

Some facts about Swiss history [the end]

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Léon Savary.
(La Tribune de Genève.)

SOME FACTS ABOUT SWISS HISTORY.

By Prof Dr. ERNST GAGLIARDI.

(Continuation).

They could not, however, permanently hold their position of power, although the Duchy of Milan, founded jointly by the Emperor and the Pope in 1512—1515, was completely dependent on the Swiss. At the battle of Marignano, in the middle of September 1515, their influence beyond the mountains was again lost to the victorious King François I of France. Thanks to the tenacious resistance of the original cantons, only the present-day Ticino district was able to remain intact. A few years later, however, religious quarrels split the Confederation into two camps. For Ulrich Zwingli — Priest of the Grossmünster in Zurich — as leader of the Reformed Church was not in a position to compel the Catholics to join with his political and religious convictions, nor was the power of the Catholic districts sufficient to root out the heretical movements which for some time had been penetrating even into their own domain.

Similar to Germany, the Confederation therefore split up into two groups. The religious wars of 1531 (Kappel), 1655 and 1712 displaced the ratio of power alternatively in favour of the Catholics or the Reformed party. But disunion itself remained. There was no longer any question of a further development of the State such as characterised the later Middle Ages — although Berne, by conquering the Vaud in 1635 with the consistent support of Geneva, had accomplished or prepared the later annexation of the western part of Switzerland. As in many respects, both parties were considered quite equal in strength, either side was prevented from obtaining power abroad. Particularly during the Thirty Years' War Swiss neutrality was established as a principle of the country's attitude towards all its neighbours. Although the opposed camps quarrelled bitterly over small matters, and the countries commonly subjected to them increased the difficulties still further, extreme measures were avoided. Common interests held "Concordia discors" of the 13 districts together to a certain degree. In 1648, when the peace pact of Westphalia was made, Heinrich Wettstein, Mayor of Basle, obtained the legal secession of the whole Confederation from the German Empire. The fact that the Swiss had been spared terrible devastation gave them a cultural advantage of generations over the horribly ravaged neighbouring country in the north.

Internal development, however, showed every sign of political stagnation. A peasant revolution in 1653 was as little effective as the fresh religious war two years later. It was only in 1712 that the Reformed Church was able to regain the supremacy of which it had been deprived at the battle of Kappel in 1531. The 18th century was consequently characterised by moderate toleration. It became obvious that an economical and spiritual rise was in progress Switzerland became the home of great writers and men of letters. Bodmer and Breitinger, of Zurich, led the way to the age of classic German literature, whilst the Ticino gained a surprising place in the artistic development of Italy.

Aristocratic pedantry, however, had long ago replaced freedom of movement. The individual parties separated into narrow-minded sects. The proverb "Dei providencia, hominum confusione Helvetia regitur" was justified, for religious hatred was still rife, seeking favourable opportunities to renew old claims. As with the German Empire, this federation of states disintegrated into a series of practically independent, individual ones. The association with the Grisons and the Valais had almost disappeared; the Federal Constitution was as defective as in the 15th century. The only difference was that the courageous spirit which, during their illustrious days, endowed them with such amazing efficacy, had now, owing to its imperfect environment, disappeared.

The French Revolution therefore brought about an entirely new spirit, although it was only in 1798 that it spread to the Alpine districts. The advance of the French troops towards the mountains instigated by Bonaparte destroyed for a period of 25 years the Swiss neutrality which had already existed for centuries. The powers of the Confederation therefore served the purposes of a foreign political system which was fighting against the rest of the world. Districts such as Valtellina, Bormio, Chiavenna, the

Valais, which had joined it a long time previously were lost. It was fortunate that at least the Ticino remained faithful; that Geneva, Neuchâtel and the Valais came back into it in 1814—1815 at the time of the Congress of Vienna, following Napoleon's downfall.

Above all, the much needed internal reconstruction took place. There could no longer be a question of continuing or restoring the old regime. The former relations between rulers and subjects were eliminated by the Revolution. A new problem arose with the necessity of granting equal rights to districts of diverse languages. Arbitrary centralisation was proved to be such an impossibility that even Napoleon I had abandoned it, as early as 1802/1803. Owing to his mediation at that time, the Cantons as such were restored. The Confederation of the Restoration period now weakened the relative unity, which had been imposed upon it during the foreign dominion of the country, to almost full sovereignty of the 22 individual states. A loosely-bound federation of States was again established, similar to the arrangement which had prevailed prior to 1798. Cantonal sovereignty ruled development almost exclusively, the more so as in those formerly subjected districts which since 1803 had become independent, nearly everything had to be built up afresh.

The insufficiency of the new regime expressed itself more particularly in the requirements of economic development. Vigilantly watched by the great powers, whose emigrants were seeking refuge on Swiss territory, the Swiss saw themselves being exploited by English and French mass production, for through the inability of the central organ to act on its own accord — the Swiss Diet voting according to government instructions — it was impossible to combat the economic protection imposed by its neighbours. The traffic system remained perilously behind owing to regional disunion and countless internal obstacles, so that Switzerland found herself in danger of being cut off like an island.

Economic causes, like the political, called for an alteration in the type of government. It can be said that this was the result of old religious controversies which, since the Reformation, had really never come to rest. The illegal dissolution of monasteries in Argovia kindled a fire of resentment among the people from 1841 onwards. It was not possible to extinguish it, the more so as since the July revolution in Paris (1830—1831), the principal economic Cantons had gone over to liberalism. There the people freely elected representatives to Parliament, which replaced the former allpowerful government. The new ideas, however, penetrated only in part, because an attempt to extend such reforms throughout the Confederation had failed, due, amongst other things, to disagreement on the part of foreign diplomats, resulting in the split becoming more and more threatening. Violations of their rights upset the situation to such an extent that the threatened Catholics conspired with countries abroad, whilst at the beginning of November 1847 the Swiss Diet decided by a majority to dissolve this separate league (Sonderbund) by armed force.

Although Austria, France, Prussia, and Russia had fully sympathised with the Sonderbund, Swiss liberalism, supported by Lord Palmerston, succeeded in winning a complete victory after a short campaign. Under the leadership of General Dufour of Geneva, the way was paved for the long needed revision of the constitution: this was approved on 12th September 1848. It was only now that a Confederation was formed out of the centuries old union of states which was no longer so helpless as regards modern requirements, and which had a central government in Berne based on the western system of two Chambers and an improved official organisation. It is certain that the individual parties remained the same as prior to the elements of foundation of the Confederation, for their power was by no means distributed in the radical sense, i.e., by means of a rigid centralisation. The Cantons retained as far as possible their old military power. Such moderate centralisation strengthened itself but slowly, according to the requirements of modern life. Even in 1872 a far too evident attempt at this, for the revision of the Federal constitution was declined.

The setting up of an economic body on modern lines was the outcome of a forced political reconstruction in 1847. Railways in Switzerland began to exist only from then on. The new supreme authority rejected all foreign interference which was still being attempted from time to time. There were threats of war with Prussia in 1856—1857 over the Canton of Neuchâtel. Savoy going over to France in 1860 gave rise to strong opposition towards Napoleon III. In both cases, however, it was possible to avoid military action. The result of all this was a strong economic development. As all political mistakes were avoided it became possible to improve still further the internal political system on the basis of democracy. The Federal constitution of 1874 which, in the main, is still the same

to-day, set up the optional referendum — i.e., the preparation of the people's demands as long as they were arranged through the Councils, or by at least 30,000 voters or at the request of 8 Cantons — a settlement which simultaneously excluded the so-called parliamentary system, i.e. the superior authority of the Chambres over the noticeably steady government.

The fundamental law of the country still remained the balancing power between combined and individual authority. The language minorities especially, jealously watched over their voting rights. Only in such a way can race quarrels be avoided. Equal distribution throughout the country by the mixing of the different and a strong economic working capacity were the results of democratic decentralisation, whilst liberty of action allowed a more intense spreading over of the old opposition than had been the case before. The fact that this country was spared from the World War gave it certain advantages similar to those during the period of the Thirty Years' War. It is quite natural that it became the seat of international efforts and aims. The year 1863 saw the foundation of the International Red Cross on the initiative of Henri Dunant of Geneva. And owing to the strong influence of President Wilson the League of Nations took its seat at the home of Calvinism. Thus the great assistance rendered during and after the Great War justified a high place in this development.

In common with the rest of Europe the Confederation stands threatened with a gloomy future. Although comparatively speaking the social problem has taken a favourable turn — the standard of living having reached a much envied level — it has, like other nations, the serious question of unemployment. Other possibilities of degeneration are not lacking either. Added to this, foreign ideas penetrate into the country which often are in direct opposition to the fundamental principles of the State and to the innermost character of the people. And this race made up of people speaking four different languages must in future find its own level. A certain amount of Germanic and Latin influences have crossed its frontiers thereby causing complications of both a political and cultural character. Owing to her geographical situation Switzerland appears to be a country open to overflow as influences from the Mediterranean district intermix with those from the north; the strength of the west with that of the east. Since the late Middle Ages historic accomplishments have been formed here of a type which did not suddenly disappear such as other did. Out of a particularly rugged Confederation a modern Federation of States has grown up, especially during the second half of the 19th century. It is no exaggeration to acknowledge the Deed of Neutrality which the Great Powers made in 1815, as an indispensable ingredient of Europe. Its mere existence is evidence enough. Contrasts of races represent by no means the only point of view for the development of the Continent. A proper historical structure proved itself much firmer than language or other types of relationship. In fact geographical grounds had a more definite influence on the ability of mankind. The distinct will of many generations closely connected should be as little undervalued as the bearing capacity of ideas which form a beneficial compromise to the intense conflict of the Great Powers nationally associated. May they stand the test still further as, on the dynamic side, the persistent conservative one appears to be indispensable. Their concerted action is the foundation of the moulded wealth of present-day Europe. The failure of the democratic-republican factors would entail a tremendous impoverishment.

THE END.



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