

Historical Analysis of the Evolution of Swiss Identity and the Successful Integration of Multilingualism into the Swiss Concept of Nationhood

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Abstract : Switzerland's ability to forge a strong national identity across linguistic barriers has long been of interest to nationalism scholars. This begs the question of how this has been achieved, given that traditional explanations of luck or exceptionalism appear highly reductionist. This paper evaluates the theory that successful Swiss management of linguistic diversity stems from the strong integration of multilingualism into Swiss national identity. Using archival analysis of Swiss government records, historical accounts of prominent Swiss citizens, as well as secondary literature concerning the fundamental aspects of Swiss national identity, this paper charts the historical evolution of Swiss national identity. It explains how multilingualism was deliberately and successfully integrated into Swiss national identity as a response to political fragmentation along linguistic lines during the First World War. Its primary conclusions are the following. Firstly, the earliest foundations of Swiss national identity were purposefully removed from any association with a single national language. This produced symbols, myths, and values -such as a strong commitment to communalism, the imagery of the Swiss natural landscape, and the use of Latin expressions, which can be adopted across Swiss linguistic groups. Secondly, the First World War triggered a turning point in the evolution of Swiss national identity. The fundamental building blocks proved insufficient in preventing political fractures amongst linguistic lines, as each Swiss linguistic group gravitated towards its linguistic neighbours within Europe. To avoid a repeat of such fragmentation, a deliberate effort was made to fully integrate multilingualism as a fundamental aspect of Swiss national identity. Existing natural symbols, such as the St Gotthard Mountains, were recontextualized in order to become associated with multilingualism. The education system was similarly reformed to reflect the unique multilingual nature of the Swiss nation. The successful result of this process can be readily observed in polls and surveys, with large segments of the Swiss population highlighting multilingualism as a uniquely Swiss characteristic, indicating the symbiotic connection between multilingualism and the Swiss nation.

Keywords : language's role in identity formation, multilingualism in nationalism, national identity formation, Swiss national identity history

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