

Switzerland during the Cold War (1945-1989)

A consociational government, which was known as a “concordance government” and which included the Social Democrats, was formed during the post-war period. From 1959, the four largest political parties permanently divided the seven government seats among themselves in a fixed constellation known as the “magic formula”.

During the post-war period, Switzerland experienced an economic boom. Its traditional economic strength was in the industrial sector, but in the last quarter of the 20th century, Switzerland transformed itself into an economy with a service sector that employed three quarters of the labour force. This process resulted in a significant increase in the standard of living, a steady improvement in working conditions and social security, and an ever-growing variety of consumer goods.

As a small and open economy, Switzerland was and is dependent on access to foreign markets. At the same time, during the Cold War it pursued a policy of strict neutrality between the two blocs, although it considered itself part of the West in economic, political and cultural terms.

Changes in the party-political landscape

In 1943 the first Social Democrat, Ernst Nobs, was elected to the Federal Council. From 1959, the Federal Council's seats were apportioned according to the “magic formula”: two seats for the Social Democratic Party (SP), two for the Liberal Democratic Party of Switzerland (FDP), two for the Conservative Christian Social People's Party (today's Christian Democratic Party, CVP), and one for the Party of Farmers, Traders and Independents (BGB, now the Swiss People's Party (SVP)). This formula remained unchanged until 2003.

Aside from internal shifts, this concordance government secured the permanent backing of about 80% of the members of Parliament. Extremist parties – the “over-foreignisation parties” on the right and the Communist party on the left – were at best able to exert influence through direct-democratic action. The Alliance of Independents, a party established by Migros founder Gottlieb Duttweiler as a protest movement to represent the interests of consumers, long held its own as the largest opposition party, sometimes garnering as much as 9% of the vote. By the 1980s, as the environmental movement gained momentum over issues such as the Kaiseraugst nuclear power station, forest dieback, and the Schweizerhalle chemical accident, the Greens had established themselves as the largest party outside the government.

The Jura question



A new coat of arms for the canton of Jura

In 1979 Switzerland gained a new canton – the canton of Jura – without changing its national boundaries. The new canton was founded as a result of a 30-year struggle by separatists in the French-speaking north-western part of the canton of Bern. Unlike the German-speaking majority of the canton of Bern, the population of this part of the canton – the former prince-bishopric of Basel – was Catholic and felt disadvantaged both in linguistic and religious terms.

Although the southern districts of the Bernese Jura were also French-speaking, they were Protestant and the majority of their population preferred to remain in the canton of Bern. Thus, following a series of popular votes at the communal, district and cantonal levels in Bern, and at the federal level in 1978, the separatists had to grudgingly accede to the split-off of southern from northern Jura to allow the three northern districts to form the new canton of Jura.

Population, healthcare and social welfare

Over the course of the 20th century, Switzerland's population grew steadily, from 3,315,443 in 1900 to 7,261,210 in the year 2000. One of the reasons the population doubled – besides immigration and periods when births exceeded deaths – was improved medical care. Whereas in 1900 as many as one in eight children did not reach adulthood, 100 years later the figure had declined to 4.5 children out of 1,000. The fact that diseases such as tuberculosis practically disappeared over the course of the 20th century contributed to this. The birth rate fell markedly during the last third of the 20th century. Because of rising life expectancy and immigration this did not, however, result in a population decrease.

The social safety net was strengthened after 1945 with the introduction of Old Age, Survivors and Invalidity Insurance (OASI), unemployment insurance, the occupational pension system, protection against the consequences of illness and accidents, income compensation allowances in case of military service and maternity, and family allowances.

Gender equality

During the course of the 20th century, women gained more legal equality with men, although Switzerland lagged behind other Western countries in this respect. Women were not given the right to vote at the national level until 1971, making Switzerland the last country in Europe – with the exception of Liechtenstein – to grant universal suffrage. One of the main reasons for this was that unlike in other countries, where women's suffrage was introduced by parliament, in Switzerland the decision to grant women the vote was taken by (male) voters at the ballot box. That is why it was not until 1990 that women gained voting rights in all cantons.

A new matrimonial law granting mothers parental authority was approved, just barely, in a popular vote in 1985: the husband was no longer the sole legal head of the household. Swiss women who married a foreign national kept their Swiss citizenship, and foreign women who married a Swiss man no longer automatically obtained Swiss citizenship.

A national maternity insurance was also a long time in coming, although in practice most working mothers had previously had part of their salary paid by their employer during their maternity leave. Various draft maternity insurance laws were rejected at the ballot box over the years, but since 2005 working women throughout Switzerland have received a maternity allowance amounting to 80% of their last salary for 14 weeks.

Youth movements

In the wake of the international student unrest in Paris and Berlin, in 1968 there were also clashes between demonstrators and the police in Switzerland, notably the Zurich Globus riot. The neo-Marxist Progressive Organisations of Switzerland (POCH) emerged from this student movement. POCH scored a few electoral victories but mainly made headlines

through extra-parliamentary activism, including their participation in 1975 in the occupation of the construction site of the Kaiseraugst nuclear power plant.

In May 1980, youth riots broke out once again, starting in Zurich (the “Opera House riots”). With the support of left-wing parties, intellectuals and artists, for almost two years the protest movement demanded independently run youth centres.

The economy



Fair prices, fair wages - Lithograph by Hans Erni 1949. © J.C.Mueller AG Zurich

After the Second World War, both imports and exports grew rapidly. Industry (machinery and metals, chemicals, watches and clocks, textiles) was long the most important economic sector and was still employing 46% of the labour force in 1970. The service sector began to dominate economic life in the wake of the economic recession of the 1970s.

From the early 1950s, many foreign workers – initially mainly from Italy – emigrated to Switzerland. By 1970, more than one million foreign nationals were living in Switzerland, accounting for 17.2% of the population and a quarter of the labour force. A quota that would have dramatically limited the number of foreigners in every canton was only narrowly rejected in a popular vote on the “over-foreignisation initiative” in 1970. During the recession of the 1970s, many foreign workers were made redundant and went back to their home countries.

Foreign policy

After the Second World War, Switzerland's foreign policy continued to be shaped by the guiding principle of neutrality. But even after Switzerland established diplomatic relations with the USSR in 1946, relations with socialist states remained cool because of an anti-communist consensus that cut across party lines. Nevertheless, Switzerland stayed out of NATO and the UN, although the UN's European headquarters were (and still are) in Geneva. A certain degree of openness was only possible towards “apolitical” international organisations, including many sub-agencies of the UN. For example, Switzerland was a co-founder of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) in 1960. Switzerland also became a full member of the Council of Europe in 1963, and in 1975 joined and became an active member of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE, now the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – OSCE).