



Sons of Norway Information Banks

#201: SYTTENDE MAI

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SYTTENDE MAI

Syttende Mai—May 17—is Norway's foremost national holiday, commemorating the anniversary of the signing of the country's constitution in 1814. For most Norwegians, it's a fun day filled with parades, fireworks and family get-togethers. But how did this landmark in Norwegian history come to pass?

THE BIRTH OF NORWAY'S CONSTITUTION

Although Syttende Mai commemorates the constitution of 1814, its origins can be traced back much farther. In the late 1300s the kingdoms of Norway, Sweden and Denmark were united under an arrangement known as the Kalmar Union. This three-part kingdom was unstable and short-lived, finally dissolving for good in 1523 when Sweden broke away. Denmark and Norway however, remained united, although the terms of the union were highly unequal, with Denmark being the dominant party.

The union of Denmark-Norway came to an end as a result of the Napoleonic Wars (1797 – 1815), a series of conflicts with France and its neighbors caused by Napoleon Bonaparte's attempts to expand his empire on the continent. Various alliances formed and dissolved during the conflicts, but until 1801 the neutrality of Denmark-Norway was honored by all sides. This ended when Russia, Prussia, Sweden and Denmark-Norway joined together in the League of Armed Neutrality, an alliance of small navies banded together to enforce their common shipping rights. Great Britain saw this as a threat to their naval supremacy and in turn destroyed the Danish Navy at Copenhagen.

An ensuing truce kept Denmark-Norway out of direct conflict for another six years, until Great Britain again attacked the harbor at Copenhagen, this time capturing the entire Danish fleet. Denmark believed it had no other choice but to join Napoleon's ranks. The resulting British blockade was disastrous to Norway's commerce and got a lot of Norwegians thinking about the advantages of political independence.

During ongoing hostilities, Sweden was allied with Great Britain. Swedish Crown Prince Carl Johan participated in a successful campaign against the Napoleonic alliance at Leipzig, Germany, in 1813 that ended France's quest for supremacy in Europe. The defeat of Denmark's ally gave Sweden leverage to accomplish what it had long desired—to dissolve the Denmark-Norway union. Through Carl Johan's political influence, Denmark forfeited Norway to Sweden under the terms of the Treaty of Kiel, signed in January of 1814.



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On paper, Norway immediately became a part of Sweden. In reality however, there was no Swedish administration in place to govern the Norwegian people, who rejected the Kiel treaty. Early in 1814, Norwegian leaders met with Norway's former Danish governor, Prince Christian Frederik, at Eidsvoll to assess the situation and examine their options. One option was for the prince, heir to both the Norwegian and Danish thrones, to become Norway's king while Sweden was still busy with post war recovery. Christian Frederick took over as regent and facilitated meetings that led to a constitutional assembly.

The regent called together the entire nation in the country's principal churches on February 25, 1814, to elect a general assembly. Of the men elected, 112 officials, farmers and businessmen traveled to Eidsvoll in early April to draft a constitution.

On Easter Sunday, April 10, 1814, the assemblymen gathered at Eidsvoll Church for a service. The convention formally opened the next day in the main building of Eidsvoll Verk. Using preliminary drafts brought by several delegates, the drafting committee completed its work in 10 days. The document was adopted unanimously on May 16 and signed by all delegates on May 17.

UNION OR INDEPENDENCE?

With most of their work finished, the assembly faced one more major decision. Should Norway be an independent nation or accept a union with Sweden? Despite the short period of consideration, the decision to elect a monarch for an independent Norway was made before May 17 had ended. Prince Christian Frederik was chosen to be King.

May 20 was the constituent assembly's last day together at Eidsvoll. The delegates formed a circle and in the name of the mighty Dovre mountains swore allegiance to the Constitution, shouting in union, "United and true until Dovre falls." Their free constitution became the only one in Europe conceived during the turmoil of the Napoleonic Wars to survive.

However, in July, the Swedes invaded and quickly crushed the Norwegian defenders. Negotiations were held in Moss, Norway, in mid-August, with the result that Christian Frederik would step down and Norway would enter into a personal union with Sweden. However, it did so as a sovereign state with its own constitution.

The revised constitution read, "The Kingdom of Norway is a free, independent, indivisible, and inalienable realm, united with Sweden under one king." The legal framework established the same fundamental ideas, the same statements of equal rights and the same concept of democracy that were defended in the constitution of May 17.

THE EVOLUTION OF A CELEBRATION

The first Syttende Mai celebrations were probably held in Trondheim in 1815. In the early years, a Syttende Mai celebration was a private affair, typically held in private clubs for merchants, bankers and others from the upper-middle class. One such merchant, Danish-born Matthias Conrad Peterson, thought that should change, and in 1826, a parade of thousands of Norwegians from all walks of life marched through Trondheim's streets in honor of Syttende Mai.

Oslo (then named Christiania) also held early celebrations. But Carl Johan, now king of Sweden and Norway, was against the festivities, perhaps because they served to strengthen patriotism and ongoing support for further independence. Bitter about his attitude, Norwegians quietly defied him through the 1820s.

The Syttende Mai celebration planned in Christiania in 1829 was not especially grand, but circumstances made it infamous. It was a Sunday with ideal weather. Citizens assembled by the harbor in the afternoon to welcome a steamboat called Constitutionen, that is, "The Constitution." The crowd grew, cheering and singing as the steamship came up the fjord. The first sign of trouble was that authorities thought shouts of "Long live the Constitution" had a dangerous double meaning. As the crowd drifted into the town

center, the stage was set for a drama that would infuriate the entire nation for decades.

At Stortorget, the city marketplace, the cavalry from Akershus Castle was ordered to line up for crowd control. Because participants in the festivities paid little attention to the sharp commands from authorities to disperse, a delegation of officials arrived at 10:30 PM with more troops, followed by a cavalry unit. Whoever gave the order for the cavalymen to draw their sabers and descend on the oblivious revelers is unknown. But screams and moans were heard all over the marketplace as people fled.

No one was killed that night and the subjugation of the Norwegians was a failure. Instead, the actions of the authorities solidified the people's will to celebrate as they saw fit. "The Battle of the Square" became a symbol of determination to continue with Syttende Mai celebrations, as well as a message of resistance to the King. The hero of the day was an Eidsvoll student, Henrik Wergeland, who continued to promote Syttende Mai celebrations and embarked on a lifelong crusade for human rights, equality, freedom and democracy.

The first official children's parade, or barnetog, was held in Christiania on May 17, 1870. The man behind the idea was Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, the famous author, speaker and political commentator. In that first year, Bjørnson marched on the streets of Oslo with 1200 flag-waving schoolboys. The unusual protest was an immediate success. Each year the march grew bigger and bigger, and soon spread across the country. Girls joined the boys' parade in 1889.

The union with Sweden ended on June 7th, 1905. While the date is usually noted in Norwegian newspapers, Syttende Mai has remained the most important national holiday.

SYTTENDE MAI DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Syttende Mai celebrations continued uninterrupted until German troops invaded Norway on April 9th, 1940. During the first Syttende Mai of the war all celebration was strictly forbidden by the German-controlled puppet government. No Norwegian flags could be flown and the national anthem was outlawed. Even in Sweden, Norwegian refugees were directed not to celebrate the holiday, as the Swedish state feared allowing them to do so could endanger Sweden's neutrality. The next year restrictions in Norway were relaxed somewhat, and the authorities allowed flags to be flown from poles - but not at half mast, as many Norwegians decided to do as an expression of the country's tragic situation under German rule.

Afterwards the Nazis instituted dozens of new restrictions on the flag. In effect, it became forbidden to carry or wear the flag or its colors. In larger cities this meant that Syttende Mai was most commonly commemorated in private. As the Germans enacted more and more restrictions, people started using more subtle symbols to show their patriotism, like paper clips and nisse hats. It comes as no surprise then that the Syttende Mai celebration of 1945 - just a few days after the German surrender - became an explosion of joy in the national colors in those feverish spring days.

SYTTENDE MAI TODAY

Syttende Mai festivities are no longer political demonstrations, but they still provide a vehicle for the outward display of Norwegian patriotism, pride and gratitude. The day is also a celebration of spring, when the sun melts away the ice and snow of the long Nordic winter and nature awakens from its long sleep.

The barnetog (children's parade) is the most prominent part of any Syttende Mai celebration, emphasizing the belief that a strong national future lies with the country's children. In cities and towns throughout Norway, youth of all ages march in their best clothes or national costumes—bunads—carrying Norwegian flags and singing patriotic songs. Bands play and people line the streets to watch the children pass. Everyone participates, strengthening national pride and the bonds of citizenship. Finally, graduating high school seniors, called russ, generally bring up the end of the parade. The festive atmosphere is enhanced by favorite traditional and contemporary foods—hot dogs in lefse and soft drinks—as well as family dinners and neighborhood parties. Amusement parks, theaters, assembly halls, and movie theaters host performances by local choruses, bands, and folk dancers. In larger cities, the day's festivities are capped off by a display of fireworks.

Syttende Mai is also celebrated across the US and Canada and around the world. To find a Syttende Mai event in your area, check with your local Sons of Norway lodge, or the events calendar at <http://www.sonsofnorway.com>. Go forth and celebrate!

WHO'S THAT?

The history of Syttende Mai has been shaped by many complex and colorful characters. Here's a closer look at a few of the people who shaped Norway and its national holiday.



Carl Johan (1763-1844)

Sweden's legendary king wasn't born into the monarchy - in fact, he wasn't even Swedish. Born Jean Baptiste Bernadotte in Pau, France, the future king joined the French army and rose quickly through the ranks to become a general and eventually a marshal of Napoleon's empire in 1805.

So how did a French general become the king of Sweden? In 1809, King Carl XIII had assumed the Swedish throne. Elderly and childless, he adopted an heir to succeed him - but the heir died in May of 1810, leaving the Swedish monarchy without a clear successor. Picking one of Napoleon's marshals seemed like a good idea, and Bernadotte was wealthy, famous and even related to Napoleon (by marriage) though their relationship had become severely strained. Bernadotte accepted the Swedish offer and was named crown prince in August of 1810, taking the name Carl Johan. The new prince quickly established himself as the driving force in Swedish politics. He became king of both Sweden and Norway in 1818 after the death of King Carl XIII. Although he proved to be an extremely shrewd leader, Carl Johan never became very popular in Norway, not least because of his attempts to suppress the celebration of Syttende Mai. Nonetheless, Karl Johans gata, the main street in downtown Oslo, is named in his honor. Today's Swedish royal family is descended from him.



Christian Frederik (1786-1848)

A cousin of the Danish king, Christian Frederik was named governor of Norway in 1813 and sent there on a mission to strengthen the country's fraying bonds to Denmark. Christian Frederik became quite popular with the Norwegian people, and when he was called home after the Treaty

of Kiel forfeited Norway to Sweden, Christian Frederik decided to stay in Norway. According to the line of Danish succession, Christian Frederik had a legitimate claim to the throne of Norway, but as events developed, he made the politically savvy choice to function as a transitional regent with the expectation that he would eventually be elected king. After being forced out by the end of 1814, Christian Frederik returned to Denmark, married and became a patron of the arts and sciences. He eventually returned to politics and succeeded his cousin as king of Denmark in 1839. He reigned until his death in 1848.



Matthias Conrad Peterson (1761-1833)

Peterson was born in the then-Danish district of Slesvig, now a part of Germany. As a young man, Peterson traveled to Trondheim looking for work. He thrived in his new home country, finding success as a merchant, journalist, editor and banker. Although he is now remembered primarily as the organizer

behind the first public Syttende Mai celebrations, in his life Peterson was also known as a pioneer in Norwegian journalism and an advocate for press freedom.



Henrik Wergeland (1808-1845)

In his short life, Henrik Wergeland was not only a prolific writer but an influential (and frequently controversial) intellectual celebrity. Born in Kristiansand, Wergeland spent part of his childhood in Eidsvoll before moving to Oslo to study, where he later became involved in the "Battle of the Square" that

roused public sympathies for Syttende Mai. But his connections to the constitution went even deeper. His father, Nicolai Wergeland, had been a delegate to the 1814 Eidsvoll Convention and a member of its constitution committee; Henrik was proud of his father's contribution and closely familiar with the constitution's inner workings.

Wergeland published his first book of poems in 1829. He also published, throughout his life, dozens of essays, short stories, speeches and plays. Norwegian patriotism and the constitution remained a theme through his entire body of work. Besides vigorously promoting Syttende Mai and all things Norwegian, Wergeland is also remembered as a tireless advocate for religious tolerance and human rights. Most famously, Wergeland fought for years to repeal a clause in the Norwegian constitution that barred Jews from entering Norway.

Wergeland fell ill in 1844 and died a year later, only 37 years old. His life, work and career remain intensely studied to this day.



Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832-1910)

Perhaps Norway's best-loved writer of the 19th century, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson was a pastor's son who grew up in rural Norway. Later in life he would study, work and write in Oslo, Bergen and abroad, but his knowledge of and connection to Norway's country culture never left him. After starting

his career in and around the theater, Bjørnson's first novel, *Synnøve Solbakken*, came out in 1857. It would be the first in a series of so-called *bondefortellinger* ("peasant stories") that established his reputation not only as a major literary voice, but as an advocate for common Norwegian people.

Through a long and prolific career, Bjørnson wrote plays, poems, novels and short stories, and participated eagerly in the many social and political controversies of the time, from women's rights to linguistic reform. Bjørnson was so admired by common Norwegian people the world over that the founders of Sons of Norway actually considered naming the organization after him (the idea was rejected only on the grounds that Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson would be hard for Americans to pronounce). Besides organizing the first barnetog, Bjørnson also wrote the lyrics to "Ja, vi elsker dette landet," Norway's national anthem. Bjørnson was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1903 and lived to see Norway break away from Sweden in 1905. He died in Paris in 1910 and was buried in Oslo in an enormous public ceremony.