

# The Genius of the Multilingual Swiss and Their Confederal Republic (CH)

by Norman Berdichevsky (February 2016)

Switzerland represents a remarkable set of opposite circumstances. It is a country with diverse peoples, languages and religions. Yet it has united all its citizens to create a unified country. Those willing to concede that the Swiss have formed a stable community and independent state for more than 700 years are usually reluctant to concede the somewhat more exalted term of a “nation” to them precisely because the country is divided into multiple ethnic and linguistic groups.

Switzerland often comes up as a topic of discussion. Most frequently it is held up as the “exception to the rule” that a single “national language” is either an essential or minimal requirement for the stability and harmonious functioning of a state. The examples of many other pairs of “sibling” nations, such as Portugal and Spain, Denmark and Sweden, Scotland and England, and the Czech Republic and Slovakia, reveal that speaking the same—or closely related, mutually intelligible—set of languages is clearly not sufficient to create a sense of common nationhood.

To many foreign observers, Switzerland has more than a reputation as “eccentric.” It is difficult to combine the idyllic Alps, the picturesque folk legends of Heidi or Wilhelm Tell, with the luxury hotels of the world’s premier tourist industry, world famous watches and clocks, and the most efficient citizen-army (copied in most details by the Israeli Army). The Swiss even resisted granting women the right to vote for a century after its adoption everywhere else in Western Europe. How could a country located in a hostile environment with no “natural resources” achieve the highest standard of living anywhere?

*Perhaps the question that has most fascinated everyone though is how could a country “divided” by four official languages and two major religions maintain a*

*strong sense of cohesion and solidarity?*



source: wikimedia.org

By any measure of stability, its position in international affairs for centuries, a loyal body of citizens devoted to common political ideals, a distinctive history, shared memories and a literature (albeit in different languages) that reflects the national experiences, Switzerland qualifies as a nation. In the face of Hitler's ravings about the destiny of one German-speaking nation, all segments of Swiss society stood firmly behind a policy of a strong defense. German speaking Swiss were no less patriotic than their French and Italian speaking fellow citizens.

No segment of Swiss society feels it is more "authentically Swiss" than any other. Rivalries, conflicts of interest and even war plagued the early history of the country but it was never based primarily on the cultural-linguistic cleavage between German, French and Italian speakers. The stability was won through centuries of peace, an ability to militarily defend the country against any aggressor, and a reputation for a stable currency and a world-renown safe haven for foreign investment and savings. These very reasons made Switzerland the natural choice for the headquarters of the former League of Nations and the International Red Cross. The country has nevertheless continued to reject membership in the European Union and by a very narrow referendum only approved membership in the United Nations in March 2002. A decade ago, it stood alone in a confrontation with Libya's megalomaniac dictator, and voted in a popular referendum to ban minarets on newly constructed mosques – something unimaginable elsewhere in the West where political correctness has become the 11<sup>th</sup> Commandment.

### **Origins and expansion of an anti-Feudal Defense League**

The three original entirely German-speaking "forest cantons" of Schwytz, Uri and Unterwalden around the eastern shore of Lake Lucerne entered into a defensive alliance in 1291 to protect their rights. The Swiss remained free from the interference of feudal lords and maintained their oath to the Holy Roman Emperor to protect the St. Gotthard Pass through the Alps between Italy and Germany in feudal times. When the Hapsburg dynasty first began to abuse its obligations,

the forest cantons rose in rebellion and established a confederation.

Attempts to crush Swiss independence were defeated and the success of the forest cantons inspired neighboring city-states to join the confederation. Bern, Zurich, Zug, and Lucerne brought with them considerable resources and urban sophistication. The trade of these cities was linked to the passageways through the Alps and across the Rhine River. Gradually Swiss successes in war and its policy of religious tolerance between Catholics and Protestants enabled it to escape almost unscathed from the devastating Thirty Years War (1618-1648). This further acted as a magnet to later draw in the Italian and French speaking regions. Other new candidates for membership were attracted by Switzerland's republican form of representative democracy and several of them deposed a bishop or prince in order to join the Swiss confederation.

The loosely organized confederation of autonomous cantons did not encourage a sense of a devoted common Swiss nationality until 1848 when, following a civil war provoked by religious differences, a new constitution was adopted. It copied the American federal system of government. Like "Topsy" in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Switzerland "just grew." It was not inevitable and certainly not the "natural outgrowth" of a common, cherished remote past or ethnic identity.

By 1939, a Swiss national consciousness and patriotism had reached such a peak level that Nazi Germany was forced to shelve any aggressive intention to conquer and absorb the country. The Swiss are not Germans or Frenchmen or Italians who happen to live in the Alps. Swiss history is the saga of devotion to representative democracy, honest government and opposition to feudal privilege.

One cannot speak of a "typical Swiss" and his or her tastes in music, food, art, leisure and hobby activities, folk customs or even superstitions. At home in their respective cantons, each segment of the Swiss population feels entirely free to cultivate their own way of life, yet all have become linked by a common loyalty, democratic institutions, a shared history and sense of destiny. The powerful attraction of the confederation for adjacent areas was the result of its rejection of feudal overlords and serfdom. It ensured mutually beneficial economic ties to manage the trans-Alpine trade and military preparedness. The original Confederation expanded as the best means to ensure its defense and the ability to avoid the bloody inter-religious wars that followed the Reformation.

The subsequently annexed French speaking areas in the Vaud and Aargau and in the Italian Ticino were originally “rotated” among the German speaking cantons as “joint dominions” but eventually turned into sovereign cantons. This political status as outlying but equal members of the Confederation proved much more attractive than the alternative of annexation to the centralized nation-states of France or Italy based on language and “ethnic homogeneity.” The name of the country on international driving plate emblems is abbreviated “CH” for the Latin “Confederatio Heveltica” and on postage stamps, the neutral shorter Latin form “Helvetia” is used.

### **Switzerland’s great test**

In spite of almost a decade of hostile propaganda, Swiss opinion was united behind the government’s total rejection of Nazi Germany’s attempts to absorb “its fellow Germans” in a new “Reich.” The country built an enormous military structure to resist invasion and was fully mobilized at the outbreak of World War II within 40 hours, even before the formal British and French declarations of war. The Swiss air-force shot down 10 German fighters and bombers crossing Swiss air space by the first week of June 1940 and during the war executed 17 Swiss citizens convicted of spying for the Germans. In November 1940, the Swiss government banned both the Nazi and Communist parties. Hitler called the Swiss “German renegades.”

Subsequent more pro-Axis policies from 1941 to 1944 also allowed a partial demobilization of Swiss military forces but in spite of such measures it should be borne in mind that no other “neutral country” openly resisted and defied Axis propaganda and the attempt to blackmail it into submission in spite of the fact that close to 80% of the Swiss spoke the same languages as the Germans and Italians thus proving that language is not synonymous with nationality, no matter how convinced the Nazis were of this “fact.”

### **The Cantons, Alpine Valleys and Language**

French Switzerland (La Suisse [Romande](#)). The highly decentralized cantonal structure of the Swiss government was organized to reflect the population geography of the country with its many narrow, isolated Alpine valleys, a feature of the landscape which operated to differentiate language into many spoken dialect varieties. An exception is the western French speaking region of

Switzerland (Romandia) whose population comprises a little more than 19% of the total and is predominantly urban. The cities of Geneva and Neuchatel were centers of literary creativity and often served as the refuge for progressive French writers and philosophers.

### **Schwyzerdutsch: German-speaking Switzerland (Alemania)**

Schwyzerdutsch, spoken by close to two-thirds of the Swiss as their mother tongue, is immediately recognizable even to foreigners with no knowledge of standard German. It is not a single language but differentiated into a number of dialects as numerous as "there are valleys in the Alps." It is certainly incomprehensible to most Germans on a visit to Switzerland.

Although all speakers of Schwyzerdutsch are educated in standard "High" German and are able to read and write in it, and most can speak it when called for, they prefer to speak the local variety at home and in comfortable social surroundings. Efforts were made by "Swiss nationalists" especially on the eve of World War II to try and codify, standardize and develop a written Schwyzerdutsch beyond the level of a dialect but it never got off the ground due to a recognition that it was not needed and most Swiss could ill afford to turn their back on their powerful neighbor. Nevertheless, the local dialect has increased in use and moved "higher up the register" being used more and more on radio and television programs, religious worship, political debate and even higher education. Politicians or other public figures who speak in standard "High German" are likely to give the impression of being snobs or even making themselves sound foolish by their unfamiliarity with a language many of them rarely speak in private. Swiss writers have, however, always written in standard German for the much larger German language market.

### **The Italian-Swiss Ticino**

The lovely Italian "Lake District" at the southern foothills of the Alps with its picturesque hamlets and colorful churches perched above narrow valleys has long been a holiday resort for Europe's wealthiest vacationers. The food, architecture, outdoor living-style and driving habits of the population are decidedly Italian. Italian has increased its share of the Swiss language pie. Those to the North have traditionally spoken a rural dialect whereas to the South, the native speech of the region is close to standard Italian, also spoken

by most Italian emigrants to Switzerland. Much closer to Milan and Turin, the Ticino folk nevertheless sought to align themselves with the Swiss confederation as early as 1440.

Although ruled by the original German speaking cantons of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden for centuries, Ticino resisted incorporation by Napoleon. The people successfully demanded equality under the banner of "Liberi e Svizzerri!" (Free and Swiss!) in 1803. The long awaited unification of Italy (1858-60) came much too late for the inhabitants of Ticino, many of whom were anti-clerical and anti-monarchist. The Ticino region has always had a higher standard of living than adjoining areas of Italy and neutrality in both World Wars presented an attractive alternative for political refugees, pacifists and opponents of fascism.

### **Rumantsch–Lingua Svizra**

One of the most curious aspects of Switzerland's linguistic identity is that the tiny Romansch speaking element which describes its language as "Rumantsch–Lingua Svizra." It used to be a common joke that the most blatant example of geographic ignorance was the belief that the Swiss spoke "Swiss," yet this is "true" of roughly 50,000 people in the canton of Graubunden comprising less than one percent of the Swiss population who speak Romansch. In neighboring Italy, diverse dialects spoken by almost half a million people are referred to as Rhaeto-Romanic.

Although originally an oral dialect, it was made an "official national language" in 1938 with a standardized orthography encouraged by the Swiss government. This was a clear political act to demonstrably defy Italian claims that Rumantsch was an "Italian dialect" implying an Italian claim to the region. The Swiss move was resented by the Italian authorities who saw in the "elevation" of one particular dialectal form of Rhaeto-Romansh to the status of an "official Swiss national language," as an attempt to tie the local speakers more closely to a sense of Swiss nationhood.

The largest city in the canton is Chur where only about 10% of the population uses Romansch as their first language and the next largest concentration is in Zurich in the heart of German speaking Switzerland. Due to limited resources, Romansch speakers cannot expect to receive the same standard of services. Even

in the home canton, secondary school education is available only in German.

**The Swiss Nation Today Will NOT be Blackmailed, Cajoled, Threatened, Brainwashed, Intimidated, Humiliated, or Made to Feel Guilty for Islamophobia**

Switzerland has already had another “finest hour” rivalling their refusal to bow to the Nazis’ propaganda in 1938-40. In July 2008, Switzerland arrested and detained the Libyan leader’s son, Hannibal Gaddafi, and daughter-in-law for beating their servants at a hotel. They were released two days later. Libyan leader Muammar al-Gaddafi retaliated, closing the local Libyan subsidiaries of Swiss companies Nestlé and ABB, arresting two Swiss businessmen for supposed visa irregularities, canceling most commercial flights between the two countries and withdrawing about \$5 billion from his Swiss bank accounts. The reaction of the Swiss press and public to the attempt of Swiss President, Hans-Rudolf Merz who went to Tripoli in August 2009 to apologize, was immediate and severe. Numerous calls were made for his resignation.

To demonstrate to the world that the Arab and Iranian calls for the disappearance of the State of Israel from the map are by no means unique, Gaddafi publicly called for the dissolution of Switzerland, and for its territory to be divided among France, Italy and Germany at the G8 Summit. This was followed by the statement of Hannibal Gaddafi in August, 2009 that if he had nuclear weapons, he would “wipe Switzerland off the map.” In February 2010, Gaddafi called for an all-out jihad against Switzerland in a speech held in Benghazi. In reference to the Swiss ban on minarets, he described Switzerland as an “infidel harlot,” calling for a “jihad by all means,” defining jihad as “a right to armed struggle,” which he claimed should not be considered terrorism. Two Swiss businessmen were arrested.

What was the reaction of the so called “civilized world” or the “community of nations,” or the United nations? NOTHING. The Swiss military drew up plans for a rescue operation to free the two hostages. It is no wonder that Israelis have such a high regard for Switzerland and its citizen army which formed the model in many respects for the IDF. According to the plan, Swiss commandos would infiltrate into Libya and liberate the imprisoned Swiss businessmen, and would then smuggle them out of the country.

Multiple other options were considered including smuggling them out of Libya

into neighboring Niger, and Tuareg guides were recruited, or flying them out aboard a small airplane. According to Swiss MP, Jakob Buechler, head of the Swiss Parliament's Defense Committee, the operation was imminent, and could have ended in a "total disaster." Considerable Italian objections and pressure were mobilized for fear of jeopardizing European relations with Libya after retaliation by Switzerland blacklisting 188 high-ranking officials from Libya by adding them to the Schengen Area visa blacklist. Italy was concerned about the effect this could have on its own diplomatic relationship with Libya, and especially on their combined efforts to stop illegal immigration from Africa into Europe.

Following the Swiss ban on minarets, Libyan government spokesperson Mohammed Baayou stated that Libya had imposed a "total" economic embargo on Switzerland, stating that Libya would adopt alternative sources for products originally imported from Switzerland (mostly pharmaceuticals, industrial equipment, and watches). The crisis ended with the release of the two Swiss businessmen after more than two years of detainment. The Swiss government was persuaded by its European friends to settle the matter with an informal "apology." The reaction of the Swiss people is that it had been let down because so much of Western opinion prefers to appease Muslim sentiment. When allowed to vote in a referendum, the Swiss People supported a federal popular initiative to prevent the construction of mosque minarets. In a November 2009 referendum, a constitutional amendment banning the construction of new minarets was approved by 57.5% of the participating voters. Only four of the 26 Swiss cantons, mostly in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, opposed the initiative.

The referendum initiators justified their stand by quoting parts of a 1997 speech by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Prime Minister of Turkey, which stated: *"Mosques are our barracks, domes our helmets, minarets our bayonets, believers our soldiers. This holy army guards my religion."*

The basic health of Swiss democracy and the popular initiative assured that Switzerland will not be browbeaten and bullied by political correctness like most of the rest of the world outside of where Islam reigns. Switzerland has always been a paradox – a true nation but one "divided" by language and religion yet sharing the same political ideal. Its diversity of cultures has produced a healthy successful society and not led to a demand for separatism and parallel societies, but rather to a common civic nation based on shared history,



traditions and the pride of success based on military preparedness. It has seen how other democratic western societies are crumbling under the impact of divisive immigrants, unable and/or unwilling to be integrated and ready to barter hundreds of years of a common collective identity for “coexistence.”

---

**Norman Berdichevsky** is the author of [\*Modern Hebrew: The Past and Future of a Revitalized Language\*](#).

To comment on this article, please click