

domaine médico-social et à l'affirmation progressive des politiques sociales urbaines dans le dernier tiers du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle<sup>102</sup>.

Alors même que la catastrophe sanitaire met en relief la complexité du rapport entre charité, philanthropie et assistance publique, les interventions convergent sur la nécessité de répondre aux besoins des malades, en particulier des plus pauvres, et sur le souci commun de préserver l'ordre social.

<sup>102</sup> Si des commissions des logements insalubres sont créées dans le cadre des communes après l'adoption de la loi du 13 avril 1850, il faut attendre véritablement la III<sup>e</sup> République pour que des institutions d'hygiène publique œuvrent également dans le domaine social. Cf. L. Murard, P. Zylberman (1996), *L'hygiène dans la République : la santé publique en France ou l'utopie contrariée, 1870-1914*, Paris, Fayard, 805 p ; E. Baret-Bourgoin (2002), *Environnement et sensibilités : les Grenoblois et leur ville au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Thèse de Doctorat, Université Lyon II, 1163 p.

## Disasters, interregional solidarity and nation-building: Reflections on the case of Switzerland, 1806-1914<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. Factors of nation-building

Nations come into being as the result of a communicative process involving different groups in society which can lead to a common awareness. National identity aims at integrating all individuals and groups living on state territory in such a way that they can be addressed and mobilized as a political community. In the process of nation-building an individual meets many unknown people who, in a sense, are like himself. This experience of similarity promotes a sense of togetherness<sup>3</sup>. In the final stage of the process, the entire group develops a "we-feeling" and distinguishes itself from the outside. The most vociferous effects of this togetherness become manifest in (international) football championships.

<sup>1</sup> This article draws on an earlier article by the author: Pfister C. (2004), "Von Goldau nach Gondo. Naturkatastrophen als Identitätsstiftende Ereignisse in der Schweiz des 19. Jahrhunderts", in Pfister C., Summermatter S. eds, *Katastrophen und ihre Bewältigung. Perspektiven und Positionen. Referate einer Vorlesungsreihe des Collegium generale der Universität Bern im Sommersemester 2003*, Bern, Haupt, pp. 53-78.

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<sup>3</sup> Münger K. (2002), *Militär, Staat und Nation in der Schweiz 1798-1874. Das eidgenössische Militärwesen als Faktor der nationalen und nationalstaatlichen Integration von der Helvetischen Republik bis zur Gesamtrevision der Bundesverfassung*, Münster, Agenda-Verlag, p.24.

Comparative research usually relates the formation of national identities to patriotic discourses, national rituals and symbols propagated in the context of celebrations. Moreover, monuments, historic buildings and landscapes are often symbolically charged in this way. With respect to Switzerland, this involves the Alpine myth<sup>4</sup>. Even folk songs and early forms of public relations may assume this function<sup>5</sup>.

In reference to Switzerland we cannot speak about national identity prior to 1798. The old Swiss Confederation was split up into a patchwork of small territories which were highly diverse in terms of geography, economy, law, language, religion and culture. In terms of independent republics, the thirteen "ruling" cantons were included in a bundle of alliances. Tributary territories were administered by a subset of ruling cantons. At that time, the "we-feeling" included kin, neighbours, members of the same village clan, people who had the same religion.

The French Revolution proclaimed the nation as a new concept of socialization. According to this principle, feelings of solidarity should be assigned to all those living on the territory of the common nation. This novel, territory-related solidarity needed to be created. Nations are invented communities, and the invention of the nation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century required considerable propagandistic efforts. In Switzerland, national identity was first campaigned in 1798 by authorities of the new Helvetic Republic, which was created by French revolutionary armies after the conquest of the country. According to the French model, the multiplicity of territorial units was amalgamated into 12 centrally administered cantons of roughly equal size. After the collapse of this structure in 1802, Switzerland became a loose federation of

independent republics. Religious and political discrepancies between cantons led to a short civil war in 1847, thus opening the way for the creation of a democratic federal state in the wake of the European Revolution of 1848. For these reasons nation building in Switzerland did not arise along the lines of a common culture as in most other countries in Europe.<sup>6</sup>

In the traditional historical literature, countrywide-represented societies and clubs are believed to be the main proponents of Swiss national identity prior to the foundation of the modern federal state in 1848. Among those organizations, the Swiss Society of Public Utilities (founded in 1810), the Swiss Federal Marksmen Society (founded in 1824), the Swiss Federal Gymnastics Society (founded in 1832) and the Swiss Federal Choral Society (founded in 1842) are of particular importance. These federal umbrella-societies were composed of cantonal organizations, which, for their part, included a number of local or regional societies or clubs. This three-levelled structure quasi anticipated the composition of the later federal state. The bourgeois elite became engaged in the leadership of these clubs and societies, where they promoted a culture of national festivities. The common fatherland and the Alpine myth were celebrated during such "People's Diets"<sup>7</sup> (the Diet Assembly was the ruling body of the loose Swiss Federation at that time) in common cults, such as ceremonial speeches and patriotic songs and in sports competitions. At least the elite were geared in that time towards common values beyond religious and cultural differences<sup>8</sup>. However, only a small minority of the population could afford to participate in national festivities and sports competitions prior to the last quarter of the nineteenth century<sup>9</sup>.

Kurt Münger highlighted the role of the army as glue for nation-building as of the early nineteenth century. The common army was early discovered

<sup>4</sup> Walter F. (1990), *Les Suisses et l'environnement*, Genève, Zoé. Here p. 58. Im Hof U. (1991), *Mythos Schweiz. Identität – Nation – Geschichte 1291-1991*, Basel, Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung. Marchal G.P., Mattioli A. (1992), *Erfundene Schweiz. Konstruktionen nationaler Identität – La Suisse imaginée. Bricolages d'une identité nationale*, Zürich, Chronos. Here pp. 11-20. Wildburger C., Oswald N. eds (1996), *Mythos Alpen*, Iglis, CIPRA. Marchal G.P. (1997), *Die alpine Friedensinsel. Robert Durrers grosses Motivbild im Ranft und der schweizerische Alpenmythos*, Bern, Haupt. Kreis G. (1993), *Die Schweiz unterwegs, Schlussbericht NFP21 "Kulturelle Vielfalt und nationale Identität"*, Basel, Helbing und Lichtenhahn. Here p. 67. Salsa, A. (1996), *Der Alpen-Mythos - wenn vorgefasste Meinungen sich selbständig machen. Die Entstehung und Entwicklung des Alpen-Mythos*, Iglis, pp. 27-42, here 34. Mathieu J. (1998), *Geschichte der Alpen 1500-1900*, Wien, Böhlau. Here pp. 191-195.

<sup>5</sup> Marchal, Mattioli (1992), pp. 17-18. Meyerhofer U. (2000), *Von Vaterland, Bürgerrepublik und Nation. Nationale Integration in der Schweiz, 1815-1848*, Zürich, PhD-Thesis.

<sup>6</sup> Benedict Anderson goes so far as to argue from false premises and without any knowledge of the relevant scientific literature that nineteenth-century Switzerland was economically and mentally backward and only became a nation in the late twentieth century (Anderson B. (1988), *Die Erfindung der Nation. Zur Karriere eines folgenreichen Konzepts*, Frankfurt, Campus. German translation by Benedikt Burkhard. Here p. 136. Original publication: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1983).

<sup>7</sup> Charbon R. (1998), *"Oh Schweizerland, du schöne Braut", Politische Schweizer Literatur 1798-1848*, Zürich, Limmat Verlag.

<sup>8</sup> Mesmer B. (1988), *Frauen und Frauenorganisationen in der Schweiz des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Basel, Helbing & Lichtenhahn, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Triet M., Schildknecht P. eds (2002), *Die Eidgenössischen Turnfeste 1832-2002. Streiflichter auf ein nationales Ereignis*, Olten, Weltbild. Schweizer Beiträge zur Sportgeschichte.



and promoted as a vehicle to improve the mutual understanding among groups and individuals who made up the macro-group of the nation<sup>10</sup>. Political leaders and military commanders were closely interwoven and well represented in the leadership positions of clubs and societies. Münger sees the emergence of a national identity as a learning process which first of all presented the issues to the recipients<sup>11</sup>.

Situations of external threat – such as the clash in 1838 with France or that in 1856 with Prussia – generated long-remembered conjunctures of excitement involving an intensified communication about national values<sup>12</sup>. It is within this context that the concept of symbolic policy coined by political scientist Murray Edelman is to be understood. He defines it as the communication of political values assuming a long-term effect<sup>13</sup>. Women and children, of course, were excluded from this form of national communication. Not even the entire male population was involved. Despite the legally prescribed compulsory military service only about half of the men were actually drafted<sup>14</sup>.

Thus far, natural disasters have not been mentioned in this context. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians had ruled out natural phenomena altogether as being purely accidental facts which were believed to be unrelated to human history<sup>15</sup>. Sudden disasters, climatic anomalies and related strategies of coping in the past were not investigated prior to the debates on anthropogenic greenhouse warming and the related interest in the human dimension of severe disasters<sup>16</sup>. Among the powerful communicative events

which can be utilized for strengthening existing values and promoting new ones through symbolic policy, natural disasters also need to be mentioned. Images and the reports on the suffering of disaster victims disseminated by the media have a highly emotionalizing impact on the public. Therefore, a disaster is a top media event likely to monopolize the agenda and retain the attention of the public for some time. Under such circumstances, the political system has to interrupt its routine business<sup>17</sup>. The supreme political leader is called to comment and interpret the disaster. Amongst others, he should relieve concerns, get back to the facts and strengthen the sense of togetherness. Crisis communication takes place under extraordinary conditions. Large parts of the population are troubled. Attention to messages from the political leadership is enormously heightened. For this reason, disaster communication lends itself to a platform to put over political programs and propagate new values. According to sociologist Kurt Imhof, disaster communication has been loaded with political messages since the late eighteenth century<sup>18</sup>.

Beyond its function as a potential sensor for novel meanings of the world, disaster communication has a property which allows measuring its actual potential to mobilize solidarity. As is generally known, disaster communication includes an appeal to make donations for the benefit of the victims. How well such appeals were heeded can be diagnosed in a certain sense through considering the raised sum of charitable donations.

<sup>10</sup> Münger (2002), p. 279.

<sup>11</sup> Münger (2002), p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> Münger (2002), p. 34. The relation between nation and emotion is complex: François E., Siegrist H., Vogel J. eds (1995), *Nation und Emotion. Deutschland und Frankreich im Vergleich, 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. Kritische Studien zur Geschichtswissenschaft Bd. 110.

<sup>13</sup> Edelman M. (1990), *Politik als Ritual. Die symbolische Funktion staatlicher Institutionen und politischen Handelns*, Frankfurt, Campus. Original publication: *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, Urbana 1964.

<sup>14</sup> Münger (2002), p. 460.

<sup>15</sup> Kempe M., Rohr C. (2003), "Introduction", in Kempe M., Rohr C. eds, *Coping with the unexpected - Natural Disasters and their Perception*, Isle of Harris, The White Horse Press, pp. 123-126. Special Issue of *Environment & History*. Here p. 123.

<sup>16</sup> Rohr C. (2001), "Mensch und Naturkatastrophe. Tendenzen und Probleme einer mentalitätsbezogenen Umweltgeschichte des Mittelalters", in Hahn S., Reith R. eds, *Umwelt-Geschichte. Arbeitsfelder, Forschungsansätze, Perspektiven*, Wien, Verlag für Geschichte und Politik, pp. 13-32. Massard-Guilbaud G. ed. (2002), *Cities And Catastrophes: Coping with Emergency in European History*, Frankfurt, Lang. Some case studies are contained within two volumes of essays: Pfister C. ed. (2002a), *Le Jour*

*d'après. Surmonter les catastrophes naturelles: le cas de la Suisse entre 1500 et 2000*, traduit par Véronique Mange, Berne, Haupt. Groh D. ed. (2003), *Naturkatastrophen. Beiträge zu ihrer Deutung, Wahrnehmung und Darstellung in Text und Bild von der Antike bis ins 20. Jahrhundert*, Tübingen, Gunter Narr. See also: Jakubowski-Tiessen M., Lehmann H. eds (2003), *Um Himmels Willen. Religion in Katastrophenzeiten*, Tübingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht. Kempe M., Rohr C. eds (2003), *Coping with the Unexpected - Natural Disasters and their Perception*, Isle of Harris, The White House Press. Special Issue of *Environment & History*. Pelling M. (2003), *Natural Disasters and Development in a Globalizing World*, London, Routledge. Pfister C., Summermatter S. eds (2004), *Katastrophen und ihre Bewältigung. Perspektiven und Positionen. Referate einer Vorlesungsreihe des Collegium generale der Universität Bern im Sommersemester 2003*, Bern, Haupt. Lübken U. (2004), "Zwischen Alltag und Ausnahmezustand. Ein Überblick über die historiographische Auseinandersetzung mit Naturkatastrophen", *WerkstattGeschichte*, vol. 38, pp. 91-100.

<sup>17</sup> Pfister C. (2002b), "Catastrophes et dangers naturels dans une perspective historique - introduction", in Pfister C. (2002a), pp. 11-25. Imhof K. (2004), "Katastrophenkommunikation in der Moderne", in Pfister C., Summermatter S., pp. 145-163.

<sup>18</sup> Imhof (2004), p. 151.

## 2. Organizing national donation campaigns – from the trial phase to routine business

Prior to addressing the issue of national donation campaigns, it should be briefly outlined as to how people were dealing with risk prior to the nineteenth century. The quest for security is part of our basic needs. To a large extent, human agency is directed to avert risk as a means of safeguarding the basis of existence<sup>19</sup>. Over the last 200 years this need of security gave rise to an important industry. However, it did not include insurance against natural hazards before the twentieth century. The ways in which people were coping with natural hazards in the previous period had not yet been systematically investigated<sup>20</sup>. Basically, three strategies are distinguished: risk avoidance (e.g. building houses outside of hazard-prone areas), risk mitigation (e.g. taking preventive measures) and, finally, precautions for the case of a loss<sup>21</sup>. All kinds of disaster assistance are geared to support people in recovering from losses. Regarding the contexts in which assistance was provided, two criteria are distinguished: the relations between donors and recipients, and the conditions under which assistance was provided. First, it matters whether a donor directly supports needy persons or whether he commits his donation to an institution which acts as a mediator between donors and recipients. Second, it is significant whether the assistance has its major point in tacit or explicit expectations of reciprocity or whether other motivations, e.g. altruism or profiling, are involved. The combination of the two criteria yields four basic forms of (disaster) assistance (table 1). The table should be understood as a rough survey rather than an elaborate typology. In particular, motivations may hardly be squeezed in a scheme because the transition between them is gradual and blurred and the categories are not mutually exclusive.

The primary place of refuge was, of course, the family in terms of kin<sup>22</sup>. Reciprocity was expected as a moral obligation. The same relates to neighborly assistance. If single households or individuals without a strong social network

<sup>19</sup> Brinkmann H. (1997), *Die Kantonalen Gebäudeversicherungen. Eine Standortbestimmung aus gesamtschweizerischer Sicht*, Bern, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Arps, L. (1965) *Auf sicheren Pfeilern. Deutsche Versicherungswirtschaft vor 1914*. Göttingen, still provides the most comprehensive survey in German.

<sup>21</sup> Grosse W. et al. eds (1991), *Versicherungsenzyklopädie*, Wiesbaden, Gabler, vol. 1, p. 412.

<sup>22</sup> Gestrich, A. (1999), *Geschichte der Familie im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*. München, Oldenbourg p. 69 provides a large number of evidence.

Motivations for and implementation of disaster assistance		
Motives for actions	Form of assistance	
	Personal	Institutional
Religious, Charitable, Selfish Economic	- Begging license - Seed-money, gifts in kind	- Church collections - Charities
	Moral	Legal
Expected reciprocity	- Family support - Neighborly assistance - Network of patronage	- Contributions within cooperative networks - Insurance

Table 1

were affected by disaster, they got a so-called "begging license." This document was issued by the community and officially confirmed that the bearer had been ruined by fire or by natural disaster ("hail begging"). He was therefore worthy to receive alms, in contrast to the able-bodied, undeserving "foreign" poor who, as was believed, was begging due to laziness. With the increasing poverty of the eighteenth century, such licenses were often forged. After the introduction of cantonal fire insurances in the early nineteenth century they were no longer issued<sup>23</sup>. As an ersatz, for example, the authorities of Canton Bern provided some seed money or organized collections in churches after the services<sup>24</sup>. In turn, the communities made timber, tools and food available to households which had been affected by a fire or a natural disaster.

If a disaster destroyed large parts of a town or a village, the community as a whole needed assistance from the outside. In such cases, there seems to have been formal or informal networks of assistance between communities – fire-cooperatives which in case of hazard provided contributions to those in need. Such assistance was given with the expectation of reciprocity. From the second half of the eighteenth century, it was commonplace to ask for a receipt. Many towns and communities listed their contributions to third parties in a register in order to rapidly survey their assets in case of a hazard<sup>25</sup>. The (military) network of the old Swiss Confederation (prior to 1798) also implied

<sup>23</sup> Körner, M. (1987), *Banken und Versicherungen im Kanton Luzern vom ausgehenden Ancien Régime bis zum ersten Weltkrieg*. Luzern, Rex, p. 125

<sup>24</sup> Rettenmund, J. (1984), *Huttwil 1834 - Erinnerungsschrift zum Wiederaufbau des Städtchens Huttwil nach dem Brand vor 150 Jahren*. Huttwil, Rettenmund, p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> Rettenmund (1984), p.40. see also: Fässler, M. (2002), "Les grands incendies – Des cas d'école pour la gestion des catastrophes", in PFISTER C. (2002a), pp. 177-190.



assistance in case of disaster, albeit on a strictly reciprocal basis<sup>26</sup>. Cantonal and private insurances developed these principles as of the early nineteenth century in a commercial context.

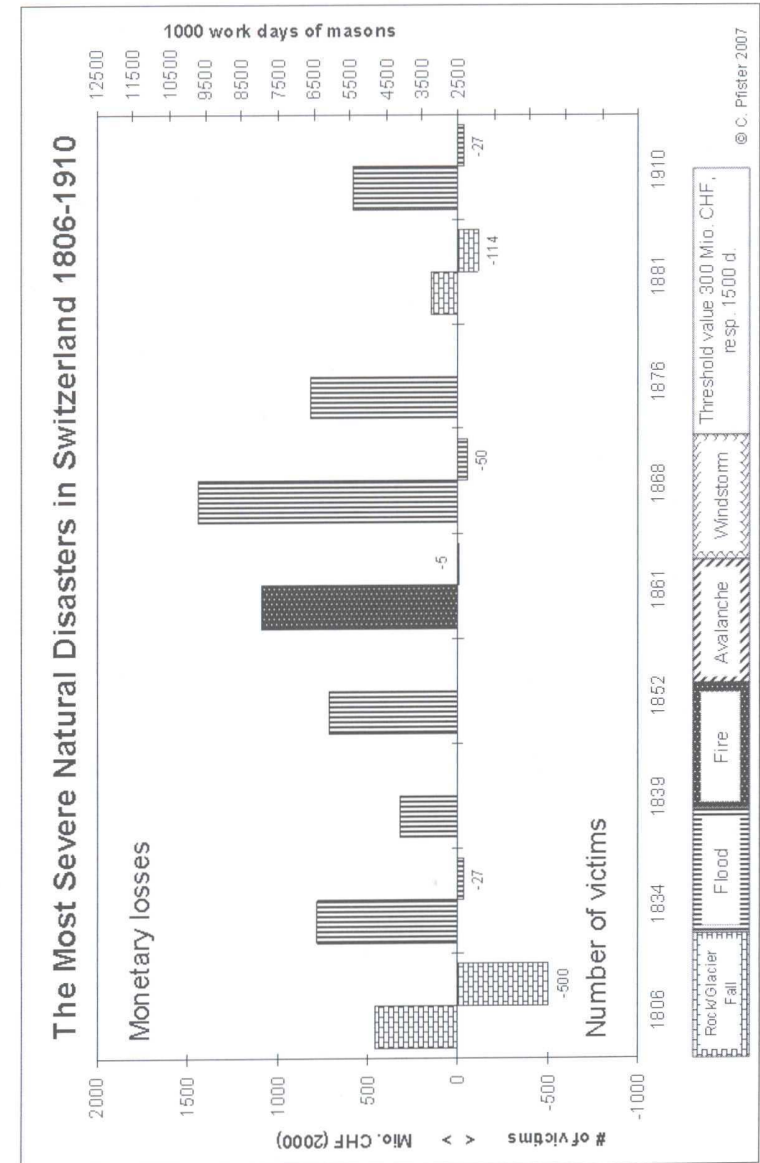
Parochial churches were the oldest institutions which conducted collections for disaster victims not personally known to the donors. The sums which could be expected varied according to the size of the territory and the generosity of the donors. From the nineteenth century, private associations within the emerging national state set up novel forms of secular donation campaigns, generally drawing on the resources of a much larger territory than the fragmented territorial patchwork in the Ancient Regime.

The subsequent summary report of severe disasters in Switzerland between 1806 and 1914 focuses on the way in which members of the elite indeed took advantage of disasters to initiate conjunctures of national excitement. It also investigates the success of such initiatives through considering the sums of money raised for victims. This requires some preliminary considerations: any attempt to compare the severity of catastrophes faces two methodological problems. First, the magnitude of a disaster is appraised on two mutually exclusive scales involving the number of casualties and the sum of losses. Taking both criteria for defining "severity" is the only solution. Second, a common deflator for the monetary value of losses is usually lacking. In the case of Switzerland, the daily wages of masons since 1800 yielded acceptable results<sup>27</sup>. All contemporary monetary values have been converted to a mason's daily wage, they then being reconverted into Swiss francs (CHF) (2000) on the basis of a mason's present-day wage. The definition of "severe" in graph 1 comprises all disasters taking more than 50 lives or causing losses of more than 300 million Swiss francs (2000).

Figure 1 displays nine disasters during the period of investigation, all of which fulfil the criteria described, namely six floods, two major rock slides and the great fire in the town of Glaris. The rock slides took the most lives whereas the remaining events caused high losses. The losses in the flood of 1852 were only surveyed in one canton. However, to conclude from the analogous case in

<sup>26</sup> The cumbersome working of these mutualistic rituals is depicted in Steiner-Barmettler, L. (1980), "Der Dorfbrand von Stans 1713". Beiträge zur Geschichte Nidwaldens, Stans, Historischer Verein.

<sup>27</sup> Pfister (2002), Table 16.1. All nominal values for losses and donations are listed there.



### Figure 1

June of 1876, the losses of this event actually may have exceeded 300 million francs (2000). Placed together, the categories of "natural" and "man-made disasters" are somewhat blurred in reality. On one hand, the disastrous fire in the town of Glaris occurred after a long period of scarce precipitation and the flames were propagated by violent winds. The rock slide at Elm on 11 September 1881, on the other hand, was entirely "man-made," as is clear from the opinion of the leading expert<sup>28</sup>. Subsequently, the nine disasters are discussed from the point of view of their significance for nation-building<sup>29</sup>.

Considering the number of nearly 500 victims, the **rock slide at Goldau on 2 September 1806** was the worst disaster in the recent history of Switzerland. Some 200 households lost their homes; the damage amounted to 460 Mio CHF (2000). This event inaugurated the first donation campaign embracing the 19 small independent republics which comprised Switzerland at that time. Napoleon had appointed a supreme officer for this structure on a purely representative basis; he bore the title of "Landammann of Switzerland". Andreas Merian from Basel, who held this appointment in 1806, invited the governments of the 19 cantons to organize donation campaigns. Obviously,

<sup>28</sup> Pfister C. (2000), "Catastrophes naturelles et réseaux d'assistance en Suisse au XIX siècle", in Favier R., Granet-Abisset A.-M. eds, *Histoire et Mémoire des risques naturels*, Grenoble, CNRS MSH-Alpes, pp. 165-176. Here p. 170.

<sup>29</sup> Fässler, A. (2002), *La naissance de la solidarité confédérale. Les actions de secours suite à l'éboulement de Goldau [1806]*, in Pfister (2002), pp. 35-68; Nienhaus, A. (2002), *Aide au développement et assistance aux pauvres. L'entraide suite aux inondations de 1834 – le cas des Grisons*, in Pfister (2002a), pp. 69-86; Nienhaus, A. (2006), "Gemeinnützige Katastrophenhilfe als Anstoss für staatliches Handeln in der Schweiz der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts", *Traverse - Zeitschrift für Geschichte* Nr.1, pp. 63-76 [pour les inondations de 1839]; Müller R. (2004), "Das wild gewordene Element." *Gesellschaftliche Reaktionen auf die beiden Mittellandhochwasser von 1852 und 1876*, Nordhausen, Verlag Traugott Bautz. Berner Forschungen zur Regionalgeschichte, Vol. 2; Fässler, M. (2002), *Les grands incendies – Des cas d'école pour la maîtrise des catastrophes* [pour l'incendie de Glaris 1861], in Pfister (2002a), pp. 177-190; Summermatter S. (2005), *Die Überschwemmungen von 1868 in der Schweiz. Unmittelbare Reaktion und längerfristige Prävention mit näherer Betrachtung des Kantons Wallis*, Nordhausen, Verlag Traugott Bautz. Berner Forschungen zur Regionalgeschichte, Vol. 5; Bläuer, H. (2002), *L'éboulement d'Elm du 11 septembre 1881. Causes et gestion sociale d'une catastrophe provoquée*, in Pfister (2002a), 113-130; Bonderer, K. (2000), *Veränderung des gesellschaftlichen Erklärungsmusters für Hochwasserkatastrophen im 20. Jahrhundert in der Schweiz am Beispiel der Jahre 1910 und 1987*, unpublished BA thesis, University of Bern, Institute of History. See also Müller, R., et al. (2005), "Die Not als Lehrmeisterin. Auswirkungen von Naturkatastrophen auf staatliches Handeln am Beispiel von sechs ausgewählten Krisensituationen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert", in Schweiz Z. f. Geschichte (SZG) 55/ 3, pp. 257-284.

he grasped this opportunity of providing assistance under his prerogatives as supreme magistrate of the country. In his own way, Merian redirected feelings of solidarity, steering them away from the dominant values in the former "Ancient Regime," – such as a common religious belief – towards the emerging scheme of territorial and secular organization, which was the nation. The invitation was made "in the name of a merciful god and the common Swiss fatherland". Thus, the disaster relief operation became a national commitment, but it primarily involved the cantons, which still were the authoritative actors. All cantons set up donation campaigns and sent the receipts to the government of Canton Schwyz, where Goldau is situated. The participation of the entire confederation allowed concentrating the surplus from a large prosperous area in favour of a tiny poor mountain republic. It is true that cantons had traditionally assisted each other in military emergency situations, but this was the first time that all of them assisted a member in a situation of logistic and humanitarian emergency. An important innovation in this context was the obligation to submit the administration of all charities to public control<sup>30</sup>. The obligation to lay the receipts and the expenses open was a very powerful pressurizing medium to avoid any fraud. It signalized to the responsible dignitaries that their reputation was at stake. In retrospect, the campaign in favour of Goldau may be interpreted as the birth of an all-embracing Swiss interregional solidarity. This definition is to be primarily understood in terms of solidarity among cantons and cultural areas, which, after all, still manifests itself in justifications to get equal access to railway subsidies and motorway junctions<sup>31</sup>.

The western and central Alps were ravaged by two severe **floods, on 27 August 1834 and again in early October of 1839**. At that time, Switzerland lacked a supreme officer to launch an appeal to set up donation campaigns in the name of the fatherland. Instead, conservative and liberal cantons clashed about the role of religion and the reform of the constitution. In place of a responsible canton, the Swiss Society of Public Utilities took the lead to coordinate the donation campaign on its own, which involved central collection and redistribution of the money raised and the goods donated in kind. The losses of every household were registered by officials of the communities on specific

<sup>30</sup> Fässler A. (2002), "La naissance de la solidarité confédérale - Les actions d'entraide suite à l'éboulement de Goldau (1806)" in Pfister C. (2002a), pp. 55-68.

<sup>31</sup> Kirchhofer A. (2007), "Stets zu Diensten- gezwungenermassen!". *Die Schweizer Bahnen und ihre "Gemeinwirtschaftlichkeit" für Staat, Wirtschaft und Bevölkerung*, Bern, PhD-Thesis. The Thesis will be published in 2008.



forms<sup>32</sup>. The amount of the donations was distributed as equitably as possible according to both the amount of losses and the degree of poverty<sup>33</sup>. In 1839, the responsible canton cooperated with the Society<sup>34</sup>. The Society represented the same circle of persons as the Diet Assembly, but as a private body it was less compromised<sup>35</sup>. Unlike in 1806, private individuals were allowed to form societies and associations.<sup>36</sup> In case of severe natural disasters, the leaders of these associations took initiatives to mobilize their members for fund-raising campaigns. The dedication of women's societies needs to be emphasized in this context. For example, a society of women in the small Canton Uri<sup>37</sup> set up a very successful charity bazaar in favour of the victims. Though the leading women were not allowed to act in public by name, public female institutions came into being in this context<sup>38</sup>. In England, the organization of charity bazaars was pre-eminently a female affair. Women's societies spread rapidly from the 1820s and they were astoundingly successful<sup>39</sup>.

The Swiss midland was ravaged by a severe flood on **17/18 September 1852**. At that time, Switzerland was already a federal state, but its executive, the Federal Council, remained passive. The question is raised as to why the government of the young Confederation did not take the opportunity to demonstrate leadership by launching a patriotic appeal to the population and setting up an all-embracing donation campaign. Reto Müller comes to the

<sup>32</sup> Nienhaus A. (2000), *Naturkatastrophe und Modernisierungsprozess. Eine Analyse gesellschaftlicher Reaktionen auf das alpine Hochwasser von 1834 in Graubünden*, MA-Thesis, Institute of History, University of Bern, 60ff.

<sup>33</sup> Nienhaus A. (2002), "Aide au développement et assistance aux pauvres - L'entraide lors des inondations de 1834 - le cas des Grisons" in Pfister C. ed. (2002a), pp. 69-85. Nienhaus A. (2006), *Gemeinnützige Katastrophenhilfe als Anstoss für staatliches Handeln in der Schweiz der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, in: Traverse - Zeitschrift für Geschichte 1, pp. 63-76.

<sup>34</sup> Summermatter S. (2005), *Die Überschwemmungen von 1868 in der Schweiz. Unmittelbare Reaktion und längerfristige Prävention mit näherer Betrachtung des Kantons Wallis*, Nordhausen, Verlag Traugott Bautz. Berner Forschungen zur Regionalgeschichte, Bd. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Nienhaus (2002), pp. 73-75.

<sup>36</sup> In 1900, some 30,000 such organizations were known in the country which then had a population of only 3.3 million (Jost H.U. (1991), "Sociabilité, faits associatifs et vie politique en Suisse au 19<sup>e</sup> siècle", in Jost H.U., Tanner A. eds, *Geselligkeit, Sozietäten und Vereine*, Zürich, Chronos, pp. 7-30. Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte, Heft Nr. 9).

<sup>37</sup> At the northern entrance of the Gotthard tunnel.

<sup>38</sup> Mesmer (1988), p. 58.

<sup>39</sup> Prochaska F.K. (1977), "Charity Bazaars in Nineteenth-Century England", *The Journal of British Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 62-84.

following conclusions: the disaster had primarily affected the wealthy cantons. The mountainous peripheries did not have the funds to assist the centers of wealth<sup>40</sup>.

The campaign after the **huge fire in the town of Glaris on 10 May 1861** was among the most successful. Some 600 houses were destroyed, 3,000 people lost their homes, total damage was estimated at 1 billion Swiss francs (2000)<sup>41</sup>. At that time, Canton Glaris was a small mountain republic with some 33,000 inhabitants. It depended on outside assistance to recover from the destruction of its capital in much the same way as the microscopic Greek city republics in antiquity as described by Burkart Meissner<sup>42</sup>. The press and the associations launched a nationwide donation campaign. The "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" (NZZ) dispatched a special correspondent to Glaris for some two weeks. Day after day, he yielded a report in tabloid style on how people were grappling with the effects of the disaster. The press also designed a new fund raising strategy by publishing the names of generous donors and the receipts of individual associations along with the donated sums. Considering the raised sum of almost 300 million Swiss francs (2000), the campaign was astoundingly successful<sup>43</sup>.

Two floods in the **autumn of 1868** inundated the valleys around the central Alps and besides the massive flood of August 2005<sup>44</sup> were the most destructive in the last 200 years<sup>45</sup>. The flooding cost 50 lives and caused damages estimated at 1.4 billion francs (2000). Confederation president Jakob Dubs visited the areas ravaged by the floods in order to strengthen the morale of the victims. In the Canton Ticino, Dubs' visit was of particular symbolic significance because the presence of the supreme magistrate was taken as an indication that the Confederation was interested in the fate of its Italian-speaking region. The commitment of the executive was followed by actions. Parts of the army were called up and several hundred sappers took pains to reconstruct the communication lines in the Rhine Valley of Canton St. Gallen as well as in Canton Ticino. The Confederation did not make any funds available for

<sup>40</sup> Müller (2004), pp. 67-80.

<sup>41</sup> Fässler M. (2002), p. 185.

<sup>42</sup> See this volume.

<sup>43</sup> In 1946, the "chain of good fortune," a private organization, adopted the idea of a donation contest for the radio by broadcasting the names of and amounts of contributions made by individual donors.

<sup>44</sup> Hilker B. et al. (2007), "Unwetterschäden in der Schweiz im Jahre 2005" in *Wasser Energie Luft*, 99/1.

<sup>45</sup> Summermatter (2005), pp. 41-53.





Figure 2 - Engraving "Solidarity"

the victims. Instead, the executive branch of the federal government took the initiative in coordinating the many fund-raising efforts which were made at various levels. Most of the successful organizational innovations which had been attempted since 1806 were implemented again. In the press coverage of his published message, Dubs compared the destructive power of the floods in the country with the attack of an enemy from outside. He pointed out that it should be fought back with the same determination. This metaphor called for a quasi-military mobilization of the country against the forces of nature<sup>46</sup>. The Federal Council singled out the positive effects of the disaster in its address, proclaiming: "Albeit the need is huge, the fraternity is even greater. Taking into account how our ancestors repeatedly succeeded in overcoming worrisome situations, we trust that we will do that once again, today. Therefore, we should truthfully raise our eyes and envisage a better future."<sup>47</sup>

This engraving (Figure 2) was sold in Geneva for the benefit of the victims of the disaster and nicely illustrates the positive interpretation of the catastrophe. The representation comprises three parts. The left side represents the dark side of the disaster with devastating torrents, trees whipped by the wind and a woman with a baby on her breast and clinging to another child with her hand. She tends her arms in the direction of the center of the illustration from where she expects help. The right side represents the light side of the disaster. Two figures run in the direction of the center of the illustration. One of them is wearing a cylinder and holding a bag of money and represents the wealthy bourgeoisie. The other one is bringing gifts in kind, such as bread and clothes, and represents the rural population. The enlightened central point of the picture is dominated by Helvetia, an allegoric representation of the nation, similar to France's Marianne and Germany's Germania. Her shield, the symbol of military might, is in the background. She wears a laurel wreath symbolizing victory over the dark powers of the elements. The maxim of the Swiss Confederation appears within the laurel crown: "One for all and all for one." A smaller woman representing "fraternité" (brotherhood) brings her a symbolic bag full of gifts. With her right arm, Helvetia points in the direction of the disaster which symbolizes the redistribution of donations to the poorest people<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>46</sup> Summermatter (2005), pp. 98-107.

<sup>47</sup> Schweizerisches Bundesblatt BBl 1868 III, pp. 519-521.

<sup>48</sup> Summermatter (2005), p. 102.



The donation campaign activated tens of thousands of men, women and children through societies, clubs, associations, schools, factories and the army. Concerts, bazaars and raffles were arranged. Virtually everyone, even needy people, raised some money. As a matter of fact, the donation campaign yielded as much as 335 million Swiss francs (2000). This outcome is astounding for a population then comprising only 2.6 million individuals<sup>49</sup>. Stephanie Summermatter points out that the entire campaign stood out because of a high level of agreement and the likeliness of improving the coherence among the cantons. This experience greatly contributed to overcoming the war-like generation of the federal state. The raised money was deposited into the federal treasury and redistributed to the affected cantons. Dissension remained on whether all the funds should be redistributed to the victims or whether part of the money should be used to rebuild the broken dams. Finally, the conflict was settled by compromise<sup>50</sup>.

Considering the scope of the emotional effect and the amount of the receipts, the campaign of 1868 was an outstanding event. The donation campaign for the victims of the subsequent severe *flood event*, which struck the midland in *June of 1876* yielded less than half of the previous amount. Reto Müller assumes that many people still resented the fact that part of the money collected for the victims in 1868 was invested in safety measures. Moreover, the wealthy part of the country was mostly affected, as had been the case in 1852, thereby limiting the potential surplus. Finally, the victims did not correspond to the image of the innocent, hard-working and modest mountain dweller which was particularly appealing for donations<sup>51</sup>. The “man-made” rock slide at Elm on 11 September 1881, which took 114 lives, is very illustrative in this context. The campaign was arranged according to the model of 1876. Human blame was brushed aside in the press reports, the victims were pictured in accordance with the image of the Alpine myth in order to maximise the donation receipts. Indeed, those were sufficiently abundant so as to cover as much as 70% of the material damages<sup>52</sup>. For the NZZ, this result was clear evidence of a strengthened

national coherence. Elm was the last in a series of severe disasters which affected the country from the 1850s to the 1880s. Over the subsequent century, such events became remarkably rare. Moreover, natural hazard insurance was made compulsory in most cantons for all property owners. The last severe flood event within the old institutional framework occurred on *14/15 June 1910*. Assisting the victims was handled as a matter of routine. In its appeal to the nation, the Federal Council emphasized that successful donation campaigns in favour of disaster victims had become a tradition<sup>53</sup>. At that time, disasters were no longer needed as platforms to promote the national coherence. Other forums for celebrating and promoting national identity had been introduced, such as the national holiday on 1 August as of 1891, the commemoration of victorious battles in the Middle Ages and the organization of national fairs (Geneva 1896, Bern 1914 and Zürich 1939)<sup>54</sup>.

### 3. A Swiss “special case”?

Switzerland is in many respects a special case. Its form of executive government and the powerful instruments of “direct” popular democracy (referendum, constitutional initiative) are unique in the world. Moreover, it has the only squared flag and the oldest constitutional recognition (1798) of three official languages and cultures – German, French and Italian. How unique is the birth of Swiss national coherence in the face of disaster?

The yield and the origin of raised donations (Figure 3) can be taken as an indicator of the readiness to pay for the sake of the nation: if the receipts are equalized on the basis of a mason’s daily wages and converted to a per capita basis, the campaigns on the occasion of the tragic fire at Glaris (1861) and the alpine floods in 1868 were by far the most successful. The previous campaigns yielded considerably less, probably because the divergence between the cantons was virulent. In 1852, no campaign at all was launched because the wounds of the recent civil war had not yet healed. Between 1876 and 1910, the readiness to pay for the victims of disaster was considerably lower than in the 1860s, but it still remained at a substantial level. The lion’s share of the donated funds was raised in the urban centers and by associations of Swiss

<sup>49</sup> Pfister C. (2002c), “Surmonter les catastrophes naturelles - les stratégies de 1500 à nos jours”, in PFISTER C. (2002a), pp. 209–254. Here p. 227 and tab. 16.1.

<sup>50</sup> Summermatter (2005), pp. 180–186.

<sup>51</sup> Müller R. (2004), “Das wild gewordene Element. “Gesellschaftliche Reaktionen auf die beiden Mittellandhochwasser von 1852 und 1876, Nordhausen, Verlag Traugott Bautz. Berner Forschungen zur Regionalgeschichte, Bd. 2, pp. 123–126.

<sup>52</sup> Bläuer H.P. (2002), “L’éboulement d’Elm du 11 septembre 1881 - Causes et gestion sociale d’une catastrophe provoquée”, in Pfister C. 2002a, pp. 113–130.

<sup>53</sup> “Vaterland”, Nr.138, 17th June 1910, p. 3. “Vaterland”, 2. B., Nr.140, 19th June 1910, p. 1. “Der Bund”, Nr.284, 20th June 1910, p. 2.

<sup>54</sup> Büchler H. (1970), *Drei schweizerische Landesausstellungen: Zürich 1883, Genf 1896, Bern 1914*, Zürich, Juris Verlag.

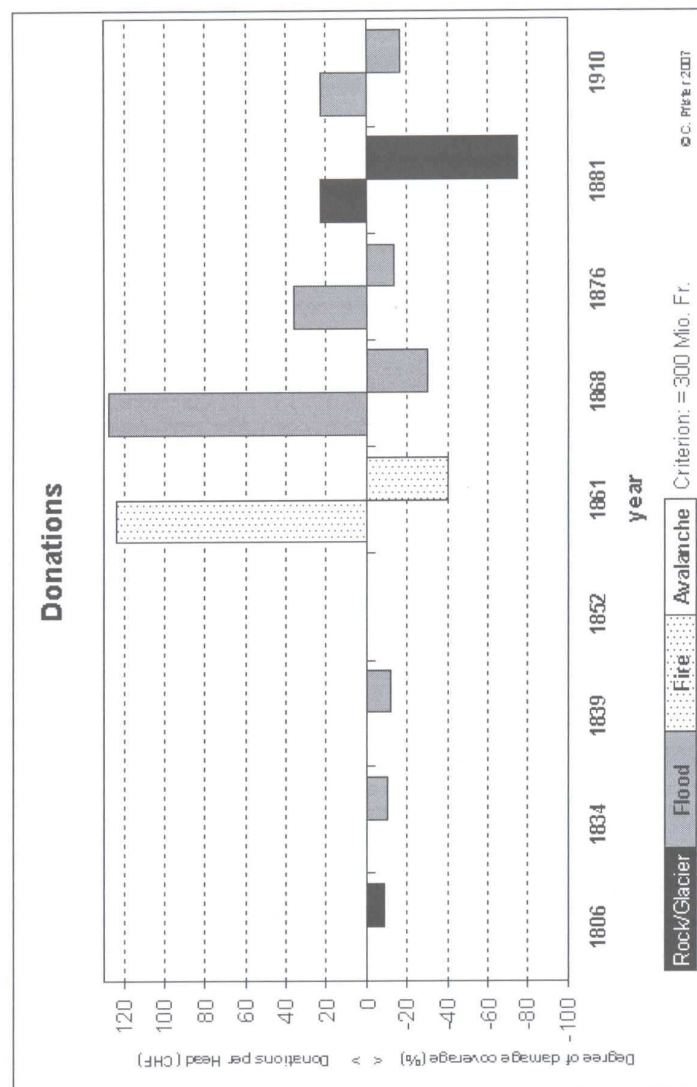


Figure 3 - Yield of national-level donation campaigns 1806-1910

emigrants abroad willing to generously assist their needy fellow countrymen in the old homeland. Most of the money flew in the peripheries, mainly in the highly symbolic Alpine region, where it mostly benefited the poorest segment of the victims, albeit after time-consuming bureaucratic procedures<sup>55</sup>.

The successful practice of country-wide, coordinated disaster assistance quite plainly showed the populace of the cantons the advantages of belonging to the new federal state. The press highlighted the fact that the prevailing culture of disaster largely contributed to strengthen the national coherence: "After severe calamities in Switzerland, assistance is in each case spontaneously organized in a patriotic spirit. Despite a limited financial scope, its effect is intensively felt in the most remote mountain valley without considering differences in political and religious affiliation. No country on earth is able to provide evidence for such a practice"<sup>56</sup>.

In other countries of Europe, of course, private charities were also an important source of nineteenth-century welfare. But besides social, medical, scholastic, church and anti-slavery charities, disaster relief was of minor importance.<sup>57</sup>

In any case, the hypothesis of a Swiss "special case" still needs to be validated and differentiated, taking into account such examples as the hazard-ridden country of the Philippines, where people developed their own strategies "from below" to cope with disaster<sup>58</sup>. Undoubtedly, disasters were used to develop platforms for national mass-mobilization. Elsewhere, people closed ranks when wars were fought against outside enemies. The memory of victorious battles is preserved in the names of bridges and/or railway and subway stations, such as the Pont d'Austerlitz in Paris or the Waterloo Station in London. Switzerland did not wage any outside wars during the 19<sup>th</sup> century,

<sup>55</sup> Nienhaus (2002), pp. 79-81. Summermatter (2005), pp. 254-261.

<sup>56</sup> Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ), 4 Jan 1882, 1 quoted in Eisner M. (1991), Politische Sprache und sozialer Wandel. Eine quantitative und semantische Analyse von Neujahrsbeiträgen in der Schweiz von 1840 bis 1887, Zürich, pp. 56-57.

<sup>57</sup> Schott, D. (2002), "One City - Three Catastrophes: Hamburg from the Great Fire 1842 to the Great Flood 1962", in Guilbaud-Massard, G. et al. (2002), pp. 185-204. Guidoboni, E. (2002), "Tremblements de terre et politique d'intervention en Italie. Une synthèse des stratégies adoptées au cours des quatre derniers siècles", in Favier, R. (2002), pp. 153-175. Cœur, D. (2002), "Des associations de propriétaires pour lutter contre l'inondation: les syndicats de riverains dans la plaine de Grenoble (vers 1750-vers 1930)" in Favier, R. (2002), pp. 131-152.

<sup>58</sup> Bankoff G. (2003), *Cultures of Disaster: Society and Natural Hazard in The Philippines*, London, Routledge Curzon.



thus enabling the object of a patriotic cult to emerge. The cult of the nation was anchored in narrative plots which reminded of the successful fights of cantonal alliances against the "foreign dominance" of the Habsburgs during the Middle Ages. The need for financial assistance in favor of disaster victims was quasi represented as a continuation of traditional military assistance among cantons, however in the form of a fight against the destructive forces of nature. At the end of the long nineteenth century, a culture of donation, one of interregional solidarity had come into being, which – in conjunction with the creation of a state-controlled, efficient and cost-effective natural disaster insurance system<sup>59</sup> – has become a cornerstone in heretofore reducing vulnerability to disaster in Switzerland.

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<sup>59</sup> Wanner C. (2003), *100 Jahre zeitgemäss – Meilensteine in der Brand- und Elementarversicherung in der Schweiz*, Bern, MA-Thesis, Institute of History, University of Bern.

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