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COMMENT

AN INCREASINGLY SLUGGISH PEOPLE

Swiss social analysts find the compulsory military training system a useful help in studying the behaviour of youths. Since every able Swiss of twenty and over is bound by the laws of the country to serve as a recruit in our militia army, it is easier to assemble data on their behaviour and thus derive certain trends.

Among the findings thus obtained, specialists have noted steadily declining performances at the recruitment physical test, and a growing number of medical exemptions. This in fact contradicts the steadily improving performance of Swiss athletes. The explanation probably lies in the separation of the young between a bulk who work and enjoy themselves without recourse to sports, and a minority who play soccer rather than look at it only, or who consistently practise other sports. But such tests all indicate that increased standards of living do not promote physical health or better soldiers.

Investigations at recruit schools have also given an insight into the penetration of drugs among youth. About a quarter of young people between 18 and 20 have tried the milder forms of drugs, and up to a fifth of them have "graduated" to the "harder" varieties. Other enquiries show that there is a sharp drop in such habits or experiences at the age of 25. Hashish and marijuana are generally considered as soft drugs, Amphetamine, barbiturates, psychotropic drugs, opiates and the extracts from cocaine are considered by most authorities to lie at a second level of danger, followed by heroin, which is regarded as the worst drug of all since it induces addiction and can destroy the body. Most heroin addicts fail to break their addiction. There are about 600 young people in this case in Switzerland. They cost 12 million francs to keep alive. This sum is at present borne by the Cantons but may be assumed partially by the Confederation within the framework of new drug laws currently under preparation.

In a recent interview, the Head of

the Pharmaceutical Division of the Federal Hygiene Service, Mr. Jean-Pierre Bertschinger, said that the emphasis of legislative work in this field is to stop the inflow of drugs. It is thus more important to strike at pedlars and at the people behind the drug rings rather than at teenage consumers. Mr. Bertschinger expressed the view that penalties for young drug offenders should be reduced but those against traffickers drastically increased.

The controversy on whether or not to legalise marijuana and other drugs whose physical harm has never been proved worse than that of tobacco is naturally topical in Switzerland. The law-makers have to choose between liberalising the sale of such drugs and opening the way to a much larger consumption, or clamping down with the risk of increased crime and delinquence. Berne has however already made its choice and decided to abide by an international convention signed in 1961 pledging its members to prevent the free sale of drugs. Switzerland hasn't so far signed the 1971 Convention regarding the more sophisticated usages such as those of LSD, barbiturates and mescaline. It plans to establish the necessary legislation beforehand.

In the absence of ready figures at hand, it is difficult to say whether this problem is more important in Switzerland than elsewhere. One's impression is that drugs, coupled with a rejection of established standards of living and behaviour, is as much of a problem in Switzerland as, say, Great Britain or France. What is surprising is that the underlying revolt can't have sprung from poverty, unemployment, marxist propaganda and class consciousness because these things had been starkly reduced by the early sixties. It is more likely that the youths who haunted Zurich's Niederdorf and who were the first in Switzerland to attire themselves in the hippy way were powerfully attracted by the example from abroad.

The Swiss are culturally the most outward-looking people of Europe — as attested by the innumerable artists and creators who have gone elsewhere to breath more deeply and the others who have looked towards the border with nostalgia. The origin of the new drug cult

must therefore be partially pinned down on alien cultural influences and on the eagerness of the Swiss to submit to it.

P.M.B.

SWISS EVENTS

NO IMMEDIATE HELP TO THE SWISS PRESS

The Federal Council has shown no hurry to bring help to the Swiss press. A draft bill tabled by an Agrarian national councillor from Zurich, Mr. Ackeret, was sharply reduced in scope by the Government, who saw no cause for applying to this particular case existing provisions on federal aid to threatened economic activities. Mr. Kurt Furgler, head of the Department of Justice and Police, claimed before Parliament that there was no legal basis for State-aid to the Press. The National Council agreed with this view and approved the Government's proposals by a 63 to 57 majority. The proposals call on the Federal Council to submit a draft bill providing for long-term indirect help to the Press.

Mr. Ackeret had pleaded for immediate and important aid to the smaller papers whose precarious situation could put the diversity and independence of the Swiss press in jeopardy.

The Government's lack of apparent concern for the predicament of the Swiss press, characterised by the existence of an enormous number of newspapers (over 400) was attacked by several left-wing and independent national councillors.

PEACE HOPES RISE IN GENEVA

Geneva assumed its traditional role of diplomatic centre once again at the end of December with the opening of Peace Talks on the Middle East.

Scheduled to start on 18th December, the Conference began three days later with a suspense as to who would participate lasting up to the last minute. In the event, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, the United States, the Soviet Union and the United Nations were represented. Syria refused to turn up. Owing to the Arabs insistence at not being seated next to Israel, the tables were displayed in a Hexagon (Syria's row of seats remaining empty) and Israel was seated between the Russian and UN delegations.

The conference got off to a promising start before adjourning on 23rd. Mr. Henry Kissinger, US Secretary of State, appears to have played a prominent role in these positive developments. The Arabs and Israelis