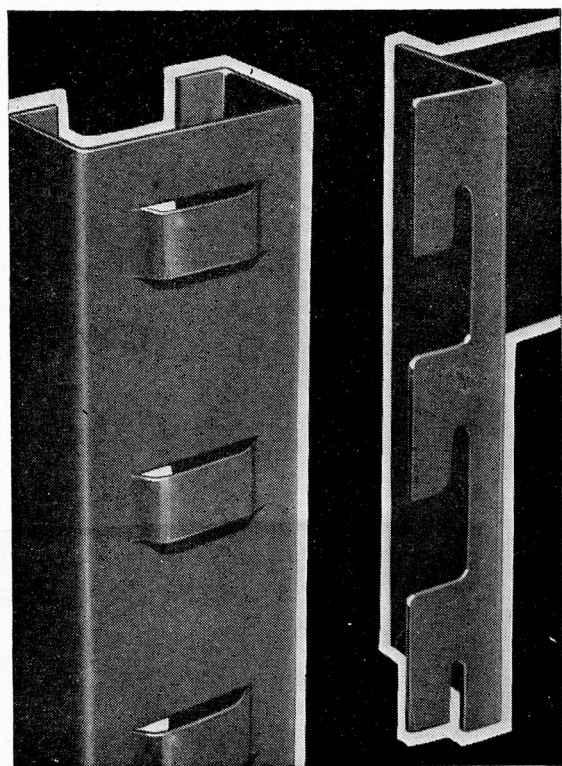
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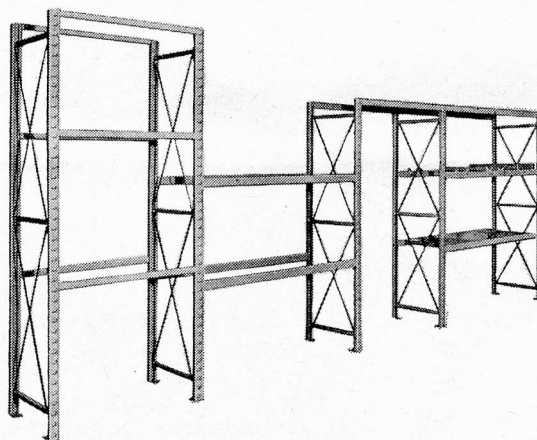
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