

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: - (1948)

Heft: 1081

Artikel: Switzerland - a country of contradictions

Autor: Allen, Devere

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-686341>

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: 28.01.2026

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

SWITZERLAND — A COUNTRY OF CONTRADICTIONS.
By DEVERE ALLEN.

(The following is reprinted from the January issue of the "SOCIALIST LEADER," by courtesy of the Editor.)

The Swiss people, according to common ideas about their country, yodel at their work, wear colourful costumes, produce amazing tones on long curved mountain horns, have the oldest pure democracy in the world, till rich soil that has made them prosper, are strongly international in outlook, and enjoy remarkable social progress.

Without a true-false test, I have no way of knowing how much of this you happen to believe. But I confess that once, prior to several working sojourns in the Confederation, I took almost all this for granted. Gradually I have learned surprising things.

To start with, we must brush off William Tell; except in legend, music, and the poetry of Schiller (who never visited the country), that stalwart rebel, along with the fruit he shot off his son's head with his unerring arrow, has been made by unfeeling historians into so much apple-sauce. And by any modern definition, the 650 years of democracy is not so very different.

Though the early cantons broke away from tyrannical rulers, they cheerfully accepted others. Without doubt there was a robust love of liberty during the Middle Ages, yet so few Swiss fighters supported struggles for liberty elsewhere, and so many served as mercenary troops, that the slogan rose in Europe, "Pas d'argent, pas des Suisses" — no cash, no Swiss.

The Confederation as it stands to-day was built up by the accession of new cantons, and some of these did not share at all in the ancient glory. Geneva, the last to join, did not do so until 1814, and had no democratic constitution until 1846.

Both in political and economic democracy, however, Switzerland is something of a contradiction. The President rules without pomp or power; he goes to work by trolley car. He serves for a year and is selected from the seven members of the Federal Council, a Cabinet-like body.

Have you ever considered Life Insurance purely from an

INVESTMENT

point of view? I am gladly prepared to discuss this matter without any obligation to yourself.

Please write to Dr. J. ARPEL,

*Insurance Manager,
5 & 6, CLEMENT'S INN,
CHANCERY 6917. LONDON, W.C.2*

The cantons have much power to rule themselves, though lately their independence has been somewhat curbed. By referendum, laws can be reviewed afresh, or adopted, after petitions by 30,000 citizens. New laws may be put up for a vote of the people whenever 50,000 signers demand it.

Nevertheless, only half the people have the right of suffrage. Women cannot vote, and most of them do not seem to want to. In Italian-speaking Ticino, woman suffrage last year was overwhelmingly defeated, and in German-speaking Basle, it was beaten almost two to one. On November 30th, last year, Zurich canton voted down votes for women by 134,594 to 39,018.

Swiss citizens, uniquely, are guaranteed by the constitution — which, by-the-way, is only about a century old — the right to trade freely. This provision, plus the decentralisation of life in the 22 cantons, has resulted in the development of many crafts and small industries, operating under a free enterprise system that has few of the marks, so noticeable in big countries, of cartel or monopoly control.

Though some 230,000 workers are employed in 8,000 small plants, Leftists point out that a somewhat larger number are grouped in industries numbering only 350. In comparison to the huge concentrations of industry in larger nations, however, this seems still extraordinarily decentralised.

ALLTRANSPORT & STORAGE LTD.

Directors: O. A. DETTWILER, F.S.F. (SWISS). H. E. NACHBUR, F.S.F. (SWISS). F. T. SMITH. Secretary: F. N. RODGERS, A.C.C.A.

Cartage Depot:

8, EAGLE WHARF ROAD,
NEW NORTH ROAD,
LONDON, N.1.

Head Office:
ALLTRANSPORT BUILDING
LITTLE TRINITY LANE
LONDON · E · C · 4

Telephone:
CENTRAL 5200 (15 Lines).
Cables: ALLTRANS.

SHIPPING TO SWITZERLAND

by all Steamers from

London, Goole, Hull, Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow, and Bristol.

Official Freight and Passenger Agents to British Airways and all Principal Air Lines

Telephone and telegraph services, as well as the postal system, were nationalised long ago. The main railway lines are also government-owned. Publicly owned light and power is consumed by three-fourths of the entire population. Even in banking, 51 per cent. of the funds are controlled by the State or the communes. Co-operatives are very extensive and powerful.

Two new laws were recently put through by popular vote: one of these belatedly inaugurated old age pensions, and the other, far more significant, provided for State control of economic life in case of any emergency need. As a matter of fact, there had been a great deal of federal regulation, both of agriculture and industry, which the new law primarily endorsed.

Swiss prosperity does not come from the soil; far from it. As someone said long ago, "Europe's richest peoples live on Europe's poorest soil." Most of the land area is not arable at all, and much that is can produce only by the hardest labour.

Raw materials and foodstuffs have always had to be imported. The very genuine prosperity of the nation has come about from hard and skilful work, the investment of capital abroad with returns to the home country and, especially, the export of expertly-manufactured finished products, such as clocks and watches.

Swiss-owned plants abroad have been taken over wholesale. Even when certain countries, such as Czechoslovakia and Poland, are willing to give compensation, the rate is usually low, and the difficulties of transferring currencies into the high-value Swiss francs are well-nigh insuperable. Some Swiss capital has been to seek less worrisome areas, such as Ireland.

Military Training in Switzerland, compulsory from the age of 20 up to 48, has always been presented to the outside world as democratic, and it unquestionably is fairly administered. But it is also very rigid. Unlike Britain, America and many other countries, Switzerland provides no alternative service for conscientious objectors.

They are given milder sentences than in some countries, but are taken to court time after time. If they are exempt for physical reasons, they must pay a military tax, and failure to meet the tax for conscientious reasons, just as refusal to serve, results in repeated imprisonments, and often in expulsion from the objector's home canton.

The importance of neutrality cannot be exaggerated. It is no negative idea or policy. Switzerland is deliberately neutral, not for narrow reasons alone, but for its service to the world. But behind

neutrality in foreign policy there is an overlooked internal aspect of this central policy; the most prized thing to all the Swiss is the cantonal freedom, but once neutrality is abandoned, centralised authority is inevitable, and the whole character of the national life must undergo a drastic and unhappy change.

The people are overwhelmingly opposed to Communism, but the great relief organisations are strongly emphasising help to eastern Europe, which needs it sorely, and from which the Swiss do not want to be separated by the political splitting up of the Continent. If anyone imagines that the Swiss are selfish in their neutrality point of view, let him ponder the fact that more than fifty million dollars has been donated or appropriated by this land of four million people for the aid of war sufferers outside its borders.

SWISS YOUTH CLUB.

For some time past the Council of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique had studied the question of giving the large number of Swiss boys and girls, who are arriving in London, an opportunity to meet on certain days, during the week on a social basis.

An Appeal was published in the last issue of this paper asking for furniture and for members of the Colony to come forward to make the necessary arrangements. The result concerning the Appeal for furniture has so far not met with much success, and we herewith repeat that the following articles would be gratefully received: chairs, club-chairs and settees, tables, book case, piano, wireless set, floor rugs, chandeliers.

The request for members to take an active interest in this undertaking has, however, been most successful and a committee consisting of the following has been formed: Mme Isacco, Mme Weibel, Mme Egli, Mme Bolla and M. Spargnapani, all names which guarantee, that with the necessary support of the entire Colony this new and very necessary venture can be carried on in a dignified manner.

With the collaboration of the Swiss Legation, who very kindly offered to put one large room in the Legation building at Grosvenor Square (entrance 28, Duke Street), at the disposal of the Committee the plans for such a social centre could be taken a step further, and on Saturday, January 10th, the Swiss Youth Club was formally opened by the Swiss Chargé d'Affaires, Dr. A. Escher, in the presence of a representative gathering.

Dr. Escher in his address thanked all those who had taken the initiative in this undertaking, and wished them success, stressing the point how important it was for our young countrymen and country-women to find a little *pied à terre* where they can spend a few hours amongst each other, in a happy atmosphere.

It might be said here, that it is a modest beginning in, as far as we know, only temporary quarters, but the main thing is, that the scheme has actually started, and we feel sure, that by getting the full support of all those who have the welfare of our young compatriots at heart, a permanent meeting place should ultimately be found.

Let us not be said in our own homeland that the London Colony as such takes no interest in their young and often inexperienced countrymen, it is a noble and we repeat, necessary work which deserves all the support it can get.

