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twined with Europe and the world while at the same time delimiting itself from them intellectually and psychologically”.

Holenstein does not primarily bring new facts into play but instead systematically writes the history of Switzerland from the perspective of interdependence and delimitation. Since the late Middle Ages, when the Swiss confederation began to establish its identity, the following pairs of opposites determined its strategies for existence and survival in varying degrees of accentuation – participation and isolation, involvement and shutting out, and integration and withdrawal. Holenstein does not judge and even sees something fruitful in this correlation which ultimately explains “why Switzerland survived the watershed moments of the past and indeed exists at all in the early 21st century”.

Little chance of success for left-wing countermeasures

The national-conservative forces are presenting their position so dominantly in election year that the other parties are being completely overshadowed. The other conservative parties have barely entered the historical-political debate. The left, above all the Swiss Social Democratic Party (SP), is attempting to call to mind other historical points of reference – but without generating much response. To commemorate the end of the Second World War 70 years ago in May, the SP suggested planting peace linden trees based on the widespread, spontaneous initiatives that took place in 1945. A few towns and villages took up the idea but it was largely met with apathy. In the April issue of the SP magazine “Links”, the historian Peter Hug accused the

Swiss authorities of “criminal neglect” of the commemoration on 8 May 1945. There is a close relationship between the lack of commemorative culture “and the prevailing mood in Switzerland that Europe is essentially hostile towards us”, according to Hug.

It is a good sign of a vibrant democracy if various references to the nation’s past are established and different commemorative cultures fostered. But this must be measured against academically researched

facts. There is a “veto right of the sources”. This means that while history is not an exact science, a professional historian cannot claim something that is not supported by the sources or which has been falsified. The task of academia is to conduct the debate on the

interpretation of facts based on the current level of knowledge. It becomes problematic when the interpretation of the past is coupled with a clear political message for the future. Federal Councillor Alain Berset couched this warning at the end of his speech on the opening of the Marignano exhibition at the National Museum in the following terms: “We have more than one possible view of the past – and also more than one possible future. As Winston Churchill said: ‘If we open a quarrel between past and present, we shall find that we have lost the future.’”

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A marriage of convenience

STÉPHANE HERZOG

The extended reissue of the book “Mariage de raison.” (Marriage of Convenience) by Christophe Büchi, correspondent for the NZZ in French-speaking Switzerland from 2001 to 2014, comes at just the right time. In this time of debate about the teaching of French in German-speaking primary schools, it is worth reflecting on the links that Switzerland has built and therefore on the rifts that could open up between the regions. And in particular on the rift created following the referendum on joining the European Economic Area in 1992, which “led to a profound division in the country”, according to the author.

“Mariage de raison.” is an erudite work, written in an effective and sometimes witty language. It is teeming with ideas and imparts intelligence to the reader through the snippets of Swiss history that Büchi brings together to talk about the state of the country today. The author is not a nationalist, but the account of battles won by the Waldstätten (which later became the Confederacy) against the great European powers – such as Morgarten (1315) and Sempach (1388) – do generate a certain emotional response. The stubbornness, the yearning for independence and the courage of our forebears demand respect.

Aside from the historical background and the political analysis, which includes the decision of the National Bank to abandon the exchange rate floor on 15 January, this work by the German-speaking journalist is a tribute to the virtues of multilingualism. It explains why Swiss-German speakers chose German for writing (it was a legacy of the Reformation) while preserving their dialect, whereas French speakers abandoned Franco-Provençal in favour of langue d’oïl, the language of the kings of France. This language, with the inherited prestige of France, made up for, and should still make up for, the minority position of French speakers in the country, according to Büchi. That is, provided German speakers continue to learn French and are prepared to use “Hochdeutsch”, the bearer of a thousand-year-old Germanic culture. French speakers who have learnt it – at least to an extent – expect their Swiss-German-speaking cousins to use it in conversation with them. “Multilingualism is a Swiss idea par excellence,” concludes the journalist.

MARIAGE DE RAISON. ROMANDS ET ALÉMANIQUES. Une histoire suisse.
Christophe Büchi. Editions Zoé, 2015, 455 pages.