

## “History of Switzerland”

Permanent exhibition  
National Museum Zurich

## Tour of the exhibition

The new permanent exhibition on the History of Switzerland is organised chronologically and examines the formation of the Confederation, the journey from *Staatensbund* (confederation of states) to *Bundestaat* (federal state) and the challenges Switzerland has faced and will continue to face in the 20th and 21st centuries.

### 15th century – alliances and military campaigns

The exhibition begins with alliance formations between rural cantons, cities and noble rulers. The alliances promise safe transport routes and guarantee military protection, but they must be continually renewed. Moreover, the federal localities conquered rulers together and went on to govern them collectively. The focal point of the room is an installation of pikes and halberds, together with a media station on the founding history. This story would be told again and again over the following centuries and thus became a catalyst for the development of a Swiss identity.

### 16th century – Reformation and the Federal Diet (*Tagsatzung*)

The room dedicated to the 16th century shows how the early, just recently consolidated Confederacy worked. Representatives from the 13 cantons met regularly at diets to negotiate and coordinate foreign policy. 13 *Standesscheiben* (stained glass coats of arms) from this time period painted by Josias Murer depict the sovereign localities of the Old Swiss Confederacy. Their focus shifted increasingly towards France. This is also evident in a facsimile of the Peace of Fribourg treaty from 1516, signed by the confederates and the French king after the defeat of Marignano in 1515. Internally, the Reformation and splitting of religious denominations put the Confederation to the test. Reformers such as Ulrich Zwingli fought against mercenaries serving on behalf of foreign powers. In Catholic Switzerland, on the other hand, mercenary leaders increased their recruitment of warriors.

### 17th century – bourgeoisie and mercenaries

The Swiss Confederation was largely spared during the Thirty Years' War. However, highly coveted Swiss mercenaries continued to fight on both sides far from their homeland, and mercenary contractors thrived by supplying fully armed regiments. In 1663, the Confederation renewed its alliance with King Louis XIV in the interest of the mercenary treaties. This scene is depicted in the “Alliance Tapestry”, which can be viewed in the exhibition at its impressive size of almost 25 m<sup>2</sup>. Still, the deployment of Swiss mercenaries posed a challenge for the cooperation between

the reformed vs. Catholic parts of the Confederation. The different confessions defended their beliefs and struggled to establish their own identities and influence. Meanwhile, a strong bourgeoisie class emerged in the cities and displayed its status in the reformed cantons with discreet luxury. One example of this is Hans Konrad Werdmüller's valuable suit of armour.

### **18th century – the Enlightenment and sentimentalism**

In the 18th century, scholars spread the Enlightenment throughout Europe. One gallery in the exhibition highlights the city of Geneva, where philosophers such as Voltaire and Rousseau debated universal values and called for political reason. Men and women held lively discussions in salons with the aim of bringing about socio-political reforms. Love marriages and parental love as well as the emotionalisation of all areas of life were first accepted among the bourgeoisie. Scientists surveyed the Swiss mountains, idealised the Alpine world and endeavoured to boost agricultural yields. Innovative entrepreneurs started spinning and weaving at home. An early form of industrialisation set in. An old hand loom symbolises home-based work.

### **19th century – *Bundestaat* (federal state) and industrialisation**

In the 1830s, liberals gained power in some cantons. They considered the rural population to be on a par with urban dwellers. In 1848, the *Staatenbund* (confederation of states) became a federally oriented *Bundestaat* (federal state). Customs duties were abolished and a single currency was introduced. The federal government acquired more power over the army and postal service, which were standardised throughout the whole of Switzerland. The Federal Palace was built in Bern, memorialised in the exhibition with a scale model. A generator from the Brown, Boveri & Cie company represents early industrialisation. In addition to railway construction, export trade in the textile and machine industries was booming. Still, there was widespread poverty. Many Swiss emigrated to North and South America.

### **20th century – World Wars and economic boom**

The 20th century part of the exhibition covers two themed rooms. Military equipment from the two World Wars and the Cold War in the first room illustrate the continuing threat of war. The planned army retreat to the Redoubt in the Second World War served to fortify the Alps on a massive scale. Switzerland thus made it clear that invaders would have a high price to pay. A telescope provided a three-dimensional view of the inside of the fortifications on the Gotthard Pass.

The second room examines the economic boom and societal changes in the 20th century. Social issues such as the introduction of OASI in 1947 were negotiated intensively. The subsequent upturn in the 1950s created jobs in construction and in the service sector. Major distributors such as Coop and Migros met the public's

growing demand for consumer goods. To this end, the country needed more workers, which it recruited primarily in Italy. From the 1960s onwards, social movements have been demanding more rights and freedoms. The dress of the first female Federal Councillor Elisabeth Kopp stands for progress in women's suffrage, the denim jacket of musician Toni Vescoli for the youth movement, and a three-wheeled solar-powered vehicle from 1985 for the rise of the environmental movement.

### **21st century – contemporary history**

Globalised Switzerland and its direct democracy face challenges in an era of rapid change. Five key 21st-century challenges are presented for debate: robotics, climate change, migration, issues of sovereignty and life expectancy. Decisions in these areas create opportunities, but also have their price. They improve things for some people, but force others to do without. And each new opportunity in one place entails a risk of imposing restrictions elsewhere. Visitors decide for themselves. How will they tackle this dilemma?