

History of Switzerland

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William Tell, Tax Rebel

by Adam Young

The legend of William Tell, the Swiss legendary hero who symbolizes the struggle for individual and political freedom, has its origins in medieval Switzerland, in the tax rebellions that launched the Everlasting League and the defeat of an empire.

Settled first by the Tene, then the Celts and then the Romans, after the empire fell Switzerland fell under the sway of the Ostrogoths, the Franks and finally Charlemagne's empire and its heirs. In the 11th century, Switzerland was divided by the conflict between the Emperor and the Papacy. The dukes and counts, abbots and bishops benefited the most from this historic rivalry, and from their castles they dominated the countryside, with walled cities like Bern, Zurich, Basel, and Schaffhausen maintaining their independence.

But high up in the mountains, in peasant communities in inaccessible mountain valleys, the people were determined to free themselves from forced labor or feudal dues.

Powerful local dynasties, such as the Zähringen, Kyburg, Habsburg, and Savoy feuded over territory and tax revenue. The Zähringen's died out in 1218, and the Kyburger's followed them into extinction in 1264. After a struggle with the Savoy, the Habsburgs claimed most of the Kyburg territories, becoming the most powerful rulers the Swiss were in contact with.

The Habsburgs of history originated in what became Switzerland. Werner, the Bishop of Strasbourg, built Hawk's Castle (Habichtsburg) in 1020, from which the family derived its name. Count Rudolf II of Habsburg (died 1232) acquired the territories of Schwyz, Uri, Unterwalden and Lucerne. These Swiss territories were divided between his sons Albert IV and Rudolf III.

Schwyz, Uri, and Unterwalden had long enjoyed freedom from feudal overlords, although many claimed the "right" to administer justice and collect taxes in these areas. In 1231, Uri became directly subject only to the distant Holy Roman Emperor, gaining the right to appoint their own magistrates in the process. In 1240, Schwyz and Unterwalden obtained similar recognition from the Hohenstaufen emperor Frederick II.

Immediately the Habsburg Counts challenged these exemptions and years of uncertainty ensued until Albert IV's son, Rudolf, was elected German King and Holy Roman Emperor in 1273 and immediately asserted his feudal claims over the people of these territories. As emperor, Rudolf asserted his imperial claims in Uri and his hereditary family claims in Schwyz and Unterwalden, using his new position to enforce these claims and to enforce taxation of Trans-Alpine trade.

Rudolf had already been in control of much of the route from the Rhine to Schwyz and Unterwalden as protector of the monasteries there or as the representative of the emperor. The opening of the St. Gotthard Pass greatly increased the value of these areas by opening a north-south route to Italy.

As the legend goes, the emperor dispatched his army of tax collectors to enforce his long unrecognized claims. One of them, Hermann Gessler, arrived in Altdorf, where he promptly acted to enforce imperial and feudal authority over the people. Raising a pole in the center square, and using his hat decorated with peacock feathers atop it as a symbol of imperial power, Gessler commanded all who passed to bow before it and show proper respect for the government.

William Tell and his young son Walter, peasants from the nearby countryside of Bürglen in Uri, perhaps having not heard of Gessler's command or maybe choosing not to obey it, walked past without bowing. Some versions say he laughed out loud at the silly symbol of the government and its claim to tax.

When Gessler heard of this, he became enraged, fearing that other men would also disobey him, and ordered William Tell's arrest. Hearing that this William Tell was a famous hunter, Gessler devised a cruel plan. He ordered Tell to shoot an apple atop the head of his young son, Walter.

Now, William Tell begged the tyrant not to have him do this. "What if my son should move? What if my hand should tremble? What if the arrow should not carry true? Will you make me kill my boy?" he asked. "Say no more," said Gessler. "You must hit the apple with your one arrow. If you fail, my soldiers shall kill the boy before your eyes."

Without another word, William Tell aimed and let the arrow loose. Walter, hands tied, stood firm and still. He wasn't afraid. The arrow struck the apple in the center, carrying it away from him.

Gessler was impressed and infuriated, but as Tell was turning away, a second arrow that he had hidden in his coat fell to the ground. Cried Gessler, "What mean you with this second arrow?" Tell proudly replied, "Tyrant, this arrow was meant for your heart if I had hurt my son."

Not surprisingly, Gessler ordered Tell's arrest again, sentencing him to life imprisonment in the dungeons of Gessler's castle at Küssnacht. During the long boat journey to transport William Tell to prison, a violent storm suddenly arose on the lake, and the oarsmen begged with Gessler to release Tell so that he could help steer them to safety.

Gessler acceded, and Tell cunningly maneuvered the boat close to the shore, saving Gessler from the storm, but then he leapt to freedom, landing on a flat rock (the Tellsplatte) and escaping into the surrounding forest.

Determined to take revenge on the tyrant Gessler, Tell hurried through the backcountry to Küssnacht. As Gessler and his party walked along the Hohlegasse on their way to the castle, William Tell leapt out and shot the tyrant straight through the heart.

As the legend goes, William Tell melted back into the woods to return to Uri and led the uprising against imperial control, inspiring his people with his act of bravery that has since been regarded as the beginning of the Swiss struggle for liberty.

After years of resisting the encroachments of the Habsburg emperor, the men of Schwyz, Uri, and Unterwalden formed the Everlasting League, in August 1291, following the sudden death of Rudolf in July. The League was the embryonic confederation that would grow into the Switzerland we know today, with the purpose of self-defense, arbitration and to support anti-Habsburg candidates for the Imperial throne.

Rudolf's son, Albert, was elected emperor in 1298, and successfully bullied Zurich from joining the League, but the successors of Rudolf—Adolf I, Albert I, Henry VII, and Louis IV—were too distracted elsewhere to intervene in Switzerland, although the Habsburgs refused to relinquish any of their feudal claims.

Suddenly in 1314, the freemen of Schwyz attacked the Abbey of Einsiedeln, which was allied with the Habsburg imperial claimant Frederick III, who was disputing the claim of the reigning Louis IV to the imperial crown. The League acted on behalf of Louis, and in response, Frederick's brother, Leopold I of Austria, led an invasion into Schwyz in 1315.

Passing through the Morgarten Pass on Nov. 15th, 1315, on their way to Schwyz, the army of armored Knights was ambushed by the freemen of Schwyz and Uri, who crushed the invaders using stones, boulders and timbers hurled from the valley's peaks, killing more than 1,500 and driving the rest into the nearby Lake Egeri.

The victory ensured the survival of the Confederation and because of the fame of the Battle of Morgarten, the name of Schwyz gradually came to denote the confederation as a whole, becoming known by forms of the name, such as Schweiz in German, Suisse in French, Svizzera in Italian and in English, Switzerland, the "Land of the Schwyzers."

Following the defeat of the Austrians, the three allies renewed their confederation on December 9, 1315, in the Pact of Brunnen, reaffirming their defensive alliance, rejecting Habsburg feudal claims and agreeing to make no separate peace.

In the face of defeat, the Habsburgs agreed to a truce that held out, with minor breaches, until the end of the century.

The wars for independence would grind on for another two hundred years, while the Swiss Confederation grew in territory. The Habsburgs finally renounced their claims to the Swiss in 1474, under the emperor Frederick III and again after twin defeats in 1501, under Frederick's son, Maximilian I.

The legend of William Tell became the central defining myth of the Swiss national identity; it has come to embody the very essence of "Swissness."

However, there is no evidence that William Tell actually existed. The classic form of the legend appears in the *Chronicon Helveticum* (1734–36), by Gilg Tschudi. The story of the marksman's test, however, is widely distributed in folklore. Similar legends appear in the Danish chronicle of Saxo Grammaticus (c.1200) and the English ballad of "William of Cloudeslee."

The story of a marksman forced by a cruel overlord to shoot an object from the head of a loved one first appeared in Scandinavian sagas centuries before the Swiss version was first recorded in the 15th century.

The legend of William Tell achieved its first widespread circulation in 1477, when an epic song was composed about the founding of the Swiss Confederation that included the story of Tell.

During the French Revolution, the legend of William Tell was used to justify the execution of Louis XVI—all the more so because William Tell and the French Revolutionary armies shared a common enemy, the Imperial Habsburgs.

In the early 19th century, the William Tell legend attained worldwide renown through the stirring play *Wilhelm Tell* (1804) by the German dramatist J.C. Friedrich von Schiller using the accounts of his friend Goethe, who traveled in Switzerland in the 1770s and 1780s, and the opera 'Guillaume Tell' (1829) by Gioacchino Rossini, who wrote the William Tell Overture, which some might remember as the theme for the old Lone Ranger radio and TV show.

During World War II, the image of William Tell hardened Swiss resolve to resist domination by Nazi Germany, and contributed to Switzerland's self-imposed exclusion from the United Nations and the European Union.

Did William Tell exist? Maybe not. But the principle his legend embodies—the resistance of freemen to tyranny—will always exist.

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