

Swiss neutrality

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SWISS NEUTRALITY.

(This interesting survey appeared in the "Tablet," October 24th, and is contributed by Margaret Leiper, who used to be the London correspondent of the "Courier de Genève.")

For over six hundred years, the Swiss cantons have worked out practically and often painfully, the problem of discovering the most stable equilibrium between a reasonable individualism and that measure of centralization necessary to cement the Confederation. To-day they form a nation so united as to be proof against any disrupting influence. During the last war, when the moral issue was less clear-cut, there was a certain division of sympathies: the French Swiss were for France and her allies, while a few individuals among the German-speaking Swiss were not without a certain leaning for the Central Powers; but the issues at stake were faced courageously and did not result, as they might have, in a serious split.

Whatever their opinions on foreign politics, the Confederates are, and always have been, Swiss citizens first and foremost. It is curious to observe that the position in this war, as between French and German linguistic groups, is rather reversed. The "German" Swiss, placed as they are in proximity to the German frontier, have for their Teutonic neighbours a unanimous and intense dislike, the fruit of intimate knowledge. To the average "German" Swiss, the Gestapo is not a myth but a reality. In 1938 it was a commonplace to hear tales of Swiss citizens going to Germany being stopped by the German authorities and shown their own photographs with the remark "In such-and-such a café in such-and-such a town — Berne, Basel or Zurich, as the case might be — you said so-and-so against the Nazi regime. Go back to Switzerland. We do not want you here in Germany." In French Switzerland things were, and are, different. In the years between the wars there reigned an atmosphere of false security, based on complex elements. The French Swiss had many reasons for pride. They felt vastly superior to the happy-go-lucky French from the point of view of hygiene. Their achievements in the realm of education are unquestionable. The Swiss as a whole are the best-educated people in Europe — there is no illiteracy, and

even those classes which in other countries are semi-illiterate, know, in Switzerland, how to spell.

The general trend of education in French Switzerland — at least in the cantons of Geneva, Vaud, Jura and Neuchâtel — it mainly secular. The result of this is a firm belief in the myth of progress, a "these things do not happen nowadays" mentality, which permeated French Swiss society. In the mixed cantons, Catholics could not escape contamination by this attitude. A rather exaggerated love of luxury contributed further to this ostrich-like attitude which refused to admit the reality of evil until its existence was established beyond all doubt. The partisans of this view followed, as closely as they dared as Swiss citizens, the lead of Vichy, thinking that all was lost, and that it was best to take the line of least resistance. Educated French Swiss Catholics, however, who possessed a real grasp of Catholic philosophy, were in the vanguard of those who, following the Papal lead, recognized from the beginning the inherent dangers in Italian Fascism; and they have an uncompromising and much-loved leader in Mgr. Besson, the Bishop of Lausanne, Geneva and Fribourg.

The "German" Swiss do not belong to the Teutonic race, but come of a mixed stock, allied to the Northern French. They are realists. They never had the hothouse mentality of the westerners. They see things as they are. They saw, heard and understood what was going on the other side of the frontier, and regarded it with intense suspicion. The result was a resolute opposition to everything German — even to the language. Swiss German dialects are legion, and an attempt has been made, by M. Borsinger de Baden, to introduce a generalized "Switzerdütsch." Meanwhile, regardless of the foreigner's powers of comprehension, he is answered, if he speaks German, firmly and coldly in dialect. The existence of a common literary language, German, has hitherto been regarded as necessary. It is strictly reserved to the printed word.

The French Swiss, ensconced in their fortress of "broadmindedness" and intellectual superiority, did not, apparently in the years before the war, know their eastern brethren well enough to appreciate their point of view. Thousands of young "German" Swiss girls — peasants' daughters — flocked into the French-speaking cantons, taking situations as servants in order to learn the language. This might have given a general impression in the minds of the Westerners that the intellectual level of their "German" compatriots was low. Hence the tendency, before the war, to regard their reports of the Nazi menace as mere uneducated hysteria. In 1939, Dr. Doka, a lawyer from St. Gall, gave a lecture to members of the Geneva Press on Nazi activities in "German" Switzerland. His conference covered the usual Nazi methods, which have been used all over the world, from Czechoslovakia to the South American States. He revealed, for example, that in Rorschach members of the German colony were being forced to read *Mein Kampf* without the knowledge of the Swiss police, who of course would have repressed severely any such foreign capital activity had they known of it. The assembled editors listened with incredulity and scarcely-veiled contempt. Naturally, the cantonal authorities concerned took a more serious and practical view of the situation.

The fact cannot be sufficiently stressed, however, that when the rude awakening came, the vast majority of French-speaking Swiss were at heart on the side

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of the United Nations. Their Press misrepresents them. Fear of the Communist bogey accounts largely for its attitude — an attitude in which degrees must be distinguished, from the mildly anti-British position of the *Gazette de Lausanne* and *La Suisse*, to the hostile attitude of the *Courrier de Genève*. Thus a private correspondent was able to write, in August of this year, "Here everyone is for the British, except the *Courrier de Genève*." For the British — that is to say, for the representatives of a way of life which approximates as closely as possible to the anti-totalitarian Swiss way of life. The probable result of the war will be to make the French Swiss even better Confederates than before. It was, however, in "German" Switzerland that the idea of the *Weltschweitzer* arose. The term is practically untranslatable. It means a man who is primarily and essentially a Swiss, irrespective of his cultural or racial attachments, irrespective of the language he speaks. In 1938, two prominent "German" Swiss expressed this idea forcefully, the one by saying that he did not care which language — French, Italian or German — his son was brought up to speak, so long as he was a good Swiss; the other by declaring that the German-speaking Swiss would rather give up their language than their nationality. Their uncompromising opposition to totalitarian ideas is shown by two examples. Before the *Anschluss* there were twenty *Frontists* (people who sympathized with a certain measure of totalitarianism) who had been elected to the municipality of Zurich. After Austria had been overrun, their number dropped to two. Even more striking was the popular reaction when, in the pre-war years, the newspaper kiosks made, under German pressure, a lavish display of German papers. People simply boycotted the newsvendors until the offending Press was, in 1939, reduced to 8 per cent. and shown more discreetly.

Switzerland, while pursuing in the economic sphere as in all others, a strict neutrality, must live. Hence the recent commercial negotiations conducted in London, hence the simultaneous talks in Berlin. The sixteen vessels of the Swiss Mercantile Marine still carry Swiss trade to Marseilles and Genoa, but it is obvious that in war time, when the seas are hazardous, the bulk of the trade must go to the nearer and more accessible neighbour. Germany uses the Swiss railways for purely commercial and non-military exchanges with Italy. In case of hostilities, the Simplon, the St. Gotthard and the Lötschberg tunnels would doubtless be blown up, and this would come to an end. Probably we have here one of the reasons why Hitler has left Switzerland unmolested.

The work which Switzerland is doing for the Red Cross and for French, Italian and German children constitutes another. As a member of the International Red Cross Committee has said, "Switzerland is the common interest of all the great Powers." It is impossible, in the space of a short article, to do justice to Switzerland's humanitarian work.

Switzerland produces no coal, and depends entirely on the foreign market — that is to say, on Germany, for this product. Hence the sufferings of the Swiss people during last winter, which were increased by a severe shortage of electricity. The cold was so intense that the lakes from which the power-stations drew their sustenance were sealed over with several feet of solid ice, which, as the water-level sank, created a vacuum and prevented the main body of water from

reaching the hydro-electric stations. The dynamos were simply paralysed for want of motive power.

In those things which she does produce, Switzerland has struggled, since the outbreak of hostilities, to attain economic independence. Before her present isolation from the rest of the world, she concentrated on dairy-produce, cutting down agriculture to a minimum, and importing not only fruit, but vegetables and grain. Now all this had come to an end, and she has become one vast cornfield and vegetable garden, every square inch of arable land being utilized. Private people are growing vegetables in their gardens, digging up their lawns and uprooting — if the authorities allow them — their trees, which help to solve the heating problem.

CITY SWISS CLUB. (Monthly Meeting).

The usual monthly meeting of the City Swiss Club took place on Saturday, November 7th, at Brown's Hotel, and was preceded by a Luncheon. About 60 members and guests were present, amongst them, Mr. P. H. Westerman, Trade Commissioner for the Netherland Indies, and Lieutenant Morel, of the British Chamber of Commerce for the Dutch Indies.

Admissions 1, Resignations none.

The President, M. Louis Chapuis read out a letter received from the Swiss Minister, Monsieur W. Thurnheer, who thanked the Club for the generous donation made to the "Don National," he also gave the text of a communication received from the Vice-President, Mr. A. Bon. The President expressed his, and the members pleasure, at the recovery of Mr. Bon after a lengthy illness, he then informed the meeting that Mr. Candrian had safely arrived at Davos, where he is to undergo treatment, and welcomed his successor, as Manager of Brown's Hotel, Mr. Wallimann.

The members heard with pleasure that our member and former President, M. A. Baume, has now, after a long period of anxiety, heard from his son, who is a prisoner of war in Japanese hands. —

"It gives me much pleasure, the President said, to inform the Meeting that three members are celebrating to-day their 25th Anniversary as members of the City Swiss Club, namely Messrs. Stauffer, Wüthrich and Gerig, and in the name of the Club I am happy to extend to them my heartiest congratulations on their "silver-wedding" day." —

Both Mr. Stauffer and Mr. Wüthrich, who were present, thanked the President and the members for their kind wishes, a congratulatory telegram was sent to Mr. Gerig, who was unable to attend.

M. Chapuis welcomed the various guests present, especially Mr. P. H. Westerman and Lieutenant Morel; the latter, on behalf of his fellow guests, expressed his pleasure at having received an invitation to attend a gathering of the City Swiss Club.

Mr. P. H. Westerman then gave a very interesting *exposé* of the conditions which prevailed in the Netherland Indies prior to the invasion by the Japanese, expressing the hope that before long this part of the world would be liberated, and that the trade relations between the Dutch Indies and Switzerland, which had proved to be highly beneficiary to both countries, could be resumed.

Mr. A. F. Suter related some of his experiences during a former business trip to the Netherland Indies.

Close of the Meeting 4.30 p.m.