

18th century

Overview



Luzernerhaus was constructed in Frauenfeld for the canton of Lucerne's representative at the Diet. From 1715, Frauenfeld was the site of Diet assemblies for the whole of the Confederation, to which representatives acting under instruction were sent by the cantons to discuss common business. © FDFA, Presence Switzerland

In terms of foreign relations, the 18th century was a peaceful time in which, after the Battle of Villmergen in 1712, religious tensions gradually began to ease. Within the cantons, however, resistance arose in a number of places against the power monopolies of small groups.

The 18th century was marked by major changes in agriculture and the emergence of cottage industries, particularly in textiles and watchmaking. Enlightenment societies addressed economic issues and questions of education and a new form of patriotism that was now linked with the nation rather than the canton. In the process, they overcame confessional boundaries and actively exchanged ideas with like-minded thinkers abroad. A few of them – such as Schaffhausen-born historian Johannes von Müller – even managed to earn a livelihood there, something which was impossible in Switzerland.

Economic changes

The Swiss population grew from 1.2 to 1.65 million over the course of the 18th century. Feeding this growing population was made easier by the arrival of the potato and the gradual overhaul of the three-field crop rotation system, under which village communities tilled the fields together but did not always do so efficiently.

However, the division of the community-owned common land between private landowners also led to a situation in which decreasing numbers of large-scale farmers produced ever larger harvests from bigger, contiguous pieces of land, while small-scale farmers turned into day labourers and tenants without full citizenship rights, creating a rural proletariat.

This growing rural underclass was particularly dependent at first on village cottage industries and later on working in the cities, thus providing the manpower for the incipient industrialisation. The domestic workers worked as part of a putting-out system, which enabled the rural population to evade the regulated guild-based economy of the cities. This new system was often introduced by Italian or French religious refugees, who were not eligible for membership of the guilds in the cities. These refugees were merchants, and so provided the home workers with raw materials (wool, silk and cotton) and tools (spinning wheels and looms). The entire

family was involved in this work, including children. The textile processing industry was primarily concentrated in eastern Switzerland (St Gallen and Zurich Oberland) and north-western Switzerland (the Basel silk ribbon industry).

Alongside textile processing, a second industry emerged in Geneva before spreading to the Jura region: watchmaking. Here, too, the technology, capital and trade relations were largely brought to the region by Huguenot refugees. Due to the cottage industries, virtually contiguous commercial regions emerged, extending from Appenzell and Toggenburg via Glarus and the Zurich Oberland to Oberraargau and the Jurassic Arc. Although it did not spell the end of poverty, the putting-out system did offer the affected areas an alternative to mercenary service and day labour on the land. Furthermore, opportunities opened up for budding entrepreneurs in the rural areas, initially for middlemen (known in Swiss German as “Fergger”) working for city merchants, and also for independent entrepreneurs in more distant, autonomous regions such as Glarus. These groups of people who had risen in the social hierarchy played a major role in the political transformations that took place up to the year 1848.

The products of the cottage industry were valuable luxury items that were mostly exported abroad and soon also overseas. As a result, international private trading banks emerged in connection with long-distance trading, primarily in Geneva and Basel. These were involved, in some cases using the treasuries the cantons had accumulated, in financing national debt and the expenditure of the European princely courts, as well as in overseas expansion, slave trading and the plantation industry in the colonies. Swiss goods also formed part of the intercontinental triangular trading system. They might, for instance, be swapped for slaves in Africa who in turn were sold in America in return for colonial goods.

Opposition to existing power structures



The memorial to Major Jean David Abraham Davel in Lausanne was built in 1898. © © FDFA, Presence Switzerland

Since the 17th century, some of the families who were eligible to rule had increasingly cut themselves off, not only from their subjects, who had no political rights, but also from the common citizens and people of the countryside, who were increasingly prevented from entering important offices and receiving recognition. This was primarily about material goods, control over property, collective usage rights and income from mercenary work.

This matter sparked fierce disputes in a number of city and rural cantons in the 18th century, which ultimately revolved around the question of which groups should share the power and thus have a say in political decision-making on the distribution of economic resources. The disadvantaged members of society put up increasingly strong resistance against the monopolisation and centralisation of government powers, mostly by campaigning to have their old rights restored.

These ‘squabbles’ aroused attention among the enlightened European public, such as the execution in 1749 of Bernese citizen Samuel Henzi. Vaudois lawyer and officer Jean David Abraham Davel also rose up against

the Bernese patricians in 1723. He submitted to the authorities in Lausanne a manifesto in which he demanded independence for Vaud from the Republic of Bern. In response, Davel was arrested and executed, which attracted no great attention at the time. It was only in the middle of the 19th century that Davel was declared a heroic independence fighter in Vaud.

The unrest that repeatedly shook Geneva between 1707 and 1782 attracted attention throughout Europe, turning the city into a “laboratory of revolution”. This was not only due to the fact that various sections of the population were fighting for their full political rights. In fact, the most famous proponents of the Enlightenment were keeping an eye on the situation in Geneva, sometimes at very close quarters, like Voltaire who lived in neighbouring Ferney and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, himself a citizen of Geneva.

The Enlightenment and the Helvetic Society

The Enlightenment period saw the emergence of a bourgeois public as well as numerous scholarly societies, debating clubs, reading circles, salons, newspapers and magazines. In their *Discoursen der Mahlern* (Discourse of the Painters), Johann Jakob Bodmer and Johann Jakob Breitinger broke new ground by bringing the English model of the moralistic newspaper *The Spectator* to German-speaking Europe.

In addition to economic changes, patriotic societies increasingly began to discuss political reform as well. This generally occurred at local level, usually in the cities. The Helvetic Society, which was founded in 1762 and usually met in Schinznach, had the aim of “establishing love and friendship, unity and concord between the Swiss”. The society united Protestant and Catholic Enlightenment thinkers from various Swiss cantons.

Under the banner of “Helvetism”, scholars from French-speaking Switzerland were incorporated into the Helvetic Society; until that point, the Confederation had been an exclusively German-speaking entity from a political perspective. However, French culture had been a major influence on the country since the 17th century, both with regard to courtly customs and Enlightenment ideas. The latter often questioned the status quo and the order and power of the state and the church, which had grown over time but were hardly justifiable any more.

In his 1762 work *Of the Social Contract*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau drew a line between political events in his home town of Geneva and the Swiss democracies and a universalistic programme of political emancipation: “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.” Rousseau gained some followers in Switzerland, such as Johann Jakob Bodmer, but was strongly opposed by the patricians in Geneva in particular. His idea of popular sovereignty and the general will had a strong and direct impact on the French Revolution.