A Contested Nation

History, Memory and Nationalism
in Switzerland, 1761–1891

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Introduction: History, memory, and the politics of national identity

> The Nation can have its BEING only at the price of being forever in search of itself.
>
> Fernand Braudel[1]

While the study of nationalism has emerged as one of the major growth areas of scholarly inquiry, generating a series of stimulating conceptual debates, some historians have recently identified a widening of the gulf between abstract theorising and context-specific research. In the introduction to his innovative study of nation formation in Wilhelmine Germany, for example, Alon Confino has maintained that 'in spite of the flourishing interest in nationalism, the sense of national belonging remains a puzzling problem. This is due, in part, to the paucity of studies exploring the ways in which theories of nationalism have worked in practice in distinct countries.'[2] Miroslav Hroch, whose three-phase model of European nation-building has acquired classic status, has argued in a similar vein, accusing some of the theorists of nationalism of impressionistic and selective use of historical evidence. As he continued his critical assessment of the state of affairs in the field: 'Polemically, one might say that at the moment we have an overproduction of theories and a stagnation of comparative research on the topic.'[3]

Yet the proliferation of theoretical literature has also inspired further detailed research on the subject, with many of the most original contributions coming from historians. The rapid growth of historical research on nationalism and national identity seems indeed to suggest that historians are intent on striking back, challenging many of the notions and concepts that the theorists have advanced over recent years. Perhaps the most persuasive critique advanced by

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[1] Fernand Braudel, *The Identity of France*, 2 vols. (London: Fontana Press, 1989), vol. I, p. 23.
[2] Alon Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany and National Memory, 1871–1918* (Chapel Hill/London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), p. 3.
[3] Miroslav Hroch, 'From national movement to the fully-formed nation: the nation-building process in Europe', in Gopal Balakrishnan (ed.), *Mapping the Nation* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 78.

historians has been directed against the equation of nationalism with a process
of administrative penetration and cultural diffusion, an assertion that is at the
heart of the leading modernist theories of nationalism. Thus, according to Ernest
Gellner and Karl W. Deutsch, people become nationals not out of voluntary
adherence to a set of shared values and symbols but due to the structural re-
quirements of modern, industrialised societies. From this perspective, acquiring
a national identity is tantamount to becoming a skilled practitioner of the cul-
tural codes of modern society. Those who oppose nationalisation on ideological
grounds are bound to pay the price of economic hardship and social exclusion.[4]
Historians such as Eric Hobsbawm and Eugen Weber have argued along similar
lines, although they have concentrated on the deliberate action of the state
rather than on anonymous structural forces. In his evocative book *Peasants
into Frenchmen*, for example, Weber meticulously investigates the Third
Republic's efforts to nationalise rural France – through the building of roads and
railroads, state-induced history and language education, and through military
conscription.[5]

   While these authors have portrayed modern nation formation as a one-way
street, new research suggests that it was in fact a road with many sideways
and unexpected diversions. Drawing on material from Württemberg in the
period 1871–1914, Alon Confino emphasised that the nation was effectively
'imagined' at the regional level; that it was above all in the German provinces
that the fate of official nation-building efforts was determined. Thus, if we
are to gain a better understanding of the protean and contested nature of na-
tional identity – this is Confino's methodological message – we ought to con-
ceive of the nation as a 'local metaphor' and concentrate on regional responses

[4] Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983). See also Gellner's first
elaboration of his theory of nationalism in *Thought and Change* (Chicago University Press,
1965), ch. 7. For critical assessments of Gellner's theory, see John A. Hall (ed.), *The State of the
Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism* (Cambridge University Press, 1998). See
also Karl W. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication*, 2nd edn (Cambridge MA: MIT
Press, 1966).

[5] Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2nd edn
(Cambridge University Press, 1993); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of
Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), esp. introduction and ch. 7 by Hobsbawm; Eugen
Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford
University Press, 1976). A summary of Weber's argument can be found in his essay collection
My France: Politics, Culture, Myth (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1991), pp. 159–88. For a
political account of nationalism that emphasises the role of the modern state, see John Breuilly,
Nationalism and the State, 2nd edn (Manchester University Press, 1993). For good survey articles,
see John A. Hall, 'Nationalism, classified and explained', in Sukumar Periwal (ed.), *Notions of
Nationalism* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1995), pp. 8–33 and Stuart Woolf
(ed.), *Nationalism in Europe Since 1815* (London/New York: Routledge, 1996), introduction by
Woolf. For a succinct recent critique of the modernisation school of nation formation,
see Eric van der Veer's introductory essay in Eric van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann
(eds.), *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia* (Princeton University Press,
1999).

and perceptions rather than on the state's cultural policies. It would mean, moreover, that we give up the 'artificial dichotomy between nationalism from above and from below' and instead begin to explore 'nationhood as a process by which people from all walks of life redefine concepts of space, time, and kin'.[6]

Even in France, where the tradition of a strong centralist state lent added credence to the 'top-down' perspective of national sentiment, several historians, drawing on a variety of provincial examples, have questioned whether the metaphor of *Peasants into Frenchmen* was really adequate to describe nineteenth-century French society. James R. Lehning, for example, has recently concluded that historians should not attempt 'to find when and how peasants became French, but to discover the ways in which they served to define what being French meant, and the ways in which French culture defined what being a peasant meant'.[7] Similarly, Caroline Ford, in her study of nationalism and regional identity in the Third Republic, has insisted that 'the creation of national identity is a process continually in the making rather than the imposition of a fixed set of values and beliefs'.[8]

The reinforced concern with the region has undoubtedly injected a welcome dose of empirical realism and historical refinement into the study of nationalism, and I shall therefore pay attention to regional responses and perceptions throughout the book. But regional contexts represent merely one factor that shapes the construction of national identities. Among the other elements that can potentially affect these processes, two will figure prominently in this book. One relates to the role of existing cultural vocabularies and historical memories in national identity discourse, particularly those that are broadly resonant and thus operate at the macro level rather than strictly confined to a particular region or group. Another concerns the conceptions of nationhood – 'voluntarist' and 'organic' – that social actors use in the political arena as they construct their national identities in the face of a changing domestic and international

[6] Confino, *Local Metaphor*, p. 4. See also Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), ch. 1. For a review of the literature on nation and region, see Celia Applegate, 'A Europe of regions: reflections on the historiography of sub-national places in modern times', *American Historical Review* 104 (October 1999), 1157–82. One major problem I see with Confino's and Applegate's highly innovative studies is that they tend to pay little attention to the normative pressure exerted by nationalism on the localities and regions. This pressure, which increased as states and other significant political actors began to embrace nationalist agendas and turned the nation from a minority creed into an ideological common sense, partly explains why the latter were increasingly compelled to justify their rival interests and agendas in 'national' terms.

[7] James R. Lehning, *Peasant and French: Cultural Contact in Rural France During the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 5.

[8] Caroline Ford, *Creating the Nation in Provincial France: Religion and Political Identity in Brittany* (Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 5. See also Alan Forrest, 'Federalism', in Colin Lucas (ed.), *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, 2 vols. (Oxford University Press, 1988), vol. II, pp. 309–27.

context. Relating our investigation to these factors can also help us to move beyond the recognition that the communities referred to as 'nations' are socially constructed. Not much is gained by reiterating this omnipresent truism. A more interesting line of inquiry, this book suggests, is to examine the cultural and political mechanisms that condition the definition of national identities at particular historical junctures.

BACKWARD INTO BATTLE: THE ROLE OF HISTORICAL MEMORY

While scholars are agreed that nationalism, the ideological movement that first rose to prominence in the American and French Revolutions, had a crucial bearing on the formation of the modern nation-state, there still remains the question concerning the cultural factors that shape the construction of national identities. Are we to conceive of modern national identities as cultural constructions, even fabrications, the nature of which changes with time and circumstance, or are they firmly determined by antecedent historical memories? Why do some historical memories and associated definitions of nationhood appeal to the wider public, while others either fail to catch popular imagination or provoke outright resistance? And in the final analysis: to what extent are these constructions determined by the conditions set by the present, and to what degree are they shaped by antecedent cultural idioms? These broad themes have been hotly debated at a conceptual level, yet their systematic historical exploration is still in its beginnings.[9]

Hobsbawm's seminal argument about the invented nature of national identities provides an appropriate point of reference from which to explore these questions. According to Hobsbawm, the invention of national traditions became historically significant in the latter half of the nineteenth century when rapid social change and the expansion of mass democracy posed a threat to the legitimacy of the traditional authorities. It was then that power elites throughout Europe began to recognise the need to historicise the present through the promotion of novel architectural styles and national mass ritual. Essentially, invented traditions 'are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to

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[9] For important contributions of a more theoretical nature, see Maurice Halbwachs, *La Mémoire Collective*, 2nd edn (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968); Pierre Nora, 'Between memory and history', in *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, under the direction of Pierre Nora, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), vol. I: *Conflicts and Divisions*, pp. 1–20; Michael Schudson, 'The present in the past versus the past in the present', *Communication* 11 (1989), 105–13; Anthony D. Smith, 'Gastronomy or geology? The role of nationalism in the reconstruction of nations', *Nations and Nationalism* 1 (March 1995), 3–14. Important European case-studies include: Robert Gildea, *The Past in French History* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1994); Confino, *Local Metaphor*; Ian McBride (ed.), *History and Memory in Modern Ireland* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition'. This phenomenon, having made its first appearance in the American and French revolutionary festivals – 'a people worshipping themselves' (George L. Mosse) on the streets and squares of big cities and small towns – by the late nineteenth century had become an integral part of European political culture. While their popular appeal derives from their ability to 'structure at least some parts of social life' as 'unchanging and invariant', invented traditions are specifically useful to elites who are mainly responsible for their creation. Writing on the relationship between invented traditions and nationalism, Hobsbawm writes that the former: 'are highly relevant to that comparatively recent historical innovation, the"nation", with its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols, histories and the rest. All these rest on exercises in social engineering which are often deliberate and always innovative, if only because historical novelty implies innovation.'[10] Most historians working on nationalism have followed Hobsbawm's lead. In an attempt to debunk many of the essentialisms promoted by nationalists – for example that nations are natural and immemorial communities rooted in a continuous past; that they reflect the 'inner self' of their constituent groups – they have stressed the political role of nationalism and the invented character of national identities.[11] Given the wide currency of the myth of the perennial nation, these endeavours at ideological deconstruction have undoubtedly been conducive to the evolution of a more critical view of nations and nationalism.

But the 'invention of tradition' paradigm, despite its alluring plausibility as a general proposition, is rather inadequate as an analytical tool in coming to terms with the dynamics involved in public redefinitions of nationhood. To begin with, the scope for inventing nationhood is limited because political elites must construct their ideologies in such a way that they resonate with the public, which partly depends on their ability to connect, in a meaningful way, to pre-existing cultural and moral frameworks. More crucial still, popular resonance is bound up with political legitimacy. Written from a more theoretical point of view, Quentin Skinner's observations about the relationship of political thought and political action can help illuminate this point. Skinner's main argument is that political actors are constrained by the set of ideas, values and narratives that

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[10] Hobsbawm and Ranger (eds.), *Invention of Tradition*, p. 13.

[11] As Hobsbawm (in Hobsbawm and Ranger (eds.), *Invention of Tradition*, p. 3) puts it unmistakably: 'Nations, we now know . . . are not, as Bagehot thought, "as old as history". The modern sense of the word is no older than the eighteenth century.' For works that are written in the spirit of the 'invention of tradition', see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1992); John R. Gillis (ed.), *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton University Press, 1994). For critical assessments of this viewpoint, see Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford University Press, 1999); J. C. D. Clark, 'Protestantism, nationalism, and national identity, 1660–1832', *The Historical Journal* 43 (2000), 249–76.

together make up the 'prevailing morality' of a particular society.[12] If a political programme sharply contradicts this morality, Skinner tells us, it is likely to be perceived as lacking in both plausibility and legitimacy. He sharpens this idea by using the political revolutionary as his example:

> The point which perhaps needs to be emphasised is that, however revolutionary the ideologist concerned may be, he will nevertheless be committed, once he has accepted the need to legitimate his behavior, to attempting to show that some of the *existing* range of favorable evaluative-descriptive terms can somehow be applied as apt descriptions of his own apparently untoward actions. Every revolutionary is to this extent obliged to march backward into battle.[13]

What Skinner wrote about political ideologies applies with equal force to the myths, narratives and values that constitute the historical memory of a community aspiring to become a nation. Such historical memories form part of the prevailing morality of a society, and thus part of the overall framework that shapes political actors and their ideologies. With the rise of a modern public sphere from the later eighteenth century, the appeal of national ideologies came to depend crucially on their ability to resonate with the wider public. Historical arguments have played a vital part in improving the public resonance of political ideologies.[14]

The Swiss patriots of the late eighteenth century, for example, in their quest for closer national integration, justified their ambitions by explicitly referring to the founding legends and liberation myths that by the turn of the seventeenth century had gained popular currency (chapters 1 and 2). These supplied the stock of cultural idioms from which they fashioned their ideologies, thereby legitimising their programme and demonstrating its plausibility to the wider public. As a member of the Helvetic Society reminded his fellow compatriots about the pivotal role of historical memory in the forging of a Swiss national identity in the 1780s: 'It is well known that to the people who live in free states their history is more sacred than their prayer books; and that, particularly in democratic states, patriotic history serves the purpose of retaining liberty and

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[12] Quentin Skinner, 'Some problems in the analysis of political thought and action', *Political Theory* 2 (1974), 299. For critics of the constructivist approach to nationalism, see especially Smith, 'Gastronomy or geology'; Alexander J. Motyl, 'Inventing invention: the limits of national identity formation', in Ronald G. Suny and Michael D. Kennedy (eds.), *Intellectuals and the Articulation of the Nation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 57–75.

[13] Skinner, 'Political thought and action', 295–6. For an illuminating analysis of conflicts over the interpretation of the historical past and its significance for pre-revolutionary French politics, see Keith M. Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), chs. 2–4.

[14] Raphael Samuel has noted that 'history' – both as an academic discipline and as a form of popular narrative – 'owed its appearance . . . to a rising concept of nationality'. Raphael Samuel, 'Continuous national history', in the collection edited by the same author: *Patriotism. The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, 3 vols. (London/New York: Routledge, 1989), vol. I, pp. 10–11.

conserving the essential principles of the constitution.'[15] Even in the vitriolic polemics which accompanied the conflicts that erupted between the Helvetic Revolution of 1798 and the creation of the liberal state in 1848, the traditional historicist narrative provided the focus for both supporters and opponents of a modern nation-state (chapters 3 and 4). Although the conflicting parties rallied behind opposing conceptions of community and interpreted the core myths differently, both referred to the same constitutive narratives to advance their rival claims. Finally, in the late nineteenth century, the Swiss historian Karl Dändliker explained the particular significance of historical memories for Swiss national identity with the ethnocultural diversity of the country's population: 'To a greater degree than any other people, the Swiss feel attached to their history . . . In fact, the latter is an integral part of our national self-consciousness.'[16]

It is tempting to discard statements such as Dändliker's as mere expressions of an elite-driven national rhetoric. Yet the evidence presented in this book will reveal that national historicism was an obsession that was shared across the boundaries of class and religious affiliation. Hence, instead of simply reducing such statements to manifestations of instrumental reasoning or taking them naively at face value, I think it would be more appropriate to ask, in keeping with Skinner, why elites cultivated such a markedly historicist discourse in the first place.

To emphasise the influence of cultural and historical antecedents is not to deny the role of present events and circumstances in shaping national ideologies. Nor is it to deny that nationalist activity presents a key to our understanding of how ideas about nationhood are deployed as devices in a political struggle. There can be little doubt that symbolic vocabularies and historical memories are only persistent if significant social groups continue to rely on them as ideological devices. Where they retain their place in the political arena over several generations, however, they sometimes acquire considerable normative and moral weight as cultural idioms that inspire and shape action. They then become part of the political culture within which national ideologues – the late-eighteenth-century patriots; the orators at the sharpshooting matches of the 1840s; the mass educators and official nation-builders of the late nineteenth century – have to operate. This does not mean that ideological innovation is impossible. What it suggests, however, is that innovation takes the form of novel combinations rather

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[15] Karl Viktor von Bonstetten, 'Über die Erziehung der Patrizischen Familien von Bern', first published in *Schweizerisches Museum.* ii/iv (1785). Cited in *Bonstettiana*, vol. I/2, p. 444. Johannes von Müller put it even more forcefully in a letter to the Zurich magistrate Johann Kaspar Fäsi on 24 December 1797: 'We need to look for clamps in the fourteenth century for the ideas of our time. This will help us to fasten them and to ensure that the new does not lack the reverence inspired by the old. It will also facilitate matters.' *Bonstettiana*, vol. VII/2, p. 752.

[16] Karl Dändliker, *Geschichte der Schweiz mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Entwicklung des Verfassungs- und Kulturlebens von den ältesten Zeiten bis zur Gegenwart*, 3 vols. (Zurich: Schulthess, 1884), vol. I, p. 20.

than pure invention. To mix metaphors from Hobsbawm and Marx: people do invent traditions, but not in circumstances of their own choosing. Nationalists create new ideological syntheses from available cultural idioms, and these syntheses may again be refashioned and transformed in different social, political and regional contexts.[17]

NATIONAL VISIONS: VOLUNTARIST AND ORGANIC

While one theme of the present book is the role of historical memory in national discourse, its second concern relates to how Swiss national identity was defined in the shifting social and political contexts of the present. Specifically, was national belonging primarily conceived in terms of a voluntary subscription to certain political values and institutions, or was it portrayed as something that is ultimately determined by nature? Unfortunately, as with the issue of historical memory, these questions have more often been taken up by theorists illustrating their arguments with a few selected examples than by historians investigating particular cases.

Civic nations, so the classic argument runs, derive their legitimacy and internal cohesion from their members' voluntary subscription to a set of political principles and institutions. In sharp contrast, ethnic nations are founded on a sense of self-identity determined by 'natural' factors such as language or ethnic descent. Consequently, civic nationhood is the outcome of deliberate human commitment, while ethnic nationhood results from long-term cultural and historical evolution. Political theorist Bernard Yack has juxtaposed the two conceptions in a critical analysis: 'The myth of the *ethnic* nation suggests that you have no choice at all in the making of your national identity: you are your cultural inheritance and nothing else. The myth of the *civic* nation, in contrast, suggests that your national identity is nothing but your choice: you are the political principles you share with other like-minded individuals.'[18] In its

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[17] Here I draw on Theda Skocpol's distinction between 'ideology' and 'cultural idioms'. As she explains their relationship: 'Cultural idioms have a longer-term, more anonymous, and less partisan existence than ideologies. When political actors construct ideological arguments for particular action-related purposes, they invariably use or take account of available cultural idioms, and those idioms may structure their arguments in partially unintended ways.' Cited in Theda Skocpol, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 204.

[18] Bernard Yack, 'The myth of the civic nation', *Critical Review* 10 (1996), 198. For other works that distinguish between two forms of nationalism, see, for instance, Friedrich Meinecke, *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat. Studien zur Genesis des deutschen Nationalstaates*, 3rd edn (Munich/Berlin: R. Oldenbourg, 1915); Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism*, 2nd edn (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1967); John Plamenatz, 'Two types of nationalism', in Eugene Kamenka (ed.), *Nationalism: The Nature and Evolution of an Idea* (London: Edward Arnold, 1976), pp. 22–36; Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).

scholarly guise, the civic–organic typology developed against the background of the polemic over Alsace that preoccupied the French and German publics in the immediate aftermath of the war of 1870/1. In 1882, the French scholar Ernest Renan argued against the insistence on language, blood and soil to justify his demand that Alsace return to France in accordance with the will of the majority of the province's population. Whereas in the German Romantic tradition the nation represents an organic community – Johann Gottfried Herder wrote that nationality was 'as much a plant of nature as a family, only with more branches'[19] – Renan argued that the nation was a voluntary community, a *plébiscite de tous les jours*. As such, it would not exist but for the civic commitment of its members: 'Man is the slave neither of his race, his language, nor his religion; neither of the courses of the rivers, nor the mountain ranges. One great aggregate of men, of sound spirit and warm heart, creates a moral conscience that is called a nation.'[20]

While the analytical distinction between civic and organic forms of nationhood is eminently useful, the Swiss case suggests that it is difficult to distinguish as neatly as some historians of ideas in particular have done between civic (or political) and organic (or ethnic) nations.[21] In a sense, this is because nationalism is almost by necessity a blend of these two visions – the voluntarist and the deterministic – in accordance with its twofold aim of creating a new political community while at the same time circumscribing its cultural boundaries. Yet in some recent works of historical sociology, too, the distinction between civic and organic forms of nationhood is applied in terms of a scheme of classification rather than as a Weberian ideal-type. Liah Greenfeld, for example, ends up equating Germany with the ethnic type of nationalism, while she defines France as civic. Even Rogers Brubaker, although he takes great care in his comparison of German and French citizenship legislation to avoid turning ideal into

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[19] Cited in Maurizio Viroli, *For Love of Country: An Essay on Patriotism and Nationalism* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 123.

[20] Ernest Renan, 'What is a nation?', in Woolf (ed.), *Nationalism in Europe*, pp. 58–9. Admittedly, Renan's definition of the nation also contains references to 'common glories in the past', a 'common possession of a rich legacy of memories' and even 'the cult of ancestors' (p. 58). Yet while Renan acknowledges the significance of these elements for modern national identities, it is important to emphasise that he conceives, for example, of a group's past, expressed in a set of myths, memories and symbols, in voluntarist rather than organic terms. For Renan, cultures and pasts have been fostered and created. They only influence people's thoughts and actions if the latter happen to make them a part of their personal and collective memories.

[21] Juxtaposing thinkers like Voltaire and Rousseau with Hamann and Herder, political theorist Maurizio Viroli writes in *For Love of Country* (pp. 93–4): 'For the founders of nationalism the distinctive feature of the fatherland is the spiritual unity based on language . . . The birth of the language of nationalism involved a change in the meaning of the concept of fatherland, which gradually became a non-political concept no longer centred on political and civil liberty, but on the cultural and spiritual unity of a people.' Works that approach nationalism from an intellectual history perspective are legion. For a particularly influential example, see the following two works by Isaiah Berlin: *Vico and Herder. Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (London: Hogarth Press, 1976); *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 333–55.

real types, comes up with a similarly clear-cut picture of a French civic and a German ethnic nation. What is more, all these works reveal a tendency of associating references to 'cultural' factors – particularly language or the pre-modern past – with the ethnic type, and those to 'political' factors – embodied in an emphasis on political values or the institutions of the modern state – with the civic type.[22]

The Swiss case is particularly well suited to bringing out the limitations of this typological approach, because within Switzerland claims to nationhood have had to be realised in a polyethnic environment. It is precisely this seemingly paradoxical constellation – the structurally imposed inability to conform to classic nationalism, which in turn triggered efforts aimed at defining national identity in ways that could satisfy its essential normative assumptions – which renders Switzerland such an intriguing case for the study of national ideology. Because its polyethnic composition deviated so obviously from the nationalist norm and had its legitimacy periodically contested both domestically and abroad, it was never self-evident but had to be constantly reasserted and redefined.

Thus, when modern nationalism began to spread across Europe, and above all with the rise of ethnolinguistic nationalism in the last third of the nineteenth century, Switzerland's political class faced a particularly challenging task. Unlike their counterparts in countries such as Germany, France or England, Swiss would-be nation-makers could not refer to shared ethnicity, in the sense of shared ethnic descent or linguistic affiliation, to bolster their claims. This posed serious problems in terms of legitimacy and international recognition in a Europe where cultural homogeneity was regarded as the cornerstone of true and authentic nationhood. Yet, the national ideology they constructed out of this quandary was neither purely voluntarist nor purely organic. Rather, they responded to the challenge of ethnic nationalism by constructing a national identity that combined voluntarist and organic elements. While fervently embracing the rhetoric of civic exceptionalism, Switzerland's political and cultural elites fostered an ideology of organic (rather than ethnic) nationhood. More specifically, they claimed that the Swiss nation was both a voluntary and a natural community – a *Willensnation* yet also a true *Wesensgemeinschaft*.[23]

What the Swiss case brings into sharp relief, then, is that particular definitions of national identity rise to prominence in particular historical situations where

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[22] For more recent applications of the civic–ethnic typology, see in particular Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood*, introduction; Greenfeld, *Nationalism*, introduction; Smith, *National Identity*, ch. 1.

[23] *Willensnation* means 'voluntary nation'. *Wesensgemeinschaft*, which can be translated as 'community of character', is close in meaning to what Otto Bauer called a 'community of fate' (*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*). Bauer's essay on the nationality question in the Habsburg lands has been reprinted in Balakrishnan (ed.), *Mapping the Nation*, pp. 39–77.

they serve to address, and potentially resolve, specific political problems.[24] Hence what matters with regard to the construction of national identities is less *what* resources political actors draw upon than *how* they put these resources to practical use. For example, all those who participated in the controversy over Swiss nationhood from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century were preoccupied with the Confederate past. What is significant, however, is that some conceived of the late medieval liberation myths primarily in ideological terms, as didactic frameworks that could inspire civic action. This applies in particular to the radicals and liberals of the 1830s and 1840s who fought for the establishment of a federal state, reflecting their aim of integrating different religious and linguistic groups into a single national state. By contrast, those who opposed the *Bundesstaat* of 1848 tended to adhere to a genealogical interpretation of the Confederate past, seeing it as a testimony that the Swiss Confederation had grown organically out of the ethnic core provided by the founding generation. Thus, for them, the federal state was an artificial construction that went at the expense of the authority of the organically evolved cantons. This organic historicism came to form the common denominator in the conservative counter-nationalism of the 1840s and beyond. A Catholic newspaper report of 1846 encapsulated this position: 'The question that remains to be answered is this: who constitutes the Fatherland, the Nation? The divided authorities, the party that breeds revolution and public outrage, or those immediate descendants of the heroic forefathers who constitute the pillars of our Fatherland's history and liberty?'[25] The sources examined reveal a similar ambiguity concerning 'national culture'. Those who advocated a voluntaristic conception of culture, while conceding that it pertained to the historical *longue durée*, nonetheless insisted that it could be changed more or less at will. The champions of organic nationhood emphatically denied this, arguing that national culture represented a manifestation of the nation's continual and natural growth. The same holds true for attitudes towards the state and its constitutive institutions. Those who adhered to a voluntarist conception of nationhood tended to portray them as man-made, as the outcome of deliberate human action. Those who subscribed to an organic conception, on the other hand, tended to brandish the liberal state of 1848 as an artificial creation designed to suffocate the cantons' traditional rights and liberties. Moreover, when the Swiss conception of nationality found itself challenged from the 1870s by the ethnolinguistic varieties that prevailed

[24] This is in agreement with Eley's and Suny's view that 'nationality is best conceived as a complex, uneven, and unpredictable process, forged from an interaction of cultural coalescence and specific political intervention, which cannot be reduced to static criteria of language, territory, ethnicity, or culture'. Geoff Eley and Ronald G. Suny (eds.), *Becoming National: A Reader* (Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 8.

[25] Cited in Franco Luzzato, 'Die mediale Konstruktion des liberalen Nationalismus im Vorfeld der Bundesstaatsgründung', MPhil thesis, University of Zurich (1996), p. 120.

in Germany and Italy, this triggered a variety of responses. Some argued that Switzerland was a voluntary nation and thus different from its neighbours; some maintained that she had evolved an organic national culture over the centuries since her founding in the late medieval period; and yet others displayed a rhetoric that fused these two narratives into an ostensibly convenient ideological synthesis (chapter 5).

THE NATION AS A CONTESTED COMMUNITY

The present book cannot claim to fill an empirical gap in the study of Swiss national identity in the period from the late eighteenth to the close of the nineteenth centuries. Given its chronological range, it would be surprising if it could make such a claim. Specific aspects relating to this topic, mostly focusing on relatively short time spans, have been addressed in a multitude of often illuminating articles and shorter studies that have been published since the mid-1980s. My debt to many of these works will become glaringly obvious in the footnotes as well as in the text of the following chapters.[26]

Among the more recent analyses of the subject, the bold syntheses by Guy P. Marchal and Ulrich Im Hof deserve special mention.[27] Both Im Hof and Marchal place Swiss national identity in the historical *longue durée*. In his book *Mythos Schweiz*, Ulrich Im Hof essentially adopts a perennialist perspective in which nation formation appears as a process of continual political and cultural integration. A Swiss national consciousness, he contends, began to take shape in the late fifteenth century and subsequently developed organically throughout the crises and conflicts of the early modern and modern periods. Meanwhile, Guy P. Marchal's study concentrates more specifically on the Confederate founding narrative, tracing its diffusion among the wider populace from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries. In contrast to Im Hof, Marchal places equal weight on the continuous and discontinuous aspects in his reconstruction of the discourse surrounding the founding and liberation myths.

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[26] See also Georg Kreis, *Die Schweiz unterwegs. Schlussbericht des NFP 21 'Kulturelle Vielfalt und nationale Identität'* (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1993); Guy P. Marchal and Aram Mattioli (eds.), *Erfundene Schweiz. Konstruktionen nationaler Identität* (Zurich: Chronos, 1992); Andreas Ernst, Albert Tanner and Matthias Weishaupt (eds.), *Revolution und Innovation: Die konfliktreiche Entstehung des schweizerischen Bundesstaates von 1848* (Zurich: Chronos, 1998); Urs Altermatt, Catherine Bosshard-Pfluger, Albert Tanner (eds.), *Die Konstruktion einer Nation. Nation und Nationalisierung in der Schweiz, 18.–20. Jahrhundert* (Zurich: Chronos, 1998).

[27] Guy P. Marchal, 'Die "Alten Eidgenossen" im Wandel der Zeiten. Das Bild der frühen Eidgenossen im Traditionsbewusstsein und in der Identitätsvorstellung der Schweizer vom 15. bis ins 20. Jahrhundert', in *Innerschweiz und frühe Eidgenossenschaft*, ed. Historischer Verein der Fünf Orte, 2 vols. (Olten: Walter Verlag, 1990), vol. II, pp. 309–403, and Ulrich Im Hof, *Mythos Schweiz. Identität – Nation – Geschichte* (Zurich: Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 1991). As their respective dates of publication indicate, both studies were written in view of Switzerland's 700th year anniversary celebrations of 1991.

It is the constant focus on this medieval mythical repertoire, he argues, that supplied an incipient Swiss national identity with a degree of permanence in spite of changing interpretations.[28]

In spite of their undisputed significance, however, these accounts contain a number of conceptual and methodological weaknesses that renders taking a fresh look at Swiss national identity a legitimate and indeed a necessary undertaking.[29] In the first instance, both Im Hof and Marchal tend to conceive of nationhood in the holistic and diffusionist manner so heavily challenged in the recent studies of Confino, Ford, Applegate. Im Hof, for example, lists a number of values and convictions – including republicanism, federalism and the will to military self-defence – which, he claims, provided the constitutive features of Swiss national consciousness for a period of more than four hundred years.[30] The problem with this perspective is that the meaning of concepts such as republicanism and federalism did not remain constant over time. The humanists' view of republicanism differed in significant respects from that of the members of the Helvetic Society, which in turn had little in common with the republicanism of the supporters of either the Helvetic Republic or the nation-state of 1848; and even within one and the same period, there was precious little consensus about the meaning of concepts like republicanism and federalism.

Marchal, meanwhile, although he is anxious to stress the dynamic and constructed nature of national identity, focuses on shifts in overarching definitions and cultural representations rather than on the political controversies over political culture and national institutions that were played out in the public arena. Essentially, therefore, both Marchal and Im Hof concentrate on elite and official conceptions of national identity, even in the nineteenth century where the question of their public reception and contestation becomes paramount. Because there is no systematic analysis of nationalism as a contentious ideology and practice – manifested in the social conflicts and counter-ideologies that supplied the discourse of national identity with one of its few firm ingredients – the top-down diffusion of these elite conceptions is (implicitly) assumed rather than examined. While Marchal employs a constructivist approach, Im Hof takes a more essentialist perspective. Although neither of the two scholars situates his study in the conceptual debate on nationalism, their accounts are mainly concerned with how the nation was symbolically represented.

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[28] Marchal, 'Die Alten Eidgenossen', pp. 309–11. Two essays that raise important conceptual questions are Georg Kreis, *Der Mythos von 1291. Zur Entstehung des schweizerischen Nationalfeiertages* (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt Verlag, 1991), and Sandro Guzzi 'Helvetischer Staat und Nationalisierung der Gesellschaft', in Altermatt, Pfluger and Tanner (eds.), *Konstruktion einer Nation*, pp. 131–48.

[29] This will involve some re-reading of key printed source collections including the reports of the annual meetings of the Helvetic Society (1762–98) and the records of the Helvetic Republic (1798–1803). It will also involve an examination of periodicals, newspapers, pamphlets, of speeches and toasts, reports of the activities of civic associations, and of local and national festivals.

[30] See Im Hof, *Mythos Schweiz*, pp. 12–14.

This study adopts a different perspective. It argues that contests over culture and institutions form a vital (but so far rather neglected) dimension of the phenomenon that George L. Mosse has described as the 'nationalization of the masses', and that such contests represent struggles for status and recognition on the part of the regions, localities and other cultural and political groupings that constitute the modern nation-state. This perspective, which, following Norbert Elias, conceives of nations as figurations of interdependent actors, is in marked contrast with much existing research on this subject that focuses on either cultural construction or administrative penetration.[31] Of course, students of nationalism have frequently noted the contested nature of national identity. Some have insisted that official nationalism frequently provoked fierce opposition from within civil society. The resistance of orthodox Protestants and Catholics to secularisation, for example, has often been taken as evidence that nationalism was less popular than its champions would have us believe. Others have concentrated on public controversies over the meaning of such concepts as Germany, France, Italy or Britain, or on the co-existence of regional and national identities. Yet, in most of these works competition and controversy is treated as a by-product of official nationalism – well suited for thick description, but on the whole less essential than the nation-state and its institutional apparatus.

In my reading, cultural contest and contestation were instrumental in popularising the modern nation itself. It was through such controversies and rivalries that men and women were drawn into a modern public sphere and became engaged with national institutions. At one level the nation may well be regarded as an abstract 'imagined community', to use Benedict Anderson's much-used phrase. But the nation was rarely merely a product of the imagination. As long as it was just that, nationalism remained a movement of intellectuals. Yet in the course of the nineteenth century, the concept of the nation became entrenched in the institutional fabric of the modern state. If we adopt this perspective, then the notoriously elusive concept of 'national identity' takes on a new meaning. It then appears as a contest in which various players at different levels of society participate – and less in terms of the creation of a shared national vision as expressed, for example, in the national representations we encounter in educational texts or public rituals.

These contests and controversies fundamentally represent struggles for collective recognition in an era in which the nation, and later the nation-state, became a central source of status and prestige for its constitutive parts. The historical regions and localities in particular, but also the political and religious

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[31] The concept of 'figuration' is discussed in Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation: Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen*, 2 vols (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976), vol. I, preface.

groups constituting the nation, began to compete for status, prestige and recognition within this new frame of reference – not just for economic resources and political influence. Here the Catholic cantons supply the most obvious and instructive example. Most of them defeated and profoundly challenged by liberal norms of cultural and economic progress, they began to stress their past and present contribution to the nation and its institutions. While forms of loyalty and identification below the nation-state did not disappear, they nevertheless became more problematic as the nation emerged as a central moral category. Although there was no inherent contradiction between national and other forms of collective identification, the rise of the secular nation-state unleashed a discourse of recognition in which local, regional and religious loyalties had to be justified in national terms. This is why both the supporters and the opponents of the new secular order established in 1848 began to work towards the nation-state.

Thus the formation and reconstruction of Swiss national identity in the period from the late eighteenth century to the close of the nineteenth was a competitive project rather than a top-down process of cultural diffusion. It manifested itself at the crossroads of politics and culture, of popular and official memory. The patriotic movement of the 1760s, for example, quickly split into a radical and a reformist faction that differed conspicuously in terms of their rhetoric and strategy (chapter 2). These intra-nationalist divisions continued to exist during the period from 1798 to the founding of a modern Swiss state in 1848 (chapters 3 and 4). In many ways, then, it would be more accurate to portray this pivotal era of Swiss history in terms of a struggle between the liberal and radical champions of the nation-state and their opponents than as a national movement culminating in 1848 in the creation of a federal state.[32] Such struggles often contributed more to producing 'the nation' as a focus of mass loyalty than any kind of (often imaginary) national consensus. Throughout the long nineteenth century, tens of thousands of people were drawn into nation-centred activities of various kinds. Debates over constitutional issues, over education and national symbols and memories were as prominent a part of this syndrome as were rivalries between different regions to hold a national festival. Even when the Swiss celebrated the 600-year anniversary of their nation in 1891, the carefully staged festivities – this time clearly supported by a nationalising state – were marred by a public debate over the 'right' interpretation of the national past, which adopted the

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[32] The tendency of associating national identity with a process of cultural and political integration and a related set of consensual values is still widespread. In her absorbing recent account of early-nineteenth-century developments, for example, Ursula Meyerhofer argues that what united the diverse Swiss population was a republican *Bürgergeist*, a pervasive mental disposition that rested on such values as industriousness, orderliness, education, discipline and patriotism. See Ursula Meyerhofer, *Von Vaterland, Bürgerrepublik und Nation. Nationale Integration in der Schweiz 1815–1848* (Zurich: Chronos, 2000).

form of a competition between 'official' and 'popular' memory (chapters 5 and 6).

Allied to internal political struggles was the competition between nations. The interrelationship of domestic and international developments – a key feature for any understanding of nations and nationalism, yet one that has not yet found the central attention it would deserve – therefore provides a key to our understanding of national identity. Once nationalism had established itself as the dominant political force in nineteenth-century Europe, it was bound to stir up competition among different conceptions of nationality and to serve as a major catalyst of national self-assertion. This international dimension was particularly visible in a small country like Switzerland. Like their counterparts in other countries, the Swiss patriots of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for example, were sensitive observers of developments in neighbouring states, and they both criticised and praised foreign cultures and polities (chapters 3 and 4). After the creation of the liberal state in 1848, moreover, the significance of international dynamics became even more striking. Thus the liberal state's cultural politics – the scores of official speeches on the state of the nation, the staging of public festivals and commemorations, the passing of new legislation to promote national art and the provision of extra funding to promote the scholarly study of the national past – were not designed merely for domestic consumption. Rather, they were part of the cultural and political competition amongst different nation-states (chapters 5 and 6). Recognition was to be acquired through conveying an image of national authenticity to the outside world. The Swiss case thus confirms, in a particularly illuminating way, that modern nationalism results in claims to national recognition that stress both difference from and accordance to conventional nationalist norms.[33]

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[33] As Craig Calhoun ((ed.), *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 21, 25) has aptly put it: 'The pursuits labelled "identity politics" . . . involve seeking recognition, legitimacy (and sometimes power), not only expression or autonomy . . . This is even so for the identity of nations, which involves a rhetoric of cultural difference yet is in large part a claim to equivalent standing with other nations – i.e. to be the same sort of thing that they are.'