

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1945)
Heft: 1043

Artikel: Switzerland: laboratory of democracy
Autor: Steiger, Henry W.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-691769>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 03.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

SWITZERLAND: LABORATORY of DEMOCRACY.

By HENRY W. STEIGER
The Christian Science Monitor.

The more the citizen of the United States comes to realize that the whole world is looking to his country for leadership in the construction of a better future, the more he is sobered by the responsibility put upon him. Looking for assistance, he may find it in Switzerland.

There are mainly two ways in which Switzerland can be of value in the reconstruction of Europe.

The first is as a "laboratory of democracy." The pattern we should like to see realized in a democratic world order and for which this costly war has been fought has been experimented upon in Switzerland for about 700 years. Starting with the fight of a few mountain peasants for their individual rights against the usurpations of the House of Hapsburg, we can study in Swiss history the emergence of our modern concept of democracy, which in the case of Switzerland finally took shape in a federation of states, very much like the United States of America. We can study the effect of religion on a nation and see in it an essential source of life, upholding freedom of conscience and sustaining resistance against the temptation of yielding to material enslavement.

Important as they have been, the Swiss services during this war in the form of the International Red Cross and of diplomatic representation of belligerent nations are actually of less significance to the world than the preservation of Switzerland itself as a laboratory of democracy. It is of great value for us to now that democracy, if sound and well established, can survive such an extreme test as the encirclement of Switzerland by the Axis. We have seen Switzerland emerge whole from that test; now we are interested to see how such a country is able to meet the problems of the post-war world.

The second way in which Switzerland can be valuable in the reconstruction of Europe is by making use of the fruits of her democracy. For the American, it is a kind of spiritual bridgehead to Germany. On one side he finds there a familiar democratic tradition, and yet almost three-quarters of the population are German by language. As a matter of fact, the Swiss won their independence from Germany in much the same way in which the 13 American colonies withdrew from the British Empire.

Even if vacation guests are not in a mood for serious investigation, the mere opportunity of some 50,000 American service men and women to spend a week in Switzerland gives them a personal acquaintance with the country, its natural beauty and its spirit. Besides planning vacation tours, the American military authorities would like to use Switzerland for educational purposes. Their objective is not merely short courses of instruction, but they have approached Swiss universities with the view of arranging opportunities for young Americans now stationed in Europe to continue or even partially finish their studies interrupted by the war.

Those American students who will return home after their studies will bring with them a beneficial acquaintance with a development of democratic principles parallel with but mainly independent of that in the United States. This will give them a more objective judgment of the institutions of their own country.

Other Americans who will be needed in the administration of Europe will find in Switzerland the best place for their introduction to European conditions, because Switzerland has suffered little destruction and in the reconstruction of Europe she can serve as a standard, very much like the laboratory of an industrial plant setting the standard for production.

Swiss universities may to-day fill the needs of American graduate students who in former times studied at German universities. Switzerland is the only area of German culture where the Nazis have never had any say. As a matter of fact, we may even say that the Swiss have been the custodians of German culture during the Nazi period. At the same time, the Swiss scholar has had the unique opportunity of studying the events of the last years from a near-by but safe observation post.

We expect more of Switzerland as a laboratory of democracy, however, than that it shall be an educational centre. The adequacy of its governmental system to meet the challenging problems of the post-war world is our main concern.

With encirclement, Switzerland faced the danger of losing contact with a rapidly changing world. While the belligerent nations have been greatly benefited by the activities of the International Red Cross, that organization's principal donor — financially and otherwise — has probably benefited most by it, for it has kept Switzerland in contact with the world in spite of a double blockade. It has presented an opportunity to participate in the world's evolution in a constructive rather than a destructive way.

Although Switzerland is much better off than other parts of Europe, that country, too, faces an enormous financial problem. How is the laboratory of democracy able to tackle this problem?

By nature Switzerland is not a rich country. It is the thriftiness of the people which has given it its high standard of living. The prosperity of the country is based on the export of its products. The encirclement of the past years has therefore greatly upset the accustomed channels of income, and in order to recover from the financial losses of this war Switzerland must have a chance to find new markets. As in other countries, the public debts in Switzerland have experienced a vast crescendo, although all debts are in the currency of the country. The indebtedness of the Swiss Confederation mounted by the end of 1944 to \$1,563,000,000 — and Switzerland is a country similar in size and population to the State of Massachusetts.

In spite of such high public debts, the rate of interest and the stock and bond market have remained low and steady. As an illustration, the 1936 defence bond of the Swiss Confederation, with a 3 per cent. interest rate, sold in 1944 at 101.50 lowest and 102 per cent. highest. This shows the general confidence in Swiss finances.

In contrast to laboratories of industrial research, it is the nature of a laboratory of democracy that it must be self-supporting. However, it is to the interest of the whole world that a laboratory of democracy have the proper chance for being self-supporting. Any thoughtless curtailment of the basis of existence of Swiss economy can have a destructive effect far beyond the support of the Swiss population. The proper evaluation and support of Switzerland may pay the world unexpected dividends.