

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: - (1969)
Heft: 1577

Artikel: Napoleon and Switzerland
Autor: P.M.B.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-696553>

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: 13.08.2025

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

NAPOLEON AND SWITZERLAND

Napoleon was born two hundred years ago and his name has been in headlines, so I opened the history books to learn of his bearing on Swiss history. Although all the Emperor's experience of Switzerland was a hurried march through the Valais on his way to Marengo in 1804, he has left harsh memories in the country. His mark was, it appears, not as deep as that left by the French Revolution, which spilt over into what was then Switzerland and therefore deserves to be recalled. Most refreshing of all, this rediscovery of the past reminded me that the Swiss had on occasions actually experienced "rough times"...

The turmoil of the French Revolution had repercussions all over Europe. Switzerland was no exception. The *Club Helvétique*, founded in Paris by exiles from Fribourg, Vaud and Geneva, circulated pamphlets throughout Switzerland spreading the new ideas of the Revolution. The subjected domains of the Confederation wanted equal rights. The people of Vaud were claiming the abolition of the feudal rights of their Bernese masters. They were celebrating openly the triumphs of the Revolution and these gestures of emancipation were duly repressed.

The inhabitants of the Bishopric of Basle, backed by the French, revolted and proclaimed the "Raurician Republic". Some years later, the French Directory annexed this territory (the actual Jura Bernois) which became the "Département du Mont Terrible". A revolution flared up in Geneva in 1792. The aristocratic government of the city was overthrown and a number of its partisans executed. But the townfolk turned against the revolutionaries. There was a general reconciliation after which complete political equality for all was proclaimed by a new government. Trouble was brewing in the Canton of Zurich. The inhabitants of Stäfa manifested against the excessive patrician authority of Zurich and had to suffer severe reprisals. The valleys of the Valtelina, Bormio and Chiavenna, subjected members of the Grison League, were claiming for equal rights. In early 1797, Napoleon was in Milan after having defeated the Austrians in his remarkable Italian Campaign. He met the representatives of the Grisons and told them to give autonomy to the three valleys. The envoys demurred, an attitude which cost them the loss of the valleys. They were annexed to the newly created and ephemeral Cisalpine Republic and definitely lost for Switzerland. At the Congress of Vienna in 1815, they were given to Austria. This was Napoleon's first intervention in Switzerland.

A Swiss Revolution sprang up in the Canton of Vaud. A patriot established in Paris, César-Frédéric de la

Harpe, asked the French Directory to support the people of Vaud's claims against Bern, a request favourably received. The whole canton became restless and claimed for a general reunion of its representatives. Bern refused and set about suppressing a movement that had gone too far. It was too late. An assembly of delegates from the townships and communes of Vaud met in Lausanne. Général Ménard, whose French troops were massed on the border, guaranteed their protection. This spurred the assembly in proclaiming Vaud's independence from Bern and in promulgating the "Republic of the Léman". The Bernese bailiffs were chased away. A revolution had been carried through without the loss of one human life.

The government of Bern decided to reconquer the country of Vaud, but Général Ménard dispatched his aide-de-camp to dissuade it from this project. On his way to Bern, the aide-de-camp was halted by Swiss soldiers in Thierrens, a skirmish took place and a hussard of his escort was killed. Ménard seized the incident as a pretext for invading Switzerland.

The Confederates failed to unite against the invader and left Bern alone to face the enemy. Bernese troops were hurriedly called to arms and put under the command of Charles Louis Erlach. But the authorities lacked in decision. They accepted a cease-fire asked by General Brune, who had replaced Ménard. The General did not feel strong enough to beat the Bernese alone and the cease-fire was to give time for General Schauenbourg to come down from Alsace and bring him help. When everything was ready, Brune marched on Morat and Bern, to be stopped at Neuennegg by a determined Bernese army. But the same day, Schauenbourg, who had advanced through Solothurn and pushed the garrison out of Fraubrunnen, beat the Bernese completely at Grauholz, killing 900. On that same afternoon, Schauenbourg made his entry in Bern.

The French seized the treasures of the State, emptied the arsenal and ransomed the citizens of the town. Even the three bears of the pit were not spared: they were sent as a trophy to the Directory in Paris.

The fall of Bern was followed by that of the whole Confederation. Geneva was soon annexed and became capital of the French department of the Léman. In the spring of 1798, the French imposed a new constitution on Switzerland. This constitution had been thought out by Peter Ochs, a magistrate from Basle, and approved by the French Directory. The "Helvetic Republic" was to replace the old 13-cantons Confederation. It was to have 19 cantons, the new ones carved

out of the existing Cantons, many receiving entirely new names. Such was the case of the Canton of the Léman, the Oberland, the Rhetia, the Cantons of Säntis and Baden. The country was governed by a centralised Directory of five members and by two chambers: the Great Council and the Senate. It formed one single state and for this reason was called "République helvétique une et indivisible". In fact, for the first time in its history, Switzerland was united. French and Italian became official languages together with German. But the cantons were no more than prefectures, subdivided into districts and administered centrally in the French style. Geneva, Neuchatel and the Jura were not included in the Republic. Some years later, the Valais was detached from it and became the "Rhodanian Republic". In 1810 it was annexed to France to become the Simplon Department.

The Helvetic Republic did its best to apply the ideals of the Revolution: it proclaimed freedom of belief, a free press, trade and industry, equality of all before the law and the abolishment of feudal rights. But French troops remained in the country, which apart from the Grisons was virtually under their control and the French representative Rapinat, behaving like a proconsul, squeezed all the money he could out of the cantons and their citizens.

Neither was the Republic received everywhere with sympathy. The mountaineers of the small cantons were indignant at the suppression of their *landsgemeinde* and were hostile to the Revolution's lay ideals, which, they thought, would upset their traditional religion. They refused to acknowledge the new republic and took up arms under the leadership of an officer from Schwyz, Alois Reding. The Swiss Directory charged General Schauenbourg with crushing the rebellion.

The French marched on Schwyz but were driven off. The insurgents having committed the tactical mistake of uncovering a vital pass, they had to retreat towards the South where they met the French at Rotenturm. Attacking the French columns with fury, women, children, old men, the whole folk taking part in the fray, they put the French to flight. They repeated the same feat on the morrow, causing severe losses to the French. Reding realised however that he could not hold out much longer. His men and women were worn out. The people of Schwyz held a *landsgemeinde*, and decided to negotiate with the French. The other rebel Cantons, Glarus, Unterwald and Uri followed Schwyz and reintegrated the Republic.

The Helvetic Directory imposed on every Swiss citizen the obligation of swearing allegiance to the Constitution and the people of Niedwald refused to comply. They took up arms and chased the Helvetic authorities away. The 9th of September 1798, French troops attacked Niedwald. Its inhabitants, men, women and children, armed with axes and scythes, put up an admirable resistance but, overwhelmed they had to retreat towards Stans, which they defended to the last extremity. The French massacred 500 inhabitants of the valley. Stans and the neighbouring villages were set afire. The Directory asked Pestalozzi to take care of the many orphans borne of this disaster.

During 1799, Switzerland became the battlefield of Europe. The country was invaded by French, Austrian and Russian armies. Two battles were fought near Zurich. In the first, the Archduke Charles of Austria defeated Masséna, in the second, Masséna beat the Russian General Korsakov. A Russian army led by General Souvarov, coming through the Gothard to join Korsakov, was baited all the way and finally stopped at Schwyz by the troops of General Lecourbe. Learning that Korsakov had been defeated and that his escape route on the plateau was barred, Souvarov made one of the most fantastic retreats of History. Escaping towards the Voralberg, his army climbed through four high passes in ten days. 6,000 men and all his artillery were left behind, either on glaciers or at the bottom of precipices.

The country was torn by political strife. The "Federalists" and the "Unitarists" were struggling for power. The Federalists won in 1801 but the Unitarists took control in 1802. A civil war broke out and the Helvetic Government escaped to Lausanne. A Federalist army was about to enter the Canton of Léman when Bonaparte intervened and ordered a break in the hostilities. A French army entered the land and the days of the Helvetic Republic were counted.

Bonaparte convened sixty-three delegates from the Swiss cantons, forty-five unitarists and fifteen federalists. Five delegates from each of the two parties, joined with French senators were appointed by Bonaparte to draft a new constitution. After having heard the voices of the two opinions, Napoleon presented the assembly on the 19th of February 1803 with a new constitution, called the "Act of Mediation".

Switzerland was no longer to be a unified state and was to revert to a federal constitution. To the thirteen cantons of the old Confederation were definitively added six new ones — but the boundaries drawn during the Republic were completely overhauled. These new Cantons were Saint-Gall, the Grisons, Aargau, Thurgau, Tessin and Vaud. Thus the Confederation of

19 cantons was created. It was the Switzerland of today minus the Valais an independent republic, Neuchatel, a principality belonging to Prussia and later given by Napoleons to one of his officers, Marshal Berthier; Geneva and the Jura, were part of France.

The Cantons regained their sovereignty and the "Waldstätten", or four original Cantons, reinstated their landsgemeinde. Federal power was entrusted to a Diet which met twice yearly in the director Canton. There were six of these: Fribourg, Bern, Zurich, Solothurn, Basle and Lucern. The first magistrate of the country received the title of Landamann of Switzerland. The Diet was composed of deputies from the cantons. Those with more than 100,000 inhabitants had the right to two seats, those with less, one.

The Act of Mediation brought ten years' peace to Switzerland. The country breathed again and could devoted itself to its agriculture and industry. In that period, Pestalozzi founded in Berthoud and Yverdon an institution universally renowned. The Bernese Fellenberg created a model school for poor children. Father Girard acquired an international reputation for the new methods he introduced in the schools of Fribourg.

An engineer from Zurich, Conrad Escher, undertook the drying-out of the marshes between the lakes of Zurich and Wallenstadt. He dug a canal carrying the waters of the Linth directly into the Lake of Wallenstadt and a second one between this lake and the lake of Zurich. These works, completed in 1818, protected vast area from periodic floods, making it amenable to agriculture. This was the first federal enterprise of importance.

But during the whole period covered by the Act of Mediation, the Swiss were severely oppressed by the Emperor. A military treaty imposed in 1798 had utterly ignored Swiss neutrality. Switzerland was bound to furnish France with four standing regiments of 4,000 men. Constantly decimated by the Napoleonic wars, the figure had to be brought down to 12,000, and even then, the authorities had to stoop to every means of recruitment. Napoleon further required of the diet that it should refuse the right to enlist mercenaries to foreign powers not allied with France. During the Russian campaign, the Swiss regiments were soon reduced by hardships and sickness. They showed great courage in covering the French retreat over the Beresina and took their share in saving the main French army from absolute annihilation. In the end, only 700 Swiss, some permanently disabled and crippled returned home.

When the tide had changed, Napoleon suffered a momentous defeat at Leipzig. His armies retreated to the Rhine and Switzerland found itself in the Allies' way. When the Diet realised

that the enemies of Napoleon were nearing the border, it hastily declared the neutrality of the "Confédération Helvétique" and levied troops with the intention of enforcing the respect of this neutrality. The army was placed under the command of General Rodolphe de Wattenwyl. Its 12,500 men were to face 16,000 Austrians. Realising that all resistance was useless, the general disbanded his troops, causing many a soldier, ashamed of this affront to national honour, to destroy their arms and cry of treason. In December 1813, the Austrians penetrated the country through Basle and Schaffhausen and, in interminable columns, made for France through Neuchatel and Geneva. The Jura suffered greatly from this passage. A detachment of this army liberated Geneva. The Valais became free from French domination at the same time. This was the end to the Act of Mediation.

Napoleon's defeat gave new hopes to the supporters of the old Confederation, who thought that the time had come to re-establish it. The old patrician families regained their former powers in many Cantons and Bern invited its former subjects, the people of Vaud and Aargau, to recognise its authority again. They refused and found a sympathetic protector in the Russian Tzar, Alexander the 1st, before whom Frédéric de la Harpe and Jomini, a Swiss strategist employed as a General in the Russian Army, had pleaded their case.

A diet assembled in Zurich in 1814. It was boycotted by Bern, which convened the "true confederates", i.e. the Cantons of the old confederation in a separate Diet in Lucern. But the Allies ordered the dissolution of this second Diet. Finally, all the cantons met in Zurich, thrashed out a new constitution in a "Federal Pact" and presented it to the Congress in Vienna. The Confederation and a number of Cantons had sent their own delegates to defend their specific interests in front of this vast assembly, Reinhard for Zurich, de Montenach for Fribourg, Wieland for the Confederation, Frédéric de la Harpe for Vaud and Pictet de Rochement for Geneva. The latter secured the commune of Carouge from Sardinia. After Waterloo, a second Congress met in Paris. Pictet de Rochement defended once again the interests of Switzerland and the Congress declared both Swiss Neutrality and Independence to be in the real interest of Europe. Neuchatel, Valais and Geneva were definitely integrated to the Confederation. The old bishopric of Basle was tied to the canton of Bern and now forms the Jura. The country had at last found peace after progressing during twenty painful years from a mediæval confederacy to the Confederation which it still is today.

P.M.B.