

A Synopsis of Norwegian History

by

Oddvar K. Hoidal

Professor of History, Emeritus

San Diego State University

The emergence of Norway as an independent nation has followed a long process of historical development. Although Norway was unified as a kingdom in the Viking period, it lost its independent status due to dynastic rivalry, disease, and economic decline, coming under the rule of Danish monarchs during the late Middle Ages. This continued until 1814, when the movement for independence first asserted itself at the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars. A representative assembly drew up a constitution, established a government, and briefly proclaimed a separate state. However, the great powers of Europe had decided that Norway should be joined with Sweden. After a brief conflict, followed by negotiations, a compromise agreement was worked out whereby Norway recognized the king of Sweden as its sovereign, but in turn received a considerable amount of self-rule in the union which followed.

During the 91 years when Norway and Sweden had the same king, the country underwent a gradual transition. Politically it became more independent. Parliamentary rule was established, and democratic rights were extended, with universal male suffrage being practiced by the end of the century. Economically, however, Norway was among the poorest countries in Europe, resulting in large scale emigration to the U.S. after 1850. Because of the importance of the Norwegian merchant marine, plus growing national feeling, relations with the monarch became strained due to the king's opposition to the creation of a separate Norwegian consular service. This led to the parliament's unilateral dissolution of the union in 1905. This action was ratified by a popular plebiscite, followed by negotiations with Sweden, resulting in a peaceful separation.

Another referendum confirmed the voters' wish to have Norway continue as a monarchy, whereupon Haakon VII, a former Danish prince, was crowned king. Politically, democratic advances continued, with women gaining the vote in 1913, Norway being among the first countries in the world to establish female suffrage. Considerable industrial development took place in the early 20th century, spurred by the harnessing of waterpower. The socialist Labor Party dominated Norwegian politics from 1935 to 1965, enacting social reform legislation, including public health coverage, unemployment insurance, pensions, and aid to the disabled. Norway's attempt to maintain neutrality in World War II ended when German troops invaded in April 1940. Following two months of fighting, Norway came under occupation, but the government and King Haakon avoided capture, establishing a government in exile in London. The Norwegian merchant marine, the third largest in the world, played a vital role in the Allied war effort. Despite attempts by the collaborationist Vidkun Quisling to institute pro-Nazi control, the Norwegian people resisted foreign occupation. Since 1945 Norway has experienced remarkable economic change, spurred in particular by the discovery of oil in coastal waters in the late 1960s. This has led to an even greater advance in the standard of living. Both non-socialist and socialist governments enacted additional social reforms in the second half of the 20th century. Today Norway is recognized as having a quality of life judged to be among the best in the world.