

A crisis for the State?

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Because of her geographical structure and very limited area, Switzerland is stony ground for the creators of works of art and culture: most of their works can reach only a very limited public. Our illustration (detail): Alice Bailly (1872-1938). «La Toilette», about 1918. Oil on canvas. Property of the Swiss Confederation. (Photo: Rolf Schlöffli)

Editorial

A Crisis for the State?



Other countries – sometimes neighbours of ours! – have their “affairs” and scandals. “Insider” crimes, trading of favours, suspect financial grants to political parties, illicit arms sales and so on. Our media report such scandals in an almost fleeting manner, scandals which for that matter are often hushed up very quickly after they come to light, without expressing much astonishment.

And now, suddenly, a storm develops in the sectors of our little Helvetic world that are concerned with politics and the media. The immediate cause was the personal drama affecting our first female Federal Councillor, who was finally obliged to resign because of an unfortunate telephone call that she had made, although in reality her fall was occasioned by her husband, who had not given sufficient consideration to the harm to his wife’s political career stemming from certain of his dubious business relations.

It is not so much any impropriety of that lady’s conduct however, but rather the way in which the State Prosecutor’s Office functions, that has given rise to the curiosity and critical attitude of the “political” classes, alerted by sectors of the media that are often forced to adopt an inquisitorial role on account of the extreme reserve and delay shown by the organs of official information.

The Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (the “PCI”) appointed to look into these matters has in its report reduced these affairs to their true dimensions, and has stressed that in the difficult circumstances prevailing, the wheels of State have been able to function without the facts revealed giving rise to a crisis for the Confederation.

But in its report, the PCI has put its finger on one weak point, namely the undoubtedly excessive use of information files maintained in various segments of the public services. This at once resulted in a flood of revelations about the existence of multifarious files containing personal data about individuals, particularly in the State Prosecutor’s Office and the Federal Military Department.

Our country, threatened by espionage and anti-democratic activism ever since the beginnings of the rise of fascism and “Hitlerism”, became once again, after the end of the second world war and during the “Cold War”, the terrain for comparable subversive machinations, even though these were inspired by other extreme ideologies. Switzerland’s reputation as a financial centre, her liberal régime, her neutrality combined to make her into a veritable crossroads, an eminently favourable terrain for dubious schemes and intrigues that are so difficult to check and control, namely the activities of spies and “traffickers” of every description.

It is not surprising that in such a situation some State functionaries were induced to collect information and to maintain files and to develop card indexes, which today seem disproportionate.

Does one have to bandy words about scandal in this context? Of course not. All the less so, inasmuch as it has not been possible to ascertain any misuse or anti-liberal employment of the files, contrary to the interests of perfectly honest and trustworthy citizens.

Switzerland is not the only Western democracy where public services use files in the struggle against crime, terrorism, espionage, treason and attempts at subversion. It is of course desirable to define the criteria to be adopted in the collection of such data, in the sense of providing adequate protection of the individual. But it would be unreasonable, even culpably reprehensible to neglect to protect ourselves against the activities of the enemies of our Confederation and of the society in which we have chosen to live.

Jean Jacques Cevey, MP, Vice-President of the OSA

Contents



Forum:
Commerce and the Fine Arts **4**

Switzerland and Eastern Europe **10**

The “Fiches” Affaire **11**

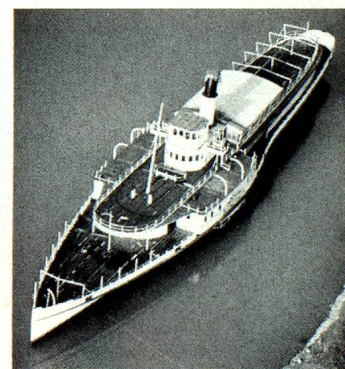
Green pages:
Local News

Mosaic **13**



A new picture book about Switzerland **17**

700 years **19**



The “Blümlisalp” Saga **20**

Communications of the SSA **21**

Official Communications **22**