

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:	- (1965)
Heft:	1479
Artikel:	What is the Swiss sense of national unity? [to be continued]
Autor:	Frei, Daniel
DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-692140

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: 16.01.2026

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

The Swiss Observer

FOUNDED IN 1919 BY PAUL F. BOEHRINGER.

The Official Organ of the Swiss Colony in Great Britain

Advisory Council: R. J. KELLER (Chairman), GOTTFRIED KELLER (Vice-Chairman), DR. E. M. BIRCHER, O. F. BOEHRINGER, J. EUSEBIO, A. KUNZ, A. STAUFFER, G. E. SUTER.

EDITED BY MRS. MARIANN MEIER WITH THE CO-OPERATION OF MEMBERS OF THE SWISS COLONY IN GREAT BRITAIN

Telephone: CLERKENWELL 2321/2. Published Twice Monthly at 23, LEONARD STREET, E.C.2. Telegrams: FREPRINCO, LONDON.

Vol. 51 No. 1479

FRIDAY, 11th JUNE 1965

WHAT IS THE SWISS SENSE OF NATIONAL UNITY?

Lecture delivered to the London Group of the N.S.H.

by

DR. DANIEL FREI

What is Swiss national consciousness or patriotism? It is hardly necessary to justify the choice of subject to a group of Swiss citizens abroad, though Swiss living in a foreign country are all — consciously or unconsciously — qualified experts in this matter. The distance separating them from their country is at the same time a kind of intellectual distance, but a distance providing a certain perspective giving them the opportunity of appreciating their native country far more lucidly than people living in Switzerland. Thus, Swiss citizens abroad usually have a deeper insight in what we call patriotism. In Switzerland, the sense of national unity is very often rather vague, weak and passive. It exists with more clarity, purity and vigour in the minds and hearts of Swiss living abroad. If talking to a group of Swiss abroad, all it can mean, therefore, is an attempt at analysing and giving some kind of survey of this enormous set of ideas called Swiss patriotism.

National feeling or patriotism is often criticised today. Many people call patriotism an old-fashioned, obsolete principle belonging to the lumber room of the nineteenth century, the Age of Nationalism. If the same people are asked what they consider to be the decisive political principle of their own time, they exclaim "Europe! Let us unify it and create the United States of Europe and abolish the old-fashioned and selfish forces of nationalism!" Ironically, these enthusiasts of European integration often justify their attitude by quoting the Swiss example. Switzerland, they say, must be the classical example and model of an integrated Europe. Before 1798, it was but a loose federation of sovereign states, of states defending their own particular assets, legal system, form of government and way of life. The federation had no common government, no capital, not even any common feeling. But already fifty years later, in 1848, Switzerland was a real State with a Federal Government, Federal Council and Parliament, common money and soon also common law. Is Switzerland, therefore, the enthusiasts of European integration ask, not an outstanding example, a model showing that citizens of different language and culture can become a nation? Is it not a model for the emerging United Europe?

This comparison between Swiss integration in the last century and European integration in progress, seems, at a first glance, quite convincing. But there is one point which those comparisons don't take sufficiently into account: they neglect considering the causes of that Swiss

integration, the moving forces behind and within that process of unification. A famous French writer, historian and philosopher, Ernest Renan, once gave an excellent definition of the force which holds together political units: "une âme, un principe spirituel — a soul, a spiritual principle". By this he meant that the cohesive force in a political group, be it a nation or any other formation, is primarily common feeling, common thinking of people forming that group, the will of those people to live together. Switzerland with its development from a loose federation to a well-organised state is a witness to the truth of that principle. The Old Confederation couldn't emerge as a State until there was a certain sense of national unity, common thinking and feeling and a will to live together; and it could not become a real State until at least a majority of the population comprehended that national consciousness. These two conditions had to be fulfilled before it was possible to unite Switzerland, and they must be fulfilled before a true and voluntary political unification of Europe can be achieved. This basic fact should be borne in mind whenever propagators of the United States of Europe want to achieve their goal in too hasty and precipitated a way and try to blame the national patriotism still alive in the various European countries.

The Swiss sense of national unity should not be considered as an isolated phenomenon, but in its historical context. Two important dates should be singled out, 1798 and 1848. Before the end of the eighteenth century, Switzerland did not exist as a state. There were no common institutions except perhaps the common administration of some subject territories like Baden and Ticino. Swiss people of that time did not consider themselves as citizens of Switzerland, but primarily of their particular Canton. The Cantons, and not the Confederation were the important political, cultural and economic unit. The common national feeling was so weak that, in February and March 1798 when Berne was seriously threatened by revolutionary French armies, it was not even possible to organise an efficient common defence of Switzerland. Most Cantons preferred to keep their troops at home and to wait and see what would happen. Thus, the Old Confederation helplessly broke down when the political thunderstorm arrived. The consequence of this catastrophe were the bitter years of French rule and domination, of misery and political disaster.

The other date, the year 1848, is the moment when Switzerland got its first Federal Constitution, when a national government was set up, when a national administration, economic policy and soon also national laws were established — when Switzerland became a State.

But what happened in that half century between 1798 and 1849? It was, generally speaking, a period of struggle between federalist and nationalist forces, between separatist and unionist tendencies. It was a period of swaying to and fro between the pole of complete unity and that of complete disorganisation. In 1798, the pendulum swung from one extreme straight to the other: The French invaders forced Switzerland into a strictly centralised political system. The country was called "Switzerland" no more, but "the one and indivisible Helvetic Republic". This system, however, could not work. Not only was it not a naturally grown unit, but it was imposed by military force and was nothing else than a sheer imitation of the French model. This system of a Swiss state, therefore, was shattered by revolts and opposition before it had even started to work. Then, after the period of French domination was over, the pendulum swung back. The period which followed was characterised by the term "Restoration". And indeed, also the loose federation of

Switzerland was restored and found itself in a position similar to that before 1798 with no common government, strong preponderance of cantonal power and customs barriers between single Cantons.

The following period could be called a period of fermentation. Those who wanted to unite Switzerland were restless. More and more, their political discontent was seething in their minds. Finally, a minority of Cantons decided to join in the movement for a common national state. This endeavour to transform this desire into political reality by means of constitutional reform failed, because there remained a minority refusing to participate in a common political unit and wishing to keep the traditional order of cantonal sovereignty. In order to unite Switzerland in spite of this minority of Cantons, it was necessary to use violence and to force those reluctant Cantons into the new Federal State. This event is known as the "Sonderbund" war, and its immediate result was the draft of the Federal Constitution of 1848 — the modern Swiss State was born.

This rough outline is the historical context in which the Swiss sense of national unity has to be seen.

(To be continued.)

"THE STATE OF THE CONFEDERATION"

THE FEDERAL COUNCIL REPORTS

(Concluded)

State Economy

The demand for restricting expenditure by the State was repeatedly made during the discussions regarding measures for slowing down the excessive economic growth. State expenditure should not grow any faster than the income of the people. But this demand can only be met as long as no new priorities with financial consequences are given to the State, unless other tasks are taken away from it.

The Federal Council states that the accounts have been favourable during the last few years with the result that there were no expansive effects. However, the necessity to catch up with modern demands in public services has led to deficits in some of the Cantons and Communes and has forced them to take up credits or increase taxes. The Confederation, too, will have to study a long term finance plan which will take into consideration the drop in customs revenue and the increased cost of the above-mentioned new tasks. This planning will have to include an extensive analysis of federal subsidies.

Defence

Questions of military armament were in the centre of discussions regarding national defence during 1964. As war techniques have progressed at an increasingly fast rate, the securing of arms has been confronted with most difficult problems. Thus was shown particularly in the introduction of the new aeroplane type "Mirage".

In the conception of defence and the planning of armament needs, modern warfare and weapons, the specific characteristics of our country, the militia system and the nature of the territory have to be considered. Limited financial means have to be taken into account and the abilities of Swiss arms manufacturing concerns. New techniques are being studied, also regarding the training of our Army. Modern arms and strategy necessitate the acquisition by the Confederation of special territory, which

meets with difficulties at a time of a generally thriving economy.

Planning of military defence has to go hand in hand with civil defence and economic provisioning in case of war. National defence used to be the main task of the Confederation. In recent times, a number of other important duties have been added. Nevertheless, even today, the sums needed for an adequate defence system are the most important items in federal finance. As in other fields of federal activities, it is important in defence policy to find a best possible and adequate form for a small neutral country to hold her own.

* * *

The report by the Federal Council has generally been approved. The question has been asked why the Federal Council was unwilling to make such an *exposé* earlier. No sensational revelations were made, nor unknown details given. But the report is acknowledged as an excellent means of giving the public much-needed information, and if it serves as a basis of discussion it will be a good thing. There has been some criticism of too carefully considered accents on controversial subjects. As one paper put it, the Federal Council should by now realise that "one cannot wash the skin without wetting it". Peter Dürrenmatt, Editor-in-Chief of the "Basler Nachrichten", wrote on 10th April that evolution in Switzerland happened in slow-motion tempo, but that the Switzerland of 1965 was nevertheless no longer the Switzerland of 1945: the mentality of the people had changed, the reputation of the country was different, and the position held by the "Bund", the general term for Government and federal authorities, was no longer the same as then. Such happenings as the "Mirage" affair and the problem of too many foreigners had suddenly and forcefully made the people realise the changes, and, together with other happenings, had started the discussion of State Reform. This would be debated in Parliament in June.