

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 37 (2010)
Heft: 4

Artikel: Swiss history : "It's the people who play the key role in Switzerland"
Autor: Eckert, Heinz / Maissen, Thomas
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906752>

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: 17.07.2025

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

"It's the people who play the key role in Switzerland"

Despite new findings and research into Swiss history, a modern overview aimed at a broad readership has been lacking. The Swiss historian Thomas Maissen has now filled the gap with his *"Geschichte der Schweiz"* (History of Switzerland). It is concise, up to date and easy to read. An interview with the author by Heinz Eckert.

"SWISS REVIEW": *Why have you written a new history of Switzerland?*

THOMAS MAISSEN: In recent years, I've received enquiries about this from five different publishing houses and projects, so there was clearly a significant demand for a concise history by a single author providing sound and easily understandable information. The last comparable book, which was more highbrow, was written by Ulrich Im Hof in 1971. And the various histories of Switzerland that have been co-authored by a number of specialists are also a bit long in the tooth.

Did you have to work on new findings?

A lot has happened in a few decades of research. In addition to the Second World War, other areas that have attracted a lot of attention include the emergence of the confederation, the uneasy co-existence of faiths and the approach to foreigners. 1998 was an important anniversary year which produced many new findings on the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), the Swiss Republic (1798) and the liberal federal state (1848). There have also been many developments in research into cantonal histories which have been the focus of attention in recent decades.

Do you have a new perspective on Switzerland's role in the Second World War?

Thanks to archive material made accessible and, above all, owing to public debate, the perception of Switzerland in the war has changed radically over the past 20 years. I have encapsulated this but it does not really constitute a new perspective, although some aspects remain controversial.

In the foreword, you write that Swiss history is more an example of solid and dull historical continuity rather than volatility. What did you mean by that?

What I actually wrote was that some people see it as solid and dull. Broadly speaking, you could write the history of Europe with-



THOMAS MAISSEN (1962) is a Professor of Modern History at Heidelberg University. He qualified as a lecturer in 2002 with a thesis entitled "The Birth of the Republic. Concept of the State and Representation in the Early Modern Period of the Swiss Confederation" and until 2004 was an SNF Professor at the University of Lucerne. Maissen was a member of the NZZ's historical analysis team from 1996 to 2004, commenting, among other things, on the work of the Bergier Commission.

out mentioning Switzerland which is not the case for our neighbouring countries. Apart from the Burgundian Wars and the Reformation, there are no earth-shattering events in Swiss history, a fact which has generally been beneficial to the nation.

Are there nations that write history in an exemplary fashion?

The writing of national history is based on similar principles everywhere. The emphasis is on the emergence of the national state, tracing the roots of this as far back as possible, and then on identifying it as a departure from the norm, as if such a thing exists, i.e. exceptionalism. The specific traits also serve to establish political legitimacy in the present day, for example, according to the maxim of once neutral, always neutral. Similarly, the Germans have a "unique responsibility for their history" and the French have the task

of propagating the civilisation of the "Grande Nation" to the world. A major difference is that figures like Luther, Napoleon and Bismarck are of European significance because their actions affected many different nations. In Switzerland, the same can only be said of Zwingli and, primarily, Calvin, who was a Frenchman. In a certain respect, it's the people who play the key role in Switzerland, the collective rather than individuals, even if very hierarchical structures have always dominated.

National history is a highly politicised field, which is why myths of victimisation (Kosovo Polje) and national honour (denial of the Armenian genocide) play such a significant role, particularly in the new or recently independent countries of eastern Europe or the "Third World", but also in France and the USA. With a rather matter-of-fact attitude towards national history, Switzerland is part of the western and northern European tradition, but there are issues in all countries where emotions can run high owing to differences of interpretation.

What do we have to know about the past to understand the present?

I don't understand the present. And there's a lot I don't know about the past. I believe it's less about knowledge of historical phenomena and more about understanding that current issues always have a historical dimension. The debate about banking confidentiality goes back to a 1934 law which was created in a completely different historical context, which in turn is explained by the First World War, which itself is to be understood in the light of the Franco-German conflict of 1870/71 or of Napoleon continuing the expansion policy of Louis XIV, etc. Things can always be traced back a long way, which is generally not necessary, because for a double taxation agreement with France it is not Louis XIV we have to deal with. However, it is good to have some knowledge of these things because we all – some of us con-

sciously, others not – carry these earlier historical decisions around with us as part of our heritage.

In light of its cultural differences, Switzerland is repeatedly referred to as a nation forged by the will of the people. Is that really the case?

I see it more as a defensive alliance. We want to protect freedom at local level, such as in the communes and cantons, and believe this does not exist in Germany or Italy, which is partly true. The people of Geneva and Vaud want the same thing. This desire for small-scale autonomy is what unites us, but I see that more as a desire to resist neighbouring states than as a desire to join with the other cantons. Swiss Germans learn Italian, if at all, to go on holiday to Sicily, not to communicate with their fellow citizens in Ticino or southern Grisons.

Is there a Swiss identity?

Of course there is a Swiss identity, which in schools and in the public arena emphasises the unifying impact of these small-scale aspects I have mentioned, namely federalism, direct democracy and neutrality, etc., which is as justified as, say in the USA, the constant reference to the constitution. In addition, there are supra-regional aspects which were and are conveyed with some success as applying to Switzerland as a whole – the Alps, farming, location for industry, sporting prowess (skiing, tennis, football). The characteristics are specific to the respective country, but the model for establishing an identity is similar everywhere.

Doesn't direct democracy constitute a major part of Swiss identity?

Yes, it does. But interestingly the foreign policy aspect, neutrality, always tops the list of Swiss values in surveys, even though it hardly plays any role at all internationally today.

What significance do the Swiss myths still have today? The Rütli oath and William Tell, etc.?

Myths substitute knowledge and are therefore useful for making sense of and determining the order of the past. The Swiss know that these stories about Tell and Winkelried, etc. are not completely true, but they have no alternative account. Many Swiss are surprised rather than shocked today when they

discover that there is not even a genuine historical basis for Tell and Winkelried, etc.

You say the Swiss began to invent their history in the late Middle Ages. What has been invented and what is true?

National history is about establishing a common past which stretches as far back as possible. In the late Middle Ages, for example, the Helvetii were identified as “forefathers”, Tell’s arrow shot was taken from other foreign texts and the tradition of liberation was invented. All of this was combined with events which were better documented to produce a plausible, credible past which made sense to contemporaries.

Are the histories of other countries more “honest”?

No, it’s not really a question of honesty. We are not talking about lies and deception, but rather a historical folklore which is always sketchy and leaves questions open. The gaps are filled in with plausible explanations to produce a coherent account. We do this today, but more meticulously and with less creativity than in the 15th century, but the approach is essentially similar.

Does Switzerland struggle with its history?

I don’t get that impression. I’d say there is a lack of interest for the reason mentioned, i.e. that there has been no earth-shattering drama in the land of the Swiss.

How important to a country is its political history?

If your priority is political aspects then the benefit lies in personalisation. The social and economic history of industrialisation is much more important than political history with regard to development and our everyday lives as wage-earners. But it has many anonymous heroes, whereas political history produces positive and negative figures, such as Napoleon, and this is otherwise only achieved by culture and these days sport.

Can we learn from history?

Here I agree with the most famous of Swiss historians, Jacob Burckhardt: history does not provide us with wisdom for another time, but (ideally) makes us wise forever. As history does not repeat itself, we are unable to learn how to react to things that occur. We are therefore repeatedly surprised by the course of events. However, we are able to deal with these surprises with greater com-

posure if we have knowledge of the past because historical experience allows us to see more possibilities than people who are caught up in everyday life. As an historian, for example, I anticipate that Switzerland and western Europe will experience war again which few people expect. I don’t have a formula for preventing war, nor would I know what to do if it broke out.

Would you say Switzerland has had a successful history?

Of course. Political alliances are created to ensure the survival of their members. In this respect, Switzerland has enjoyed impressive long-term success.

Are there key watersheds in Swiss history – positive or negative ones – that had an impact so strong we are still feeling it today?

Reformation (religious division), 1798 (equality before the law, national state), 1803 (federalism), 1848 (federal state), 1874 (direct democracy), Second World War (concordance model), 1971 (doubling of the population); but many involve a slow process and cannot be pinned down to dates.

Does the approach to history differ between the various linguistic regions?

Yes, there is always a strong cantonal influence. There is therefore no definitive history of Switzerland. While not many Swiss Germans know who Major Davel is, he is a very familiar figure to people in the canton of Vaud. The histories of the various linguistic regions are also heavily influenced by the historiographical traditions and models of neighbouring countries.

How much interest is there in Switzerland in our own history? More or less than in the past? Or has it remained the same?

Generally, there is greater interest in national history in times of crisis than in times of normality. We look for guidance in difficult situations. I anticipate that interest in Swiss history and controversy surrounding it are likely to increase.