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"The number of preconceptions about French-speaking Switzerland is incredible"

Do we really know the history of our country? Have we forgotten what it is that binds the nation together?

The historian Georges Andrey, author of the bestseller *L'Histoire de la Suisse pour les Nuls* (Swiss History for Dummies), has just published *La Suisse romande, une histoire à nulle autre pareille* (French-speaking Switzerland, a history like no other). With a style of writing that will appeal to the general public, this native of Fribourg offers numerous new discoveries and clears up a number of preconceptions about the makeup of our country.

Interview by Alain Wey

You say in your conclusion that you wanted to clear up and dispense with received ideas about French-speaking Switzerland. So you're keen to set the record straight...

I collected a huge number of opinions and preconceptions about French-speaking Switzerland. Among other things, my team and I discovered *combourgeoisie* agreements. These are alliances between towns designed to provide mutual defence, to open up markets and, in the event of a conflict with a third party, for one town to act as mediator. There was therefore already a French-speaking Switzerland in the Middle Ages thanks to these treaties, which came into being between the 13th and 16th centuries. The citizens of Fribourg created alliances, for example, with the people of Yverdon, then with those of Avenches and Berne.

How would you define French-speaking Switzerland?

It is the region of Switzerland where French is the dominant language but not the only one. German speakers have never said that Valais is a German-speaking canton. So Haut-Valais counts as French-speaking. And that means that the people count as "French-speaking", even though they speak German, just like the people of Sion in the canton of Valais. I did not write this history of French-speaking Switzerland in terms of a supposed conflict between French-speaking and German-speaking people. That is a false view of history because the *combourgeoisie* agreements focused on Fribourg and Berne, both founded by the House of Zähringen (1157 and 1191). The network of *combourgeoisie* agreements was built around this French- and German-speaking partnership between Berne and Fribourg. Later it spread to Biel, Neuchâtel, then Lausanne, Geneva and even Solothurn, Lucerne and Zurich.

We should not say that French-speaking Switzerland is a territory defined by separateness from the German-speaking part: that is not the case. Which is not to say that there aren't differences, but the main thing is that there is a single entity – the Swiss Confederation or previously the Helvetic Republic. It has to be said that the Helvetic Republic (1798–1803) was a real high point for Swiss national sentiment.

Between 1798 and 1815, Switzerland was occupied by France under Napoleon. What effect did this occupation have on national cohesion and what are the common misconceptions about this period?

It is what is known as the "black legend". The period from 1798 is considered to be a shameful episode in our national history. The land of William Tell a vassal of France? According to this black legend, nothing good happened between 1798 and 1815. It is even said that the 1803 Act of Mediation was Napoleon imposing his will without consulting the Swiss people, which is completely untrue. The Paris Consultation from November 1802 to February 1803 represented three months of hard, difficult negotiation between Bonaparte and the Swiss cantons, which consisted of two belligerent camps – the rebel army and the republican, government army. Napoleon therefore negotiated a new political state for Switzerland – a reunited Switzerland – with not 13 cantons as under the Ancien Régime, but 19. The subject and allied territories – Grisons, Saint Gallen, Aargau, Thurgau, Ticino and Vaud – were elevated to the status of sovereign cantons in 1803. And in these six new cantons, you have the four national languages. It was a great honour for them. This was all confirmed in 1815 with the Federal Pact. We accepted the entity constructed by Bonaparte, to which we add

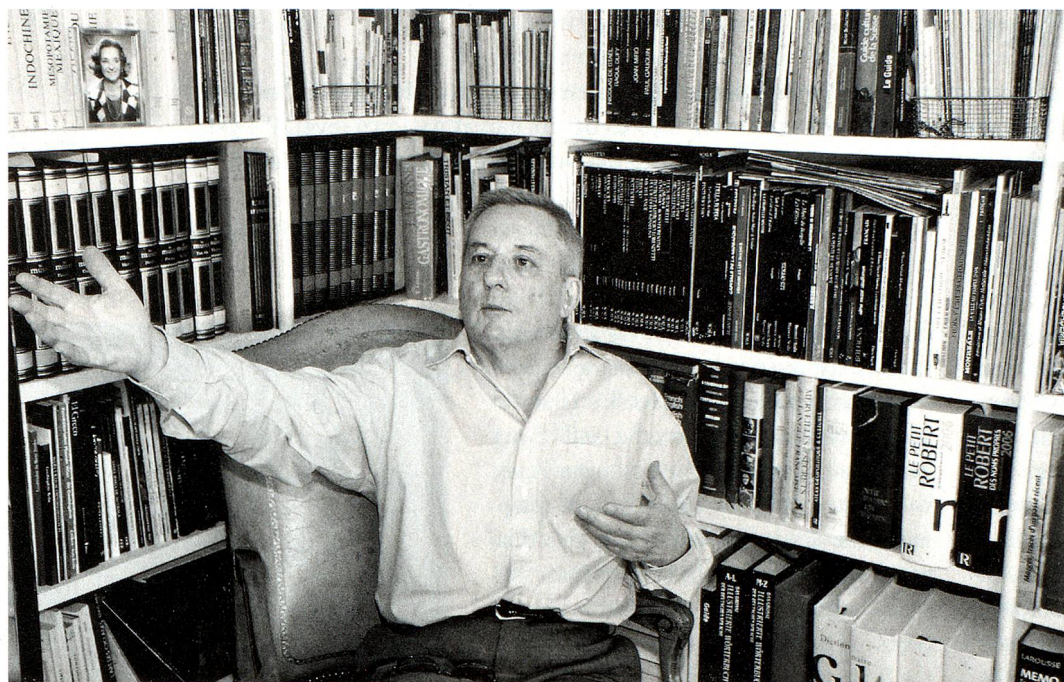
–ed the territories that had belonged to France – Valais, Neuchâtel and Geneva.

Yet historians have long decried this period in history.

Yes, it is condemned in all textbooks on Swiss history. They talk only about occupiers and the occupied. They forget about the advent of modern democracy and all our modern freedoms. Today, we are reappraising events more objectively. In terms of domestic institutions, modern Switzerland was born not in 1848 but in 1798. The problem was that there was no federalism. Centralism does not suit Switzerland. And who was the first to recognise that? Bonaparte! At the second session of the Paris Consultation he said: "Nature has made your country federal." He therefore demolished what the French Directorate had set up in 1798 in order to create a new federalism. If 1803 is celebrated in six cantons, it is because Bonaparte made the old Swiss of the 13 cantons recognise that the districts that had been allied with or subject to them were now also equal Swiss cantons. For once, this has to be said, loud and clear.

What is the secret to Switzerland's unity? What is the magic ingredient that holds the country together?

The desire to live together. We have constantly been creating links ever since the medieval *combourgeoisie* accords. It was the Reformation that broke this early solidarity. When the Bernese arrived in Lausanne in 1536, they made the people understand that they could not keep their alliance with Fribourg because the city still adhered to the old faith. The Reformation therefore had a dramatic effect. The second upheaval was the Sonderbund War – the Swiss civil war of 1847 – and the third the "Röstigraben" of the First World War.



Emeritus historian Georges Andrey, 75, was academic advisor to the Department of Foreign Affairs (until 2000) and Professor of Media History and Modern History at the University of Fribourg (until 2005).

What happened in Switzerland in 1914-1918?

The Helvetic consensus between French-speaking and German-speaking lands – between Francophiles (who supported France) and Germanophiles (who supported the German and Austro-Hungarian empires) – was falling apart. There was a very clear division. The German-speakers created the term “Röstigraben”. In French-speaking Switzerland, the term most often used is “dissent”. Then, in the inter-war period, French-language historians and journalists talked of a “moral divide”. This crisis was partly caused by the appointing of one Ulrich Wille as General of the Swiss Army, who was born in Hamburg, did not know a word of Swiss German and was married to a Bismarck. What did they think in Paris and London when they saw the attitude of the Swiss Federal Assembly? They thought: the Swiss are not neutral. Today, we are convinced that the Federal Assembly chose Wille, a Germanophile through and through, because it was confident that the Central Powers would be victorious. The period 1914-1918 is curious because on the one hand it cemented the French-speaking Swiss identity and on the other it represented a major crisis for coexistence between French-speaking Switzerland and German-speaking Switzerland.

Do you think the history of Switzerland is taught adequately in schools?

No, it is taught badly and isn't given enough importance. In school timetables, the number of lessons on Swiss history is ever decreasing. You realise that the method of teaching does not give pupils an overall view of the history of Switzerland in terms of a narrative. The chain of events is not clear. First there were three cantons, then four, then eight, then 13, 19, 22 and finally 23. At the very least, you need to explain that. Teachers are abandoning political history and concentrating on social and economic history. When young people leave school, they do not know much about Swiss history.

Are the Swiss badly informed about their history?

So it would seem. I know a grammar school teacher in Liestal and he teaches almost no Swiss history. He spends more than half the time on the Second World War, the atomic bomb and the concentration camps. They teach the dramatic events, but who governs in Switzerland, what our past is, where we come from, how there came to be French speakers in Switzerland, all that is not taught. If we do not explain history, we cannot understand why we are all together. That's dangerous.

Dangerous?

Yes, because there is the danger of diluting national identity. You end up saying, why shouldn't Europe consist of an even greater number of states? You could make

states out of states. It is one possible scenario. A Europe of 27 could very well become a Europe of 50. So why shouldn't there be a German-speaking Switzerland, a French-speaking Switzerland and an Italian-speaking Switzerland all existing as microstates? We already have Luxembourg, Monaco, and San Marino. The potential for splits, for example in Belgium, or for Spain and Catalonia, cannot be ruled out. At that point, the idea of a voluntary nation will risk being lost and we will end up giving priority to language.

ALAIN WEY is an editor at «Swiss Review»

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