



A History of Bern



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INTRODUCTION

Bern since 1848 the capital of Switzerland is a beautiful small town facing the impressive and famous, Swiss Alps. The fantastic old buildings and the romantic of this city are touching the hearts of all visitors and leave something within that they never forget. Please join us on a journey through the streets of Bern beginning by the federal parliament and ending at Bern's well known attraction "The Bear Pit".

Often people are asking why Switzerland is so beautiful, clean, wealthy, and has such a low level of unemployment. What is standing behind this nation that is represented by its capital city Bern?

It is quite impressive to stand in Bern on the federal square facing the national building of parliament, which was built between 1894 and 1902. All around are famous big Swiss bank like the UBS, Credit Swiss and others. On the left side you see the National Bank of Switzerland. What people do not see are the gold reserves of the Swiss under your feet. A lot of important decisions for Switzerland are made in this place. But still, all this is not the foundation of Switzerland, neither are cheese and chocolate. So what is so unique with the Swiss that made this nation so beautiful? Or - what is it that holds the Swiss people together?



1 National parliament building

The inscription "Curia Confoederationis Helveticae" (Federal Assembly of the Swiss) on the façade of the parliament building hints towards the belief of the Swiss. Swiss people stand together in union. This is also written on the glass roof in the entrance hall "Unus pro omnibus, omnes pro uno" (One for all, all for one). The Swiss think that it is possible to stay united in diversity. A good expression for that is the Swiss Federal Council, made up of seven counsellors and not just one president. Their thinking is that politics is at it's best when many people with various convictions find one solution. The major political parties in Switzerland have the right for one or two counsellors. This means the Swiss do not have a big opposition, since every major party is involved in the top of the government itself. Decision making of this Federal Counsel has to be made in one room and when decisions are presented, they must have agreed on only one solution. This system is unique in the whole world, yet it seems to function quite well.

The female figure on the left on the neoclassical facade, with two handcuffs on a chain, embodies freedom. Above the figure in golden letters is written the year 1291, the year of independence of the Swiss where they freed themselves from the violent oppression of the Habsburg Family. The woman on the right is holding a palm branch as a symbol of peace, and a sword in her hands. Above you see the year 1848 in golden letters, the founding year of the Confederation of Switzerland.



1.1 1291 the year of independence of Switzerland

The Swiss became independent from king and princes. In the year 1291, Werner Stauffacher, Walter Fürst and Arnold von Melchtal stood on a place called "Rütli" in the mountains near the lake of Lucerne. They swore that together they want to be independent. They stood up and proclaimed we don't need a king nor princes who take care of us. They wanted to elect their own judges and rulers out of their community and not for money. This scene is represented in the entry hall of the house of parliament.



On a big marble stone these three founders looking down on all visitors, remind them of the amazing founding story of Switzerland in the year 1291. They started and later established a new system in a world of kings and princes ruling with strong hands. But why this rebellious idea in midst of these powerful kings? They were only farmers with no weapons, little education and no money. Why could they be so bold to stand up against this unjust system and fight against this rather big enemy?

In the beginning of the Federal Letter (Constitution) they wrote: "In God's Name. Amen." Their claim was that they were not alone. God is standing with them and helping them to become independent.

This was their motivation their strength. The bible claims that God doesn't want a king. He is the king. 4000 years ago, God gave the Israelites this advice through his word. In the end of the letter they wrote: "These Regulations shall endure forever, God willing." It seems idealistic. But they believed in God and were convinced that the system that God teaches will endure forever. It is not in human hands but it is in God's hand. 725 years later, Switzerland still has this system. It seems that what they believed became reality.

As it seems, it is better not to have a king. Switzerland was not directly involved in the Thirty Years' War, not in the First World War and also not in the Second World War. The Thirty Years' War was a conflict between catholic and reformed kings. When a king became reformed, he oppressed and persecuted the Catholics. The same happened when a king stayed Catholic, he persecuted reformed people. The conflict eventually became so big, that it ended in a war were over 35'000 villages were destroyed in Europe. But how could Switzerland stay out of all this? The Swiss came to the agreement that every Canton would decide by itself if they want to stay Catholic or get become Reformed.

Yes, even Switzerland had some conflicts on battlefields between Catholics and Reformed. Ending the first battle actually ended in eating a soup together instead of fighting. (called the Kappeler Milchsuppe). The second conflict with two different battles ended in the peace letter (called Kappeler Landfrieden). The Catholics won and the conflict left 800 dead. 800 people are a lot, but close to nothing compared to the enormous destruction in Europe. The third conflict, again with two different battles (called; Villmerger Kriege) ended firstly in the third peace letter and the victory of the reformed cantons Bern and Zürich and later in the decree of freedom of religion (1712). From now on everyone should be able to choose his own religion. This became the beginning of the well-known neutrality of Switzerland.

Also the First and the Second World War were conflicts of power of kings, rulers or dictators. Switzerland was not too much involved in these conflicts because it was not ruled by kings or dictators. Switzerland had no need to play this power game that others had to play.

1.2 1848 The Confederation of Switzerland

Napoleon wanted to establish constitutions in the whole of Europe. It didn't work out. Even the Swiss received a constitution from Napoleon that ended in 1815. While all the other countries stayed in the old system of kings and rulers the Confederation of Switzerland was founded in 1848. Switzerland has established the first constitution in Europe.

In 1848 Europe was on fire. Everywhere rebellion broke out. It brought also Switzerland to a point of nearly falling apart. But General Dufour was able to bring countryside and cities back together in a peaceful way. So eventually Switzerland received the first constitution in 1848 in Europe.

General Dufour was a convinced Christian and prayed with his officers before they went to the battlefield. It seems that God heard that prayer. His Christian faith was the foundation of his service like it was with the three “founders of Switzerland”. For him it was not a problem that Christianity and politics, even on a battlefield, belong together. For the Swiss the Christian faith was not only for the church, it influenced all spheres of society.

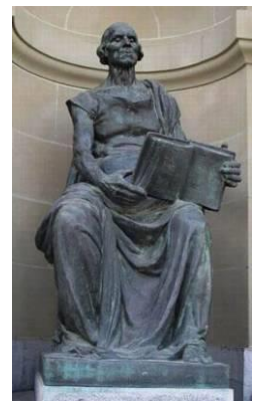
Today each year on the third Sunday of September, the Swiss celebrate the national day of prayer. In 1848 during this time the Swiss came together and shouted to God for help. They believed that they could solve the problem themselves, and that a higher authority had to help in this situation. And it happened.

Similarly the national anthem is a call for prayer and to show the sincerity of the Swiss to their faith and their trust in a personal God who can hear them and help.

1.3 The writers on the facade



On the facade on the right lower side there is the history writer of the present time and on the left lower side the history writer of the past. *The writer on the right has his book before him and is ready to write down the decisions from today and the writer on the left shows his book to the people that everybody can read the decisions from the past.* The Swiss believe that everything that they say and decide today has an impact into the future and for the next generation like the founding fathers of the Swiss 1291 believed. It is important to write everything down that the Swiss debate or decide for later review or research.



1.4 The Swiss cross

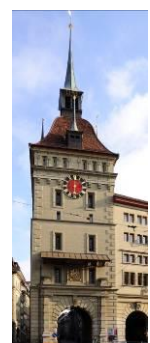
What holds the Swiss together is represented on the top of the dome on the building of parliament. It is the cross which represents the faith of the Swiss in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Also the flag shows a white cross in a red square. That symbol shows what the Swiss believe and what actually held the Swiss over these 725 years together.

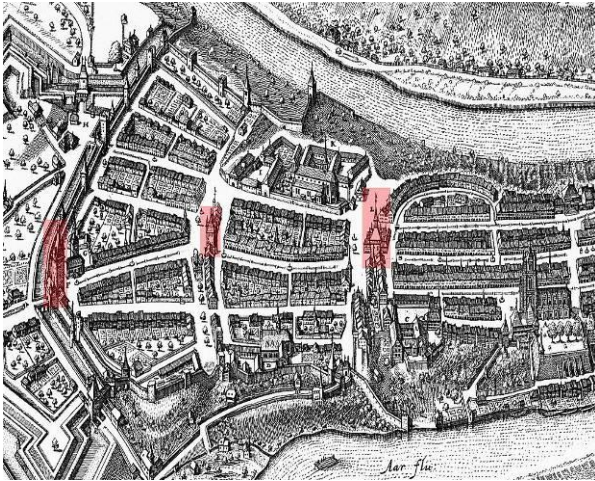
It is recommended to visit one of the free tours through the parliament building. Please have a look on the internet.



2 Käfigturm (Prison-Tower)

The first tower was finished in 1256 after the second extension of the city of Bern as the new city gate from the west. Later it was used as prison. The tower standing here today was built in 1641. It is a museum with changing exhibitions and also a lot of information about the political system of Switzerland. The entry is free and it is recommended for all visitors.





The city of Bern was founded through “Herzog Berchtold the 5th of Zähringen* in 1191 at the bridge of Nydegg,

The first city wall was finished in 1220 and enclosed the entire city until the “Zytglogge” tower.

The second extension went to the “Käfigturm” and the third one in 1345 up to the “Christoffelturm” near today’s train station.

The Pestilence of 1347 stopped another extension and so the old city of Bern ended at the entrenchment (called kleine und grosse Schanzen) near today’s train station.

3 Dutch tower

The Dutch-Tower “Holländerturm” was built in 1256 as part of the second extension of Bern. After 1345 it was also used as prison. Its name came from the Bernese officers who were in the Dutch service and who came to the tower to use the forbidden tobacco in a hidden place.

First the tower was called smoking tower, but in 1896 it received its present name “Holländerturm”. The last renovation was in 1939.



4 French church

It was the first church in Bern in Gothic style and was built as a monastery for the Dominicans in 1269. After the Reformation in Bern in 1534 it became the centre for the Huguenots, the refugees of the reformed movement from France. The Catholics inhumanly persecuted the Reformed. The Bernese welcomed their brothers in Christ and gave them this church to use. Its name is thus derived from this period. In this time it was also used as a storehouse for corn. There the Bernese stored the corn in summer for the winter. The west façade was built in a Baroque style in 1753.



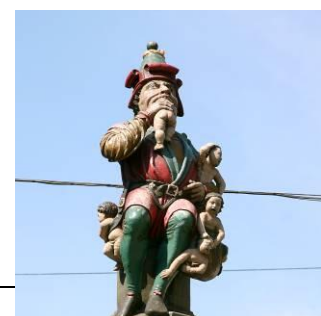
5 Corn house square “Kornhausplatz”

From 1911-1915 the Bernese built the corn house (called today Kornhaus) to store the corn there, since the church was too small and not really practical as a storage place. Today it is used for many other purposes like concerts and bars. Next to the corn house is the neoclassic building of the city theatre of Bern. It opened in the year 1903.



6 “Kindlifresser Brunnen” (Child-Eater-Fountain)

Bern is very famous of all the fountains. Every fountain tells a special story. This fountain tells us the story about the Jews. A child called Rudolf from Bern died 1294 and was not found any more. The Bernese claimed to know that the Jews ate the child, since the Jews still followed the instructions from the Old



Testament including all the offerings. The Bernese didn't obviously understand the Old Testament. The Bible is very clear about this and forbid sacrificing human and especially children. But the Bernese didn't like the Jews and were trying to find a reason to throw them out of the city.

In 1347 plagues spread throughout the whole continent and killed a third of the population. Only the Jews were not much affected by these plagues. They lived in communities together and had high hygiene standards because they followed the instruction of the Bible. The cities in the Middle Ages were often horrible, dirty and very smelly. In this environment plagues had an ideal ground to spread.

The Bernese thought the Jews put poison in the water to kill the non-Jews. In 1472 they expelled the Jews from the city. Only in 1848 the Jews could come back to Berne and today they have a Synagogue.

7 Blood tower "called Blutturnm)

For the Anabaptists the Reformation did not go far enough. They still could not see the people turning back to God. So they separated from the Reformed Church. The Bernese didn't like this, and so expelled 500 of them from the city. Often they allowed them to settle down in areas that lie higher than 1000 meter above sea level.

Many escaped into the Bernese mountains or hills, north west in the Canton of Bern called Jura. Quite a big number escaped to America, Holland or elsewhere. Often the Bernese took all their property, land and houses and gave it to others.

In 1528 the Bernese drowned three Anabaptist near this tower. This was the starting point of a bigger persecution through almost all of Switzerland. In 1571 the killing was over. But until today this blood still clings to the Reformed Church and especially to the Canton of Bern.

Only in 1820 they were again accepted and allowed into the city. Today millions of Anabaptists in all kinds of spin-offs are living in the whole world. (Mennonites, Amish, Quakers, Brethren...)



8 Zytglogge (time-bell)

Every hour figure on the face of the tower shows the end of the hour and the beginning of the next hour. A lot of tourists are waiting five minutes before the hour in front of the tower to observe this fantastic spectacle. The first tower was built 1220 as the city gate in the west. After the second extension of Bern it was used as a prison. After 1406 it was used as a clock tower. The astronomic watch is from the year 1530. It displays the old understanding of the cosmos that people had before the Reformation. It is the old worldview of Ptolemy that the world is in the centre and the stars and the sun hang in the sky and turn around the world. Outside of this is then the world of the gods.

Galileo of course claimed the world is turning around the sun, which was a major challenge for the Catholic Church. If this were so, where would then God be? They didn't allow Galileo to claim such things. For the Reformers it was not a problem. Because God's Kingdom is not up there, it is here in the midst of the people. God is not far away, but he is near with his children.



9 Einstein house

Bern was also host of the famous physicist Albert Einstein who lived a bit further down the street in direction of the bear pit (Kramgasse 49). He worked here, but also was certainly studying about his theory of relativity.

Today his house is a museum which displays to people how Albert Einstein studied in his days. In the middle of the street is a small brook which was providing the citizens with water in the middle age. And again, every few meters you find one of the famous fountains of Bern.



10 Ratshaus (parliament building)

The parliament building of Bern built between 1406-1415 was one of the most expensive gothic buildings of its time. Bern was very rich and reached from Lake Geneva almost to Zürich. In 1799 Napoleon had stolen six million Francs in cash and 18 million in promissory notes of the treasury of the parliament building. He called out the first Helvetic Republic and made Aarau its capital. Bern lost its riches, many of its estates and the dominion in Switzerland. In the end he even stole the bear, the important symbol of Bern. Street signs were made anew in red, yellow, green, white and black to explain to Napoleons soldiers where to go, since they could not read and write mostly.



On Mondays the Government of Bern came together for their weekly meeting. On Easter Monday the people of Bern had a parade from the Münster (Cathedral) to the close by parliament building. The pastor walked in front holding the bible in his hand. Since the 17th century this bible is on a stand in front of the government. It stood as a symbol that the pastor always had the authority to go to the parliament, to open the bible and point to the right scripture and say what the government is doing is wrong according to scripture here. The bible was the highest authority. Today the bible is still there but has lost its authority. Today Bern is a secular city and the church has almost no influence in politics.

The preaching in the church was the glue of the society, holding everything together. When people acted immorally, it was pointed out and a pastor confronted them about repentance, otherwise they have problems with God. As long the fear of God was amongst the people this system worked and the people behaved in reasonable ways. In a secular state it is not clear how this should still work.

Some people think human rights could replace the bible, but even those only work when someone control and confronts. Do people really fear human rights?

The system with God represented through the bible could bring freedom and order. The Bernese built their whole society on this system. The question arises: is this system still working when the foundation, the bible actually got lost? Perhaps the Bernese have to rethink what they lost in all these years with the secularisation of society.

11 Old Catholic Church 1858-1864

Switzerland has three official national churches, the Roman Catholic, the old Catholics and the Reformed Church. The old Catholic Church is the smallest in number but it has a church building in Bern, the St. Peter-and-Paul church. This church is known mostly in the German language world (some in Holland, Poland and the Czech Republic).

In their theology they got Reformed, but in the services stayed Catholic. It is similar to the Anglican Church in England. Because of the infallibility stated for the Pope in the Vatican council in 1870, the Old Catholic Church separated from the Roman Catholics.



12 Mosesbrunnen (Fountain of Moses)

This fountain dating from the 16th century shows Moses, the one in the Bible, holding the Ten Commandments in his hand. Moses points to the second commandment «you shall not make for yourself a carved image of God».

Nobody has a complete picture of the whole reality. Here the Swiss applied it practically to their political system. It is not good when someone has too much power.



13 Münster (Cathedral)

It is one of the most important Gothic buildings in Switzerland and was built from 1421 to 1521. 344 steps lead the visitor up to the 100 meter high tower which was only finished in 1893 to its complete height.

Under the church there was probably a Celtic temple. Before Europe was christianized the Europeans believed in all kind of spirits and offered goods and even people to them. Examples were that around Christmas the people believed the god of the sun to be angry, because nights got longer and days shorter. In order to appease their gods, often babies were sacrificed, for the sun to come back again.

During Christianisation these places of offering were replaced with churches. The offerings stopped and the sun still came back again also. Christianity liberated people from such superstitions. Today in most villages churches are built over the former pagan temples and their towers reaching to heaven are visible for everybody to see - like the Münster in Bern. Everybody from all around should be reminded that they were delivered from all fears and superstitions.

It took centuries to build the church. The architect who wanted to build it had to make sure that many generations after him would still have the same vision and would continue it in the planned way. It is fascinating to see how they were able to think beyond a generation and were able to hand the vision to their children and grandchildren. I suspect that this worldview is almost gone. Why did the Bernese and the Swiss lose it, or is this not on the decline? Was it Christianity, the faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ that gave such long term vision and perspective?



If the visitors enter any church they face east where the sun rises. The church was always built with the altar in the east, since this is the symbol of the risen Christ.

The entrance porch shows with elaborate ornaments a scene of the last judgement. Every visitor shall be reminded that there will be a final judgement. The church is full of figures and symbolism but often in a rather depressed mood. It kept the observers often in fear and being scared. A lot of figures like Maria, were heresies in the eyes of the Reformers. They didn't like this overwhelming symbolism and so they tore down a lot of figures. Still today on some places the figures are missing. Some are being restored again. The Reformed Churches were built without a lot of symbolism they want to focus on Jesus and the bible alone. But in the reformed Münster, we still can see a lot of Catholic symbols visible.

In the Middle Ages people focused on the afterlife. The Reformation changed the focus to building the Kingdom of God. The people should enjoy life because they overcame the judgement through the cross. In a reformed church the cross is always empty because of celebrating the resurrection. In the Catholic churches Jesus still is on the cross. The emphasis is on the death and sacrifice of Jesus.

13.1 The Reformation

500 years ago before the Reformation, the Catholic Church was ruling people by oppressing them. The church was no longer to help the people but the people to help the church. People had to pay for their salvation. The pope and his cardinals lived in prosperity, but most of the population all over was very poor. Most of the land belonged either to kings or to the church. The people had to work for the pope and the kings but clergy and kings did not care for them. This was an enormous injustice and people longed for transformation.

Martin Luther began the Reformation in 1517 by posting his ninety-five theses at the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. He accused the pope and the church of being wrong in many of their practices and they had to stop doing these evil things. The people stood up against the oppression of the church and a new movement called the Reformation started. Christianity split into two wings the Reformed and the Catholics. The message spread in a brief period all over Europe and the Reformation took its course. The whole movement touched as well Switzerland especially through Zwingli and Calvin, two of the main reformers in Switzerland. Luther reformed the church and in Switzerland this was taken further to reform society

The Reformation made the idea clear that everyone stands before God and the church does not stand in between them and God. Everyone has access to the truth through the bible. Everyone has the opportunity to find out what is good or bad. They didn't need an absolute control, neither in the church nor in the state. Everyone could stand, with the Bible in their hand, and claim right or wrong.

Living in freedom was only possible because they had an absolute measure or ethical standard to which they were accountable. It was a completely new idea in this time and it led to enormous development in every sphere of society. Social freedom without chaos was possible. It was the beginning of the modern society.

In 1528 the citizens of Bern, the reformers, Zwingli and the bishops came together in the Münster for a debate. There were four main issues linked to the acceptance of the Reformation. Firstly, the churches must give the land back to the farmers; secondly, the abolishment of peonage (like slavery in the 19th century); thirdly, the reduction of the taxes; and fourthly, the right of citizens to have a voice in political decisions. These four issues fit better to a Reformed Church than to a Catholic one. The Reformed won the debate and the Catholics had to give up their power. Berchtold Haller (1492-1536) was convinced by Zwingli to stay in Bern and hold on to the Reformation.

In front of the church was the “lettner” an iron curtain which prevented the people from coming to the altar. The Reformers took out this iron curtain, since everyone should have direct access to God not only the priests. These bricked places where the curtain was fixed are still easy to recognize today. The Reformers presented now a bible on the altar that symbolized the word of God being the centre and not any more the pope or the church. All the confessionals were taken out and no more did the priest forgive sins. It is God and everybody has direct access to him.



14 Von Wattenwil Home

It was built 1705-1706 at the Junkergasse 59 and is used today for regular reception called “von Wattenwil talk” between the Federal Government and the leaders of the five main parties of Switzerland. The main facade with the grand terrace is visible on the left hand from the platform of the Münster.



15 Erlacherhof

This beautiful baroque house shows the wealth of the patrician families in the Junkergasse 47. It was built from 1745-1752. Most buildings are made in stone or sandstone. In 1406 a big fire destroyed 600 houses in Bern. Since then it was no more allowed to build houses in wood. Only a few houses in the old city of Bern survived the fire and they are still in the old city of Bern.



16 “Gerechtigkeitsbrunnen” 1543 (Fountain of Justice)



The woman of Justice, blindfolded and the scale in her hand, represents the justice and impartiality of the court. Under her feet are the pope representing the church, the Caesar representing monarchy, the sultan as absolute ruler and the mayor representing a republic. All of them stay under the law called “Lex Rex”. The law was in this time the bible represented in the old supreme court of Switzerland in Lausanne. Paul Roberts painted a picture called “The Justice of the Nation” in 1905. Every judge who goes into the court has to walk by this painting and is reminded of biblical justice. The lady justice painted on the picture points with her sword to the Bible and to the common law that decides between right and wrong.



17 Bear pit

Bern has its name from a bear. It is still today a very important part of the identity for the Bernese. Almost throughout all the centuries the city had a place where bears could live. In the 12th century “Herzog Berchtold von Zähring” laid the foundation of the City of Bern near the bear pit. He commanded his soldiers the first animal that they kill should be the name of the City. It was a bear. In 1353 Bern became a member of the Swiss Confederation and in 1648 Bern had the status as a republic and was independent of the Holy Roman Empire. At this time Bern was biggest city state north of the Alps. In 1831 Bern received the first constitution in Europe. Today it is a Unesco World Heritage because of its wonderful old city.



18 Rose garden

Take some time of relaxing and thinking back on what you discovered in Bern, while you sit in the “Rosengarten” next to the bear pit, in a quiet nice café with a wonderful view over the city and the Swiss Alps in the background.



Take the opportunity to book your personal tour

Contact: reformationstour@sbcw.ch, +41 (0)32 391 70 36, www.sbcw.ch/Reformations-tour