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A new book

The Early Days of Professional Diplomacy in Switzerland



Annual meeting of Swiss diplomats in Auvernier on the "Helvetia".
(Photo: Swiss National Library)

In a meticulously researched – but eminently readable – work, Swiss diplomat Claude Altermatt has written a highly interesting book. He tells how the establishment of diplomatic representations in foreign countries was seen as a "quantité négligeable", as of minimal importance, to the authorities of the newly founded Federal State in 1848. He goes on to describe how – not without setbacks – the need for "classical" diplomacy came to be recognised, and how Switzerland's original two diplomatic representations increased over the years to reach the level of eleven by 1914.

In his introduction, the author explains how the whole concept of diplomacy and its functions had previously been – at least for the layman – vague and obscure. He points out how it is not merely a matter of understanding the relations between States, and the art of safeguarding by negotiations the interests of the country that one represented, but also that of knowing the diplomats themselves and the problems of the administration involved by their activities. And it is the persons and personalities concerned that constitute the principal theme that interests the author. In the

first and second sections of his book, he shows from what modest beginnings a type of Swiss diplomacy developed as an instrument of the country's foreign policy, but also how, parallel with this development, there was a long lasting period of strong opposition to what were alleged to be the exaggerated and all-too-expensive activities of our envoys, which were said to be out of line with the modest and reserved attitudes of Swiss foreign policy and liable to bring contempt on that policy. The treatment meted out by the Berne authorities was far from generous, especially in respect of the size of personnel permitted. The competent department for these matters was called the Federal Political Department (EPD), and was often completely isolated, standing alone, without any staff at all, trying to cope with the wishes of the annually changing Federal President. There was no trace of professionalism in the diplomatic sphere – the ambassadors were politicians who had ambitions to take up a diplomatic career. It was not until 1888 that – thanks to the dynamism and cosmopolitan outlook of Numa Droz, the Federal Council member from Neuchâtel – the Federal Department for

Foreign Affairs (EDA/DFAE) was at last established, with permanent staff and a management that would no longer be changed every year. Even so, widespread mistrust of our diplomatic organisation continued, especially in popular dislike of the "système Droz". In 1896, the reforms were cancelled – but in 1913, they had to be reinstated! This "to-and-froing" was an expression of the tension which in those days existed between conservative politicians and the circles that were in favour of more up-to-date State policies.

The third section of Altermatt's book deals mainly with the diplomatic career of those early days in detail and contains a wealth of stories ranging from the merely interesting to the highly amusing. For instance, a sizeable personal fortune was essential for anyone seeking a successful career, as "...furthermore our young gentlemen must be prepared to work without remuneration for two or three years, and must intend to stay on in the diplomatic service, and not take it up only to achieve a better social status thanks to a more or less lengthy stay in some foreign metropolis".

The book provides a mine of valuable information in the shape of 28 short biographies of Swiss diplomats holding office between 1848 and 1914.

The fourth section demonstrates once again in résumé that the continuous development of our Federal state did not keep in step with the concurrent growth of Swiss diplomacy, quite the reverse! This counteracted the fundamental opposition mentioned above which arose as a result of various factors. On the other hand, the strong animosity of popular opinion towards our foreign policy discouraged politicians from continuing to seek diplomatic posts – thereby actually helping to promote the growth of our professional diplomatic activities.

This book is important, above all because it makes a valuable contribution to the current debate – so vehemently conducted – in connection with Swiss foreign policy.

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Claude Altermatt: "Les débuts de la diplomatie professionnelle en Suisse (1848–1914)". Published by Editions universitaires, Fribourg 1990. Price SFr. 38.–. It can be obtained from the Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad, Alpenstrasse 26, CH-3000 Berne 16 (no charge for postage). Only available in French.

A male bastion has been stormed!

The Federal Supreme Court has decided to grant the women of Appenzell Inner Rhoden the right to vote in polls and elections concerned with cantonal issues. In September of last year, the "GFI" (Group for Inner Rhoden) petitioned in Berne for the introduction of female suffrage. Its action proved successful, as evidenced by the Court's decision, based on the provisions of Article 4 of the Federal Constitution establishing equal rights for the sexes. It now remains to be seen whether this introduction of voting rights for women, having been decided from "outside" will seal the fate of the tra-

ditional "Landsgemeinde", the open-air voting assembly which for many generations had been open only to male citizens.

The tourist trade is booming

The importance of tourism to the Swiss economy is far greater than assumed hitherto. According to a study by BIGA (the Federal Office for Industry, Trade and Employment) the income from this activity amounts to between some 32 and 34 thousand million francs per annum. It is also estimated that about 360,000 jobs are concerned with tourism, corresponding to about 11% of all workers in Swiss business.