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# The Swiss Observer

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## SWITZERLAND'S TWENTY-FIVE DAY WAR

by Emmanuel Mayer

*Like the United States, Switzerland has also had a War of Secession. It broke out in late 1847 and was in fact the last time the Swiss were involved in war. Like America's War of Secession, the Sonderbund War paved the way for the definite establishment of a federal state. The first Federal Constitution was drafted after the fighting and contained two articles banning Jesuits and new religious orders from Switzerland. These articles are now in the process of being abrogated. It was a swift affair costing a total of 128 dead on both sides during the 25 days while it lasted.*

### The dissolution of the Aargau monasteries, the Jesuit question, and the secession campaign

The Radicals won their first great victory in the canton of Aargau where the Catholic minority rose in indignation and stormed the cantonal capital with an armed force which was repulsed by government troops. The victors were persuaded that the riot had originated in and been supported by the monasteries, which were centres of resolute resistance to the new ideas. At the demand of the Radicals, Aargau at once dissolved its monasteries and this not without harshness. A number of cantons protested against this step and charged the canton with a breach of the constitution, since article XII of the federal pact expressly

guaranteed the existence of the monasteries and their property. The Aargau decision to secularise them roused the Catholic world far beyond the Swiss frontiers, and the question of the monasteries, at first a legal dispute, became a political issue. More and more it became a cancer in the body of the confederation.

In the midst of its triumphal progress, radicalism encountered the opposition of the extreme form of catholicism, namely, the militant order of the Jesuits. There now set in between these forces a struggle in which the whole of Switzerland and all classes of the people took a feverish part.

As a result of Radical provocation and the dissolution of the Aargau monasteries, the Great Council of Lucerne in 1844 adopted an agreement with the Jesuits by which theological teaching, the seminary, and worship in one part of the town were placed in their hands.

The transference of higher teaching to the order was certainly no breach of the federal pact; the Jesuits were already acting as teachers and preachers in Fribourg, Valais, and Schwyz. Besides, Lucerne was its own master in all questions of education and could appoint whom it pleased to the direction of its higher educational institutions. Thus by the federal law then in force no objection was possible. Yet the step taken by Lucerne proved to be a grave political mistake. The provocative invitation given to

the Jesuits by the leading canton of the confederation at that time of tension turned a purely local dispute into a national one. The Swiss Radicals, to a man, took the decision of Lucerne as a declaration of war. For them the Jesuits were the avowed enemies of progress, the systematic oppressors of a free world order, the representatives of suspicion and ignorance, the creators of civil dissension.

On both sides feeling rose to fever pitch. Anti-Jesuit societies were formed. The passions of the people were shamelessly played on until they burst into flame. When the Radicals of Lucerne realised that the call to the Jesuits could not be legally withdrawn they recklessly resolved to take the law into their own hands and in December 1844 organised a riot in the town which was put down without difficulty by the government and punished with unnecessary severity.

The anti-Jesuit movement thereupon gained strength among the Radicals in other cantons. Huge popular demonstrations demanded active support of the Aargau decision from the cantonal governments. In the mind of the common man, if the text of the federal constitution stood in the way of the expulsion of the order, a new federal law must be enacted for the purpose. The Radicals of Lucerne boldly proceeded to prepare a new armed expedition with their fellow Radicals. The general anarchy reached such a point that the governments of the Radical cantons, completely neglecting their duty, left the insurgent Radicals an almost free hand and did not even intervene when the *Freischärler*, as the Radical volunteers were called, helped themselves to arms and ammunition from the city arsenals. Certain cantonal authorities played a double game by closing their eyes to the lawless goings on, and later posing before the confederation and the outside world as deluded defenders of the law. Universal lawlessness seemed the order of the day not only among the people but in the governments too.

At the end of March 1845 the *Freischärler*, a motley troop of 3,600 men under the command of Ulrich Ochsenebein, a Bernese captain, advanced from the canton of Aargau over the Lucerne frontier, and on the evening of the following day had

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reached the outskirts of the city. The startled government was already thinking of abdicating. Ochsenbein, however, partly from reasons of humanity, refrained from bombarding the city, whereupon his exhausted troops fled in disorder. Half of them were taken prisoners, 500 were killed. It was, perhaps, well, for a victory of the *Freischärler* would not have provided a proper solution of the great problem. A passage of arms was, of course, hardly to be avoided, but to be of enduring value it would have had to be fought out by the whole nation and not merely by a chance collection of lawless adventurers.

## The formation of the Sonderbund

Feeling themselves endangered by these onslaughts the Catholic cantons of Lucerne, Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden, Zug, Fribourg, and Valais concluded a defensive pact among themselves. Its aims, though not set down in writing, were later admitted to have been chiefly directed against the impending reform of the confederation and against the introduction of a unified government at the expense of cantonal sovereignty. The league declared itself defensive in character, formed for protection against a repetition of the attacks; its sole purpose was stated to be the security of the territory of the seven cantons and their independence against further invasion. As soon as any of the cantons received reliable information of any actual or impending attack it was forthwith to regard itself as committed to raising the troops adequate to the situation without awaiting official notification from the canton in question. The union was placed under the leadership of a committee with almost plenipotentiary powers, consisting of one deputy from each of the treaty cantons; it bore

the ominous name of the war council.

The founders of this Sonderbund, as it was soon aptly named, had taken the greatest care to avoid any violation of the letter of the federal pact: article VI provided that no canton should enter upon alliances which might be prejudicial to the confederation or to the rights of other cantons. The question was merely whether the whole of Switzerland was prepared to believe in the defensive character of this political and military league and whether it was not at variance with the spirit of the federal pact.

When the federal Diet came to deal with the question of the Sonderbund, a few cantons, Vaud, Zurich, Berne, Solothurn, and Geneva, which had hesitated till then, elected Radical governments. The whole country, tense with excitement, watched St. Gallen enter the Radical camp. With that, the twelfth cantonal vote was attained and an absolute majority in the Diet secured. "Douze voix font loi" proclaimed the Radicals of French Switzerland.

## Preparations for war

Ochsenbein, the former *Freischärler*, now president of the Bernese government and in that capacity presi-

dent of the confederation, opened the Diet in Berne. The fateful meeting was being watched from abroad, for its decisions might have consequence outside Swiss territory. Ochsenbein began his lengthy but skilful presidential address with a reference to the general importance of the session, and then, with candour and firmness, went on to discuss the character and aims of the Radicals. An open conflict between stability and progress could not be avoided; it was now Switzerland's sacred duty to set up a new Bund for the whole nation. It was thereupon resolved by a narrow majority that the Sonderbund should be dissolved as incompatible with the federal pact, and there is not doubt that the twelve cantons and two half-cantons represented the majority of the Swiss nation. Yet it was a revolutionary measure for the Radicals to settle a constitutional question by a mere majority vote.

The Radicals now pressed for vigorous action on the decisions of the Diet. They raised troops and elected Colonel William Henry Dufour, a Conservative Genevese, then sixty years of age, as their commander. The army of the Diet was thus commanded by a man whose personality was to mean much for the conduct and issue of the war. The choice shows

## *A personal statement from the Chairman of the "Swiss Observer's" "Advisory Council"*

It has been my privilege to assist in guiding the "Swiss Observer" through occasionally very difficult periods ever since the formation of the Advisory Council soon after the second world war.

After the retirement of its former Chairman, Mr. Robert J. Keller, to Switzerland some time ago, it has been my task to preside over the Council's meetings. Apart from this, a great deal of backstage work has fallen on me during these many years, which I have tried to do to the best of my ability.

Two factors have led me to the conclusion that the right moment for me to lay down the burden and retire from "Swiss Observer" work at this juncture is now. One of these factors is my wish sooner or later to retire from active journalism altogether and to go back to Switzerland.

The second is that new developments are in preparation for the "Swiss Observer", which have already been hinted at in various reports and which may, if the Publisher and the Advisory Council so decide, mature in the not very distant future.

As I personally do not wish to influence these pending decisions in any way, and could in any case not personally devote the necessary time and energy to their implementation, I have handed in my resignation to the Publisher and Hon. Secretary of the Council, and through him asked the Council to accept it.

I would like to put on record that during all those many years I have experienced nothing but good will, friendship and unfailing courtesy from the members of the Council and particularly from the Publisher, Mr. Oscar F. Boehringer, with whom I have been in friendly and fruitful consultation innumerable times in official and private meetings and over the telephone. Even if, at my urgent request, the official contact now ceases, I am certain that the feelings of friendship remain alive.

In concluding this statement and explanation, it remains for me to wish my successor, all the members of the Council and last, but not least, our Colony publication, the "Swiss Observer" well for the future. This I do most sincerely.

Gottfried Keller.

with what political intelligence and high sense of responsibility towards the nation as a whole the Radicals were able to act at really decisive moments; it further testifies to the earnest endeavour towards moderation made by the leading moderate Radicals. By accepting the command, Dufour, in the eyes of Switzerland and the world at large, legalised the war preparations of the Diet. Conservative officers of high standing followed his lead and joined the confederate army. His character and personality were in every way attractive: benevolent, unselfish, moderate, he had the qualities of the good citizen as well as of the soldier, simplicity and loyalty.

The Sonderbund was equally convinced of the justice and necessity of the war. A community of religion and the sense of danger gave a solidarity to their determination to resist which, worked upon by their political and religious leaders, rose at times to fanaticism. Preparations for war were made with tremendous energy. The war council ordered earthworks to be constructed, the reserves called out, and arms purchased. By an unlucky chance a consignment of rifles which Fribourg had brought in France was delayed at Neuchatel. Munitions from Austria were also intercepted in the Ticino, whereupon the Diet prohibited the import of arms by the Sonderbund. In the *Landsgemeinden* and in the churches, popular feeling for a holy war for the old confederation and the old faith found fervent expression.

The Sonderbund, however, lacked unity of command.

No clear line had been drawn between the civil and military authority. The war council and the army command stood side by side in an unhappy equality. Again and again the particular interests of individual cantons interfered in the general plan and frustrated any comprehensive unity of plan or action. Constantin Siegwart of Lucerne, who possessed the necessary strength of will and energy in action, realised that he lacked military experience. In vain he applied to Austria for a superior commander. Then the war council elected Johann Ulrich von Salis-Soglio, a native of the Grisons, as commander-in-chief. He was by training and profession an officer, but he lacked the capacity for independent strategy and for vigorous action. None doubted his personal bravery, but that could not make up for his lack of professional skill and of the intuition necessary to a commander. Nor had he the perseverance to overcome all set-backs. He was not the man to remain calm in the midst of the storm.

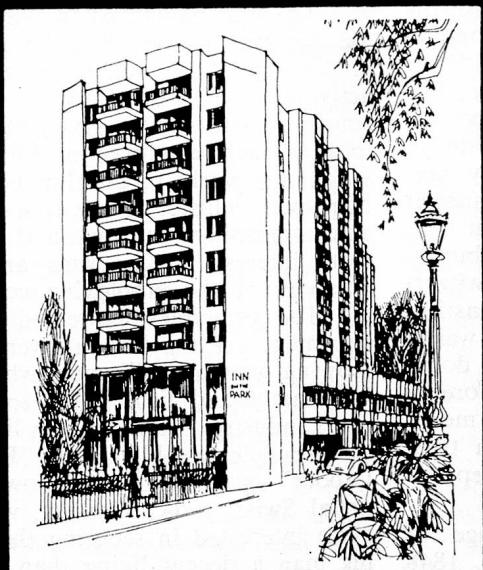
#### Civil war

After a further meeting of the Diet a final conference between the parties led to no agreement. The majority of the cantons, with Neuchatel and Appenzell Ausserrhoden, resolved on 4th November, 1847 to break up the Sonderbund by force of arms. Its fate was sealed very soon. The total forces of the Sonderbund side num-

bered 79,000 men as against the 99,000 men of the Diet. In addition the Sonderbund side was much weaker in trained soldiers. It has indeed caused some surprise that, in view of this numerical and material superiority on the side of the Diet, the Sonderbund should have still imagined victory possible. The Sonderbund, however, recalled that in the past history of Switzerland, great victories had been won against superior numbers, while many hoped that if they held out intervention would come from abroad. And, too, a miracle might happen.

The courage of the Sonderbund militia was of little avail against General Dufour's superior strategy. He first ordered a concentric advance on Fribourg; on 14th November it capitulated to superior numbers without serious resistance. The canton was obliged to dismiss its troops, withdraw from the Sonderbund, and admit a confederate occupation. A new provisional government was set up which expelled the Jesuits.

Some scattered Sonderbund successes in the Ticino and Aargau were powerless to overcome the disastrous impression made by the fall of Fribourg. Dufour immediately ordered a concentric march on Lucerne. In face of this threatening advance, Zug left the Sonderbund and surrendered without a struggle on 21st November. The main engagements took place in very cold weather on 23rd November at Gislikon and Meyerskappel. The Sonderbund had occupied fortified positions there and defended themselves



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bravely, making good use of the terrain. On the confederate side it took the courageous personal intervention of the commander-in-chief before his frightened troops could be led to attack and to victory. At nightfall, the Sonderbund leaders fled with the Jesuits across the lake to Flüelen. On the evening of the following day, Lucerne, besieged on all sides, surrendered, and part of the victorious confederate army entered the town. A few days previously, Siegwart had implored Metternich to arrange for a military occupation of the Ticino: he now sent repeated formal appeals in the name of the war council for armed intervention by Austria. But no foreign help arrived, and Siegwart, with a few friends, escaped across the alps to Milan, where like many others he remained in exile and poverty. Valais was the last canton to lay down its arms; the members of the Sonderbund were obliged to pay the costs of the war and to set up new administrations.

The civil war had lasted twenty-five days. Dufour had manoeuvred rather than fought and thus spared many lives. On the side of the confederates were 78 dead and 260 wounded, on the Sonderbund side, 50 dead and 175 wounded. Dufour won the hearts of the defeated by his repeated appeals to his troops to spare the civil population of the enemy. It does the General the highest honour that he inflicted no fresh wounds on the body of the confederate state with the weapon it had placed in his hands, but healed those which already existed.

#### The attitude of the powers

While the powers were still considering how they would intervene in Switzerland, the Sonderbund had ceased to exist. Although certain governments regarded it with the greatest sympathy as the guardian of the Conservative principle, there were many obstacles in the way of intervention. Metternich had long advocated intervention and was endeavouring to bring about an understanding among the five powers in order to prevent the rise of a powerful Radical republic in Switzerland, but the British cabinet held severely aloof. Palmerston steadily upheld the principle of non-intervention and repeatedly offered his services for peaceful negotiation. He early branded the Sonderbund as illegal and congratulated Ochsenbein on his "well known firmness of character". He openly declared himself opposed to any interference and exerted his great diplomatic powers to frustrate it.

Palmerston's policy was supported by public opinion in England. True, both cabinet and public were at first on the side of the moderate Conservatives in Switzerland because they suspected the Radicals as enemies of Christianity and political extremists. *The Times*, for instance, at first re-

fused to print the Diet's proclamation to the Swiss people, but later sent a special correspondent to Dufour. The *Seven Letters concerning Politics in Switzerland* published by the historian George Grote in the *Spectator* did a great deal to bring about a change in public opinion in England. He sympathised with and understood the confederates and did all he could to win the educated public over to their side.

Siegwart's appeals to the powers for help had grown ever more urgent. Metternich sent money and arms and threatened the frontier cantons with reprisals, while the French Minister promised to bring pressure to bear by means of military demonstrations, but at the critical moment he was disowned by his government. Finally, after long negotiations among the powers, an identical note was sent by them to the Swiss government. By the time this reached Switzerland the war was over and the Sonderbund dissolved; the notes were delivered, but to the great indignation of the other states, without British support. Instead, Palmerston sent Stratford Canning, whose term of office at Berne won him universal respect, with instructions to do all he could in the cause of peace. When he arrived in Berne on 7th December, 1847, Stratford Canning found the war over. He could now advise a course of extreme moderation upon the Radicals so that hostile powers should be given no pretext for reprisals or blockade.

The government of the confederation was now able to inform the powers that an offer of mediation presupposed a state of war which no longer existed; further, this attempt at mediation was at variance with the position of Switzerland in Europe as recognised by treaty and also with the constitution of the confederation. For the last time the eastern powers attempted to frustrate the reform of the confederation, this time by presenting a collective note. The answer of the Diet, drawn up in firm but tactful terms by Jonas Furrer, burgomaster of Zurich, claimed for Switzerland the right to amend her constitution as she thought fit. There was a new tone of self-reliance in the document. Finally, as regards foreign policy, the Sonderbund War meant Switzerland's final release from tutelage and complete national independence.

Shortly after this exchange of notes the European crisis of 1848 broke out. Following the February Revolution in Paris, the Republican party in Neuchatel rose and overthrew the Royalist government by armed force, set up a republic, and thus cut the bond between Neuchatel and the king of Prussia. The powers were too busy with the troubles of their own countries to pursue their plans of intervention in Switzerland and the confederation was left undis-

turbed to establish a firm confederate state in the midst of a distracted Europe.

## COMMENT

### MILESTONE IN LABOUR RELATIONS

A new agreement has been signed between the Association of Swiss Machine Manufacturers, two engineering unions and the Swiss Mercantile Society on an extended form of co-operation between both sides of industry at plant level.

This agreement, concluded on 23rd June last, enhances two previous national agreements and is extremely encouraging for the future of labour relations. One of its main clauses is the setting up of "employee committees" representing both white and blue collar workers in negotiations with management. Their members get days off for special training in their new responsibilities, which they assume in a spirit of interest for the future of their company.

The new employee committees have access to all the information relevant to their new task, much of which may be confidential. They are entitled to discuss conditions of work, advancement, encouragement, technical suggestions, safety, hygiene, pension schemes and bonus payments with management during working hours. They are the spokesmen of all the workers in the plant.

The first paragraph in the text of the agreement says that the purpose of "co-operation" is to extend the activities of the work force beyond the simple execution of a given job so as to help each employee to fulfil himself at his work; to develop his sense of responsibilities, to create a favourable atmosphere at work and to promote interest in the aims and productivity of the employing company.

The principles expressed in this document are the best answer to the growing wave of militancy, which has fortunately had little effect so far in Swiss industry. It also falls in line with the principles established by "Peace of Labour" agreements and follows traditional Swiss trade unionism, which is more interested in securing the working man a decent living than in promoting class warfare.

The most interesting aspect of the document is that it provides for the training of worker representatives for up to a hundred days in four years. This means that these representatives are made aware of economic realities and can therefore be in a position to assume responsibilities. At a time where workers tend to scoff at explanations given to them by management