

# Switzerland

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Switzerland is a case that puzzles not only scholars of nationalism, but also those working on migration and citizenship. How did a state develop that simultaneously emphasizes internal ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity and tolerance and has produced one of the most restrictive immigration and naturalization regimes in Europe? As a multilingual, multiethnic (French, German, Italian, and Retho-Roman speakers) and federal state, Switzerland is often discussed as a case that does not fit the common theories of nation-state formation. For those, like Ernest Gellner, who perceived linguistic and cultural homogeneity as a given condition of nationalism and nation-state formation, Switzerland was treated as an exception. For others, like Ernest Renan, who emphasized a shared political history as the foundation of the national imaginary, Switzerland was a paradigmatic example. In general, the debate revolved around whether Switzerland, with its multilinguistic character, could be considered an example of civic nationalism, a multinational state or an example of constitutional patriotism (Helbling and Stojanovic 2011).

Newer research, however, claims that Switzerland might not be an exceptional case, but rather an imagined nation that has been shaped by mechanisms similar to those in the states surrounding it (Altermann, Bosshart-Pfluger, and Tanner 1998). Switzerland might best be understood as a multiethnic nation in which the nation comprises several subnational ethnolinguistic communities. Moreover, multiethnicity represents a pivotal element of Swiss national identity, particu-

larly since World War I, when a collective Swiss national identity came to predominate over local identities. The fact that different language groups have lived together peacefully under one political roof is a matter of considerable pride for the Swiss and forms the core of official nationalism to this day (Wimmer 2002). The lack of cultural and linguistic homogeneity is not seen as a deficiency, but has instead become the very core of the Swiss national imaginary: Switzerland is often referred to as a “nation by will” (*Willensnation*), a term that is used in almost every speech celebrating national days and symbols.

But this particular collective nation-building process, which was based on a multiethnic and, until World War I, radically republican concept of the nation, was simultaneously accompanied by a principle of exclusion along national lines, particularly with regard to immigrants. The development of a common Swiss national identity that was able to embrace linguistic-local and cantonal belonging worked only by excluding outsiders (Arlettaz and Arlettaz 2004). During the first sixty years after the foundation of the modern Swiss state in 1848, there was almost no discrimination against foreigners with regard to temporary residency, permanent settlement, or economic activity, and a liberal naturalization regime was in place. During and after World War I, immigrants' access to rights was limited, the naturalization process became more restrictive, and immigrants were subjected to cultural and ethnic bias (Dahinden 2014). Switzerland today has one

of the most restrictive naturalization regimes in Europe, and political struggles concerning naturalization mostly revolve around the question of how to ensure that only those persons who correspond to a fuzzy idea of being “Swiss” will be naturalized. While a liberal conception of nationhood prevails in some municipalities, mainly in the French-speaking cantons (in these cantons foreigners often have the right to vote at the communal or cantonal levels), in others an ethnic understanding of citizenship has emerged (Studer, Arlettaz, and Argast 2008). This point is important because it shows that a uniform consensus on the nature of Swiss nationhood does not exist, even among political actors in Switzerland.

Historically, what has been particularly relevant for the closure of the Swiss national boundary was the myth of a small country that had to fight against “overforeignization” (*Überfremdung*). This powerful myth was particularly well suited to boosting a Swiss imagined community without questioning its internal cultural and linguistic heterogeneity because it offered self-affirmation *ex negativo* (Kury 2003). The use of the term “overforeignization” is peculiar to the Swiss and has been part of most political debates since the end of the nineteenth century. It first emerged within government administration, trade unions, and civil society; it was later mobilized by right-wing popular initiatives with regard to immigration and integration; and it was directly inscribed in migration laws. For example, the first Federal Law of Residence and Establishment of Foreigners, which was in force between 1931 and 2007, stipulated that immigration must be regulated to meet the nation’s economic needs and guard against “overforeignization.” This kind of thinking is still employed by contemporary anti-immigrant movements like the Swiss People’s Party; their referendum “against mass immigration” has been

accepted by the Swiss population in February 2014 and aims to reintroduce quotas on the number of foreigners allowed to work in Switzerland. Hence, while ethnic and linguistic diversity among the Swiss is perceived as a virtue, ethnic diversity with regard to migrants continues to be regarded as highly problematic.

SEE ALSO: Citizenship; Immigration; Minorities; Multiculturalism; Nation-State

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