

# Impressions on the Bonjour report

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# The Swiss Observer

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## IMPRESSIONS ON THE BONJOUR REPORT

The Bonjour Report, which has for some time been out in its entirety and which is in the course of being translated into French, must surely rank as one of the most serious and objective war histories of the present day. The hundreds of pages of arduous German of its three volumes overcame your Editor's enthusiasm, but many illustrative excerpts and comments on this monumental work have appeared in the Swiss press. Even they are too detailed and it is impossible to give a fair account of the multitude of facts gathered by Professor Bonjour here. But we can try with a few general impressions.

As readers know, the Bonjour Report was commissioned by the Federal Council in 1962, at a time when Mr. Paul Chadet was the doyen of this supreme executive body, and was intended to be an honest and searching study of the practise of Swiss neutrality between 1939 and 1945. The Bonjour Report was thus to be a *foreign political* history, leaving out military events (or topics such as the "National Redoubt") and other matters not lying on the higher decisional levels. Other matters on which extensive literature had already been published, such as the question of refugees and the problem of military information, were left out as well.

The Swiss political predicament during the months preceding the outbreak of war had similarities with the British situation: Nobody knew, or would admit, just how dangerous the Germans were. This was partly due on the governmental level to the misguided reports of the Swiss Ambassador in Berlin, Hans Frölicher. Although endowed with undeniable diplomatic qualities, his political judgement was singularly blunt and, unable to perceive the real motives of the Nazis, he sent optimistic reports to Berne with the result that many officials were caught almost off their guard when the Germans came to invade Poland. Many high-ranking officers trained in German

military academies were, if not sympathetic, at least trusting in the honesty of German intentions. The most outstanding case was that of Colonel Gustav Daeniker, who left on an officially guided tour of Germany in 1941, and returned publicly stating that the Germans were *not* preparing anything against Russia, adding that their intentions were most honourable and that Switzerland was solely to blame for current Swiss-German tension. His assertions were endorsed by 200 Swiss citizens. General Guisan handled his case with tact as he didn't want to offend the Society of Officers and other parties, but Colonel Daeniker stepped back from his office. Although by that time, the great majority of the Army were against this kind of attitude, it nonetheless represented a latent pro-German frame of mind which made it more difficult for the Government to take a definite stand when the war broke out.

Judging from the Bonjour Report, one feels that no Federal Councillor ever stood out more sharply from his colleagues in Swiss history than the head of Swiss foreign policy, Marcel Pilet-Golaz. This was partly due to his superior intelligence and to his tendency to take steps without first consulting his fellow Federal Councillors. But the first reason was that the emergency situation of the war had laid exceptional burdens on the leaders of Swiss foreign policy. When war broke out, Pilet-Golaz could not find it in himself to take the determined decision to hold out. The blitz invasion of France had badly shaken his patriotic confidence and on 25th June, 1940, a few days after the occupation of Paris, he pronounced a gloomy and defeatist speech to the nation. Exactly a month later, General Guisan summoned his officers on the Ruetli and told them that the country would stand firm at all cost. This rally was Guisan's most important political decision and determined Switzerland's course in the five-year storm that was to come. It made

the Army's position quite clear—above all to its own pro-German elements. The Ruetli proclamation also prompted the Federal Council into more determination and one can say that General Guisan, a non-political figure, played the charismatic role required by the circumstances. He symbolised the hope of a nation in the same way as Queen Wilhemina or Churchill.

Although Switzerland had decided, after prior hesitation, not to yield to German pressures and to defend her independence to the last ditch, she still had to compromise with her mighty neighbour. The country was, after all, encircled by Germany and her allies and the only way of avoiding complete starvation was to reach as honourable a settlement as possible. Swiss-German trade discussions were extremely tough and the Reich's negotiators never missed a chance of blackmailing their counterparts with threatening German reprisals if Switzerland did not comply with the German conditions. But Swiss negotiators managed to oppose many of the German's demands. Throughout the war, Switzerland continued to receive coal and steel from Germany, and the exit to the sea was left open. In exchange for this the Germans were to receive Swiss machinery and precision products, and war supplies were to be given right of way across the Gothard.

Switzerland also had to sacrifice to some extent the freedom of her Press to German intransigence. The pro-German press and the Frontist movement were banned for their defeatist influence, but so were all publications too outspokenly anti-German. This led to considerable controversy among intellectuals. One derives the impression from the Bonjour Report that General Guisan, under the influence of his collaborator Captain Masson, head of intelligence, and other aides, muzzled the Press more than was necessary in order to assuage the Germans.

A few years ago, a sensationalist historian emitted the theory that the

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war had been "won in Switzerland", the espionage hub of the two camps. The book related Captain Masson's secret dealings with the Nazi espionage chief Walter Schellenberg and received considerable publicity at the time.

The interviews between General Guisan and Schellenberg are also depicted in the *Bonjour Report*. It enlivens the reading but does not really reveal an important event. The details of what was said between the two men were not reported but it appears that Schellenberg had come all the way from Berlin only to hear from Guisan himself that Switzerland was not going to compromise on her territorial integrity under any circumstances. Actually, Schellenberg never mentioned this meeting in his "Memoirs". The question of territorial integrity came up again toward the end of the war, as the Allies were driving the Germans away from Italy and France. More men were mobilised to guard the borders and negotiations took place between Guisan and General De Lattre to make sure that the war and its sequel would not overflow into Switzerland.

The *Bonjour Report* is not only a remarkably readable account of vital historical events, it is also a rich portrait gallery of the greatest interest to all contemporaries of Switzerland's war-time leaders. But one must have sufficiently long holidays . . .

(PMB)

## LE "REDUIT NATIONAL"

Georges Piroué, a Swiss author established in Paris, has written a book on war time Switzerland of a rather different vein than the *Bonjour Report*. His book is called "*Le Reduit National*". It is the story of a company confined to an upper valley of the Alps with the mission of guarding a railway bridge. The war is raging abroad, but for this isolated company, stiff with

boredom and lewd dreams, it is a far and distant echo with which they are remotely concerned. The long trains of sealed wagons, packed with their mysterious loads, climb up the mountain in endless files and disappear in the tunnel on their way to Italy. The bored sentinels watch them pass and patrol absently on the bridge. They enliven their beat by staring down the valley with their field glasses, hoping to catch signs of life and movement in the villages below. They see the artillery men of the regiment haul their vast twenty-pounders in the field, pull off their covers, swivel their lethargic machinery and wait the whole day in lazy alertness for an enemy that would not come, and return to their barracks. But the company finds a way of transfiguring the hours of the long evenings. There is the *Magi*, who hypnotises people while the company sit on their haunches and watch intently, listening bemused to the hypnotic divagations of their comrades. But life wears on until one day, the company's disciplinarian Sergeant Klug goes mad and is shot down accidentally. Another rookie comes home to the barracks dead drunk and swearing, forces himself into a game of Jass and drags off to sleep never to wake up again.

The book is quite short, almost a short story, but this gives it formal beauty and consistency. It is written in a limpid and evocative style, which makes George Piroué a worthy disciple of Proust.

(PMB)

# COMMENT

## THE "ROMANDS" AND THE FRENCH

The French-speaking Swiss and the French share common ancestors. They both spring from the Burgunders, the Celts, the Gauls and have both been shaped by the same civilising influence of Rome. History has endowed both nations with the same language and both people can pride themselves of one trait commonly shared: they are Latins.

But further than that they differ in almost every aspect. The relations between the French and the French-speaking Swiss have always been tinged with a touch of mutual irony. The French traditionally tease the Swiss for their historically subservient and inglorious role of vergers and mercenaries. For reasons which escape the understanding, the French, a strongly bourgeois people, consider the Swiss as small-minded and middle-class shopkeepers. A new word has become increasingly in use in their spoken language. It is "*s'ensuisser*" and is supposed to have the same meaning as "*s'embourgeoiser*" with, however, a

marked contemptuous connotation. I do not think that the *Académie Française* has passed this expression for regular and acceptable usage. Let us hope that it will never do so—this might create a diplomatic incident. But the fact that this deprecatory idiom has gained ground shows what the image the Swiss have in the minds of the French. The French are also known to be amused by the singing accent and the colourful expressions of the Swiss vernacular. And, lastly, they consider their small neighbours as mental oxes with slothy reactions. This, of course, is injurious to Genevese or Valais Swiss, whose sharp sense of repartie and witticism should not be confused with the same of less Latin Swiss. The French tend to put under one Swiss label and one national characteristic people as different as the Appenzeller, the Graubündener and the Genevese.

The French-speaking Swiss naturally react against their powerful neighbours for their untrue vision of the Swiss character. The French, they say, speak before they have any ideas to express. The essential is to speak. They have love of fine words and dainty vocabulary which *Romands*, who ponder more before they say something, consider as blue stocking perversion. "We have ideas which reach our speech with difficulty", wrote a Swiss journalist. "The essential thing is our conscience. The French have fugitive opinions. We search for unalterable convictions. At the limit, this yields our sparkless honesty and the superficial elegance of the French".

The French-speaking Swiss may readily concede that the French have more taste and a more developed sense of etiquette. But the same journalist commented: "In France, there are no truths, there are fashions. The opposite would apply with us, our truths belong to our communes, our families". The Swiss may envy the gaiety of the French, their exciting and brilliant style of life. They are perhaps aware of pondering over life too much, of perhaps making it too plain. But their strongest criticism is aimed at the French tendency to place their culture above that of other countries and their own. The French have Paris, a prestigious capital that drains the intellectual and artistic sap of the nation. The Genevese have Geneva, the Lausanne have Lausanne and each are proud of their local cultural achievements which do not attempt to vie with those of an overriding capital.

Many French-Swiss intellectuals are concerned by the French cultural invasion. The Swiss, after all, prefer to watch the French TV channel and listen to "Europe No. 1". Pop music and fashion came from beyond the Jura and most of the new literature for sale in a Geneva bookshop are French editions. But this is the natural fate of a small country living in the cultural orbit of powerful neighbours. The in-