

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 25 (1998)
Heft: 3

Artikel: The Swiss press in the Second World War : "Write something favorable about Hitler!"
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907519>

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The Swiss press in the Second World War

“Write something favorable about Hitler!”

In the Second World War the Swiss press came under serial fire. The Nazis wanted to wear down Switzerland with this war of nerves, and weaken the will to resistance of its people. Amongst the most determined critics of the Swiss press were Swiss themselves.

From 1939 to 1945 there came a German intervention against the Swiss press on average every twelve days. Not counted are the many semi-official and private attacks. Amongst the harshest critics were

*Patrick Feuz **

Swiss. On October 26th 1940 for example, the pro-German Swiss minister in Berlin, Hans Frölicher, ticked off an article by the editor-in-chief of the “Basler Nachrichten” in a letter to the Federal Political Department – the Swiss foreign ministry of the time.

He writes: “At a time when the Swiss government and all good Swiss should have as their main preoccupation to do everything to save the independence of our country throughout a critical period, it seems to me most unsuitable that the head of one of the most respected papers should become the defender of the Jews in face of German anti-Semitism, and should thus provoke annoyance in influential quarters in Germany”.

Albert Oeri, the criticized editor-in-chief, expressed himself when asked to do so, as follows: He had not written the article “for nothing, but because I, like all good Swiss, have as my main preoc-

cupation to save the independence of our country through a critical period. To maintain our independence it is not in my opinion for our people to copy the anti-Semitic excesses of our neighbours. In view of the very strong anti-Semitic agitation in our Country modelled on that abroad that seems to me most important. Switzerland must not seem to be on the same lines: If we made ourselves dumb, this would be a sad capitulation before the propaganda flooding into our country. There would then be no holding back in the structure of the Swiss press.”

As early as December 20th 1940 Frölicher was again annoyed about an article by Oeri. This time it was about a speech by Hitler to German munitions workers. Frölicher thought it was wrong always to be critical, “instead of trying in such a case to draw out also the positive and the involved in the reflections which lay behind Hitler’s social commentaries.”

Alongside Oeri, NZZ editor-in-chief Willy Bretscher and his counterpart at “Bund”, Ernst Schürch, again and again came in the firing line of the critics. In summer 1940 the German press attaché in Berne, Georg Trump, tried to silence the heads of these three leading center-right newspapers. He obtained support on the Swiss side from the “Volksbund für die Unabhängigkeit der Schweiz”, a reactionary organization of pro-German anti-democratic politicians and the mili-

On August 1st 1940 Federal councillor Pilet-Golaz received a delegation from the Volksbund. This explicitly demanded the resignation of Bretscher, Schürch and Oeri. While Pilet-Golaz did not at least contradict the Volksbündler, the radical Federal councillor

Ernst Wetter gave them written advice about how to leave the unloved editors- in-chief out in the cold without bringing in the government. Wetter suggested that they contact certain gentlemen in business and industry who were on the Boards of Directors of the stubborn newspapers to ensure that these took a “more reasonable attitude” towards the Third Reich. Another Federal councillor, Berne’s Eduard von Steiger, was himself a member of the Volksbund.

But the attacks against the three editors-in-chief were resisted, and Trump’s action failed. The mixed Press Political Commission – this represented the interests of publishers and journalists – mobilized and addressed the Federal Council.

Markus Feldmann, vice-chairman of the commission, called on the government “not to bring the people into a situation in which it would not show sufficient resistance if it should finally come to a battle.”

Strong instructions for the press people

Switzerland stuck to freedom of press throughout the Second World War. But the press was obliged to hold back. Publication of news which would endanger the neutrality and independence of Switzerland was prohibited. Censorship was organized along military lines, but civilians gave the general tone. There were very few measures such as unlimited prior censorship or prohibition of a newspaper. For day-to-day work more important were the “instructions” about how to deal with daily events. These were not legally binding but journalists nevertheless felt themselves closely hemmed in by them.

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