

On the way to becoming a federal state (1815-1848)

In 1815, after their victory over Napoleon, the European powers wanted to partially restore pre-revolutionary conditions. This occurred in Switzerland with the Federal Pact of 1815, which gave the cantons almost full autonomy. The system of ruling cantons and subjects, however, remained abolished. The liberals instituted a series of constitutional reforms to alter these conditions: in the most important cantons in 1830 and subsequently at federal level in 1848. However, the advent of the federal state was preceded by a phase of bitter disputes, coups and Switzerland's last civil war, the Sonderbund War, in 1847.

The Congress of Vienna and the Restoration (1814–1830)

At the Congress of Vienna in 1814 and the Treaty of Paris in 1815, the major European powers redefined Europe, and in doing so they were guided by the idea of restoration. They assured Switzerland permanent neutrality and guaranteed that the completeness and inviolability of the extended Swiss territory would be preserved.



Caricature from the year 1815: pilgrimage to the Diet in Zurich. Bern (the bear) would like to see its subjects Vaud and Aargau (the monkeys) returned. A man in a Zurich uniform is pointing the way and a Cossack is driving the bear on. © Historical Museum Bern

The term “restoration”, after which the entire age was named, came from the Bernese patrician Karl Ludwig von Haller, who laid the ideological foundations for this period in his book “Restoration of the Science of the State” (1816).

The pre-revolutionary elite already assumed power in most cantons when Napoleon's opponents marched through at the end of 1813, partially restoring the earlier set-up with its social and political inequalities. However, the new cantons of 1803 did not become subject territories again, despite the fact that the erstwhile rulers – in particular Bern with its former subjects Vaud and Aargau – tried to enforce this, even at the cost of civil war.

In August 1815, the cantons signed the Federal Pact, which gave them back most of their governmental powers with the exception of foreign policy and parts of the military. This meant that the cantons were again responsible for tolls, currencies and weights and measures, which was just as much of an obstacle to economic development as the lack of basic rights, specifically the freedom of industry and domicile.

During the Restoration, the major European powers, namely France and Austria, formed what was known as the Holy Alliance with the intention of ensuring that the old order remained intact. They interfered with internal Swiss affairs mainly in relation to questions of press censorship and political refugees.

The Regeneration (1830–1848)



Protests against foreign intervention in Swiss affairs at a people's assembly in Flawil (canton of St Gallen) on 7 August 1836. © Zentralbibliothek Zürich

The July Revolution of 1830 which dethroned King Charles X of France sparked a liberal awakening in Switzerland known as the Regeneration. People's assemblies, mostly in country towns with fewer rights, led to the creation of new, liberal constitutions, primarily in the large cantons of the Swiss plateau. These introduced equality for all residents of the canton, the division of power with representative, elected parliaments, as well as freedom of the press and of association, assembly, trade and industry.

This led to the emergence of many new associations, after proponents of a liberal nation state had already used this method to promote a sense of common identity across cantonal borders. At national level, the "Schweizerische Schützenverein" (the Swiss shooting association) was established in 1824, the "Eidgenössische Turnverein" (the Swiss gymnastics association) in 1832 and the "Eidgenössische Sängerverein" (the Swiss singers association) in 1842, while many scholarly societies and student associations also sprung up.

However, an attempt in 1832/33 to revise the Federal Pact and introduce a new Federal Constitution failed, as changes to the Federal Pact required a unanimous decision by all the cantons. The revision was opposed by the conservative cantons, in which the political conflicts between the fully entitled and disadvantaged citizens even led to the break-up of cantons, temporarily in Schwyz and permanently in Basel in 1833.

The liberal governments mainly invested in education, for instance by establishing compulsory elementary schooling ("Volksschule"), setting up teacher training colleges and founding universities (Zurich in 1833, Bern in 1834). However, such measures soon met with resistance from many Protestants and Catholics who were loyal to the church. They feared that rationalism and materialism would replace the Christian revelation. In 1839, following a protest march by the rural population that was accompanied by pastors, the liberal government in Zurich had to make way for a conservative one, in an event that came to be known as the Züriputsch. Conservatives also came to power in Lucerne in 1841.

The Sonderbund alliance

In the 1840s, the conflicts between liberals and conservatives rapidly escalated as extremists on both sides heightened the tensions. At its core, the conflict was a political one: should the cantons retain their sovereignty or should a national government with extensive powers be created? However, the conflict was increasingly run along confessional lines, which allowed both sides to mobilise their supporters.

The radical liberals took on clericalism and in 1841 managed to bring about the closure of the monasteries in Aargau, even though this was in breach of the Federal Pact of 1815. When the ultramontane Catholics in Lucerne invited the Jesuits to take over the administration of secondary education in 1844, many liberals reacted with dismay. They were afraid that the Pope, a foreign power, would thenceforth have a say in Lucerne's affairs. Even though the call-up of the Jesuits was constitutionally legal, in 1844 and 1845 two groups of radical liberal volunteers without state authorisation marched on Lucerne and made violent attempts to bring down the government there. They were defeated in battles that claimed over 100 lives.

In response, seven Catholic/conservative cantons – Lucerne, Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden, Zug, Fribourg and Valais – formed a protection alliance, the "Sonderbund", in 1845 to protect their traditional rights against the liberals. They also turned to foreign powers, specifically Austria and France, for support. The liberals saw the Sonderbund as being in contravention of the Federal Pact, according to which the cantons were not allowed to form any "alliances detrimental to the Confederation as a whole", and therefore called for its dissolution.

But it was only in the summer of 1847, after a number of elections and coups, that a majority of twelve cantons with liberal governments was formed. These then declared the Sonderbund to be in violation of the Constitution at the Diet and demanded that it be disbanded militarily. The liberal majority also decided to set in motion a revision of the 1815 Federal Pact.

The Sonderbund War (1847)

The Sonderbund alliance was disbanded in November 1847 after a short war which claimed only 100 lives. General Guillaume-Henri Dufour, commander of the federal troops, avoided excesses in this fratricidal war and was keen to end the conflict before foreign powers could intervene on behalf of the Sonderbund.

After the isolated canton of Fribourg had already been forced to capitulate at the start of the war, the decisive battle took place at Gisikon and Meierskappel in the canton of Lucerne. Following the victory of the federal troops, the other Sonderbund members quickly surrendered.

Guillaume-Henri Dufour (1787-1875)



Equestrian statue of General Guillaume-Henri Dufour in Geneva. © FDFA, Presence Switzerland

Guillaume-Henri Dufour is primarily known for his role in the Sonderbund War. The son of a watchmaker and liberal politician, Dufour also had various other great accomplishments, however. As a young man, he was responsible for flood protection in Geneva and was involved in the design of the first suspension bridge there.

Dufour was also a talented mathematician, engineer and cartographer. In 1838 he founded the Swiss Topographical Bureau. This later became today's Swiss Federal Office of Topography (swisstopo), which is still responsible for producing maps of Switzerland. Thanks to his initiative, the first full map of Switzerland was published in 1865, an event which also attracted attention abroad. Switzerland's highest mountain at 4634 m is named the Dufourspitze in honour of this versatile general.

In 1863, Dufour was also one of the founding members of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva.

The Federal Constitution of 1848



Seal of the Federal Constitution of 1848. © Swiss Federal Archives, Bern

The victory of the liberal-radicals in Switzerland displeased the conservative monarchies in France, Austria and Prussia. They warned the liberal majority in the Diet against changing the Constitution. However, in February and March 1848, the neighbouring states were themselves caught up in liberal and national revolutions, meaning that they could no longer interfere in the Confederation's affairs.

The Diet took advantage of this weakness to complete work on the new Federal Constitution in the spring of 1848. Its approval by the Diet was followed by ballots in the cantons, with 15½ voting in favour of the new Constitution and 6½ rejecting it, including most of the former Sonderbund cantons. Since any changes to the Federal Pact of 1815 actually required a unanimous vote, under applicable law these majority decisions constituted a revolutionary act.

On 12 September 1848, the Diet declared that the Federal Constitution had been passed. The cantons were now presided over by a national government (the Federal Council) and a national parliament (the Federal Assembly). The Federation was primarily responsible for foreign policy, the army, the currency, the postal service and the toll system.

The misgivings about federalism, not just of the Sonderbund cantons but also of the moderate liberals, were reflected in the bicameral system of the Federal Assembly, which was based on the US model. The National Council was elected by the cantons in proportion to their population, while the Council of States, the actual successor to the Diet, had two representatives per canton. Men were given the right to vote, provided they were Christian and not claiming social assistance. The Federal Council, the executive branch of government, consisted of several members with equal rights who were jointly elected by the two councils at the United Federal Assembly. The president of the Confederation, who acted as chair of the Federal Council, was elected for a term of office of just one year. This office, which until 1920 was usually connected with the Department of Foreign Affairs, has since been filled on a rotating basis by one of the other federal councillors. In the interests of the division of powers, a Federal Supreme Court was also established, although initially it only had modest powers.

The new Constitution guaranteed Swiss citizens freedom of the press, the right of association and petition, and freedom of trade and industry, provided the cantons did not impose police restrictions on them. Freedom of domicile and worship were initially limited to Christians, with Jews being granted freedom of domicile only in 1866 and the freedom to practise their religion only in 1874.

The Constitution created the necessary conditions for a uniform domestic market: the franc was introduced as the national currency and the Federation took over responsibility for supervision of key roads and bridges as well as for the postal service and tolls. It abolished internal tolls and unified external tolls, which simultaneously became its most important source of income and increased sharply thanks to the economic boom.

The Federal Assembly met for the first time on 6 November 1848, after the liberals and radicals had achieved an overwhelming victory in the first parliamentary elections. As expected, the representatives of the people elected seven liberals to the Federal Council, including two Catholics and one representative each for the French- and Italian-speaking minorities. Jonas Furrer was appointed the first president of the Confederation, and Bern prevailed over Zurich and Lucerne to be elected as the federal capital.