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RELATIONS BETWEEN BRITAIN AND SWITZERLAND

The first part of this fascinating talk, delivered by Monsieur Jean-Jacques Indermuehle to an open meeting of the NSH appeared in last month's issue of the Swiss Observer. *We have great pleasure in offering you the second instalment.*

WGS

An event illustrating the importance of balance of power to Switzerland's independence is the so-called Neuchâtel Affair. The Principality of Neuchâtel, which enjoyed co-citizenship with Berne, Lucerne, Fribourg and Solothurn, had been ruled since 1539 by the ducal family of Orléans-Longueville. When the male line became extinct in 1691, claims were made by the Prince of Conti and the Duchess of Nemours. The Parliament of Paris favoured the Prince of Conti, who was related to Louis XIV. Fearing a French threat to herself and to the independence of Vaud and Geneva, Berne secured local recognition of the claims of the Duchess of Nemours and made preparations to help her defend her rights. When the Duchess died in 1707, new candidates put forward their claims. Among them was Frederick I, who had recently been crowned King of Prussia and who was a nephew of William III of England. His case was supported before the "Neuchâtel Tribunal of the Three Estates" by Great Britain, Holland, Austria and Sweden. Berne pleaded in favour of Frederick, pointing out that he was Protestant, distant and relatively insignificant. King Louis, in face of the four powers' opposition, did not press his support of the Prince of Conti and on 3rd November 1707 Frederick was declared by the Tribunal to be the lawful ruler of the Principality of Neuchâtel.

As French influence tended to grow over Switzerland, the Swiss turned more and more towards England for political and moral guidance. The English love of freedom, their way of thinking and their attachment to nature served as examples to Swiss philosophers, scholars and men of letters. Newton, Locke and Hume had their followers in Switzerland. Edward Gibbon, the founder of modern history, who lived fifteen years in Switzerland and completed "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" in Lausanne, had no direct influence on the study of history in Switzerland. Yet, he took a keen interest in the Confederation's past and even wrote, in French, an "Introduction à l'histoire générale de la République des Suisses". He left it incomplete and had no intention of publishing it.

In literature, the Swiss showed a growing interest in England. They awakened to the beauty and richness of English letters; they read the works of Addison and Steele, of Pope and Dryden, of Milton and Shakespeare. They discovered the English novel in Richardson, Fielding, Goldsmith and Sterne. In Berne, a weekly, the "Teutscher Bernischer Spectateur" was published on the lines of the Spectator.

Simultaneously, foreign travellers in considerable numbers were writing accounts of Switzerland for home consumption. One of the best appeared from a London press: An account of Switzerland written in the year 1714 by Abraham Stanyan. The best known of the Travels in Switzerland was that published in 1789 by the archdeacon William Coxe which had a wide circulation and was much drawn upon by later writers. Slowly too, conditions of travel made it possible for a growing number of tourists to appreciate Swiss scenery. About the middle of the eighteenth century modern alpinism may be said to have started, Mountaineering became that combination of sport, pleasure and personal adventure which made a special appeal to Englishmen. The praises of Swiss nature, Swiss scenery, the simple life of the Swiss peasant, as well as old Swiss customs were sung by English poets. William Tell became a popular figure on the English stage.

The outbreak of the French Revolution interrupted this idyll. As the Revolution moved forward victoriously across the continent, Great Britain gradually stood out as its chief adversary. The conservative island power pitted its strength against the revolutionary continental power and struggled with its ancient rival for command of the seas and of world trade. William Pitt used the military powers of Europe against France, subsidizing them to an extent unprecedented in English history. Unable to defeat the French armies in the field, he tried to foment a counter-revolutionary movement in France, by supporting the royalists. Switzerland was the best place from which to put such plans into action. It was from there that conspiracies could best be planned and secured by armed forces.

Pitt found in Sir William Wickham a diplomat who was fully conversant with conditions on the continent and in Switzerland and who was fitted for the onerous task of organizing opposition to the revolutionary forces. Swiss territory was an excellent observation post from which a first-rate secret service could be set up all over the Continent. Wickham worked hand in hand with royalist agencies in Paris and bribed royalist generals. He introduced counter-revolutionary propaganda into Paris and accumulated war material along the Jura frontier, the point at which the internal and external counter-revolutionary movements met. There, Wickham had a frontier service of his own which allowed his enemies and spies to pass without hindrance. He himself settled at Lausanne in order to be near Lyons, a centre of revolt, and constantly moved from place to place in Switzerland. In this way, England endeavoured to draw Switzerland into her struggle against the Revolution. As the French armies advanced victoriously through southern Germany and northern Italy, the Directoire became more exacting and finally demanded Wickham's expulsion from Switzerland. So, to spare the country, Wickham left of his own accord.

Under Napoleon, the French occupied Switzerland and imposed on her the Act of Mediation. How utterly Switzerland was at the mercy of France became clear when Napoleon decided a blockade of Britain and applied to her too the increased duty on cotton aimed against Britain. At the end of the Napoleonic wars, Switzerland was invaded by the allies, in particular the Austrians who did not intend to respect her neutrality but sought to bring her under their influence. After France's defeat this new threat to her independence was offset by England's attitude. The man who played a major part in the new Switzerland's early days was Britain's envoy to Berne, Stratford Canning. He was a member of the special committee set up by the Congress of Vienna to deal in the first place only with the rectification of the frontiers and internal changes in Switzerland. In its first report, the Committee stated that the continued existence and sovereignty of the nineteen cantons were the foundation on which the political system of Switzerland rested. Stratford Canning was put in charge of drafting the acts of neutrality. Since, however, he did nothing in the time allotted to him, Castlereagh and Capo d'Istria requested Pictet de Rochemont, the Swiss plenipotentiary at the peace negotiations after Napoleon's second defeat, to draft the act himself. The final guarantee of Switzerland's permanent neutrality was sponsored by Britain's recommendation.

England further realized that Swiss neutrality must be an armed power if it

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was to be respected. It was Stratford Canning again who submitted, as early as 1815, a detailed report to the Confederate Commission for military reform, in which he pointed out the necessity of founding a Swiss military academy, a permanent military authority and a national war fund.

The period between 1815 and 1848 witnessed the awakening of the Liberal spirit. Freedom was the word which rang out from everywhere. The cry for personal freedom was heard, with all its consequences such as freedom of the press, religion and occupation. It was followed by demands for political freedom. The French Revolution of July 1830 aroused immense interest in Switzerland because it seemed to herald a new era. But the conservative forces in Europe attempted to suppress the liberal movements some of whose leaders sought asylum in Switzerland. These regugees, secure on Swiss soil, conspired against the outside world and planned armed raids into the neighbouring royalist districts with the object of overthrowing the governments in power. While this was going on, opposition grew among the cantons between radicals who were working for the unification of the Confederation and the conservatives who supported the traditional federal form of government. The situation in Switzerland worried the Austrians and the French who began insisting that in the Vienna Treaty of 1815 they had only guaranteed Switzerland as a federal union. Things were slowly coming to a head with Metternich, the Austrian chancellor, waiting for an opportunity to intervene in order to crush the liberal movement and to reduce the turbulent refugees to silence. The threat to Switzerland's independence became truly serious when the French Premier Guizot brought French foreign policy into line with Austria's and adopted a new and conservative policy in home affairs. Once again England's attitude was decisive and her interests coincided with those of Switzerland. If she had not been concerned in the Swiss situation as part of the central European question, it is more than doubtful whether Switzerland could have resisted this union of her two most powerful neighbours.

England's foreign policy was at that time entirely in the hands of Palmerston. Obviously, it would be over-sentimental to see in Palmerston's support of Switzerland any far-reaching agreement of his political views with those of the Swiss radicals. His attitude was mainly determined by motives of pure interest.England required peace in central Europe if her trade and commerce were to flourish. If Switzerland became a pretext for armed intervention by Austria and France, a great struggle in central Europe might ensue. This danger would most likely vanish if the power of the Confederation in Switzerland were to outgrow all foreign influence. It was only as an independent and inviolable territory that Switzerland could play the part assigned to her of buffer-state between Austria and France. That was the value of Swiss independence and neutrality for Palmerston's policy. During the civil war of November 1847 Palmerston upheld the principle of non-intervention and repeatedly offered his serious and peaceful negotiation. His policy was supported by public opinion in England. The civil war was quickly ended and the conservatives defeated.

As a result of the victory of the radicals, a new constitution was drawn up in 1848. In Palmerston's eyes the federal constitution, as he told a foreign statesman, strengthens central power and, as a consequence, the independence of Switzerland, which is in the interest of peace in Europe.

Another significant episode in Anglo-Swiss relations was the Neuchâtel Affair of 1856. Eight years earlier, a revolution had broken out in the canton of Neuchâtel which, as a consequence, severed all remaining ties with the Prussian monarchy. Frederick William IV had never abandoned his claims to the principality and he intended recapturing it at the earliest opportunity. In the night of 2nd and 3rd September 1856 the royalist party in Neuchâtel tried to overthrow the republican government. Frederick William gathered his armies and threatened to use force to restore the royalists. England had meanwhile consistently reminded Frederick William of the guaranteed neutrality of Switzerland. The Swiss army under General Dufour stood on the northern frontier ready to resist any invasion. In this tense situation and when war between Switzerland and Prussia seemed inevitable, the English cabinet under Palmerston put the Prussian government under heavy diplomatic pressure. England was anxious to prevent any rapprochement between France and Prussia to which the conflict might lead and to avoid any new war which might upset the balance of power on the continent and endanger her trade. At the Paris Conference, where the affair was settled, the English representative stood up for the Swiss. His conduct, according to a member of the conference, was "plus suisse que les Suisses". As in the previous century, it was England's attitude which determined Neuchâtel's future. Then France had given up all idea of annexing Neuchâtel; now the Prussian King definitely gave up all his claims to the former principality.

At about the same time Britain was waging war in Crimea. Although the Swiss Federal Council reminded the cantons of their strict neutrality, the radicals, which meant the overwhelming majority of the Swiss population, nevertheless espoused the cause of England, which is hardly surprising in view of the ideal aims England was pursuing in the war and the friendly attitude she showed in the Neuchâtel affair. Under the very eyes of the Federal Council, English officers illegally recruited 3,300 men for the "British Swiss Legion", which never reached the theatre of war. This was the last time that Swiss mercenaries, who had fought with the British in the Napoleonic wars or in her conquest of India, were to be recruited for service in the British army.

You may be under the impression that relations between Britain and Switzerland were always ideal and friendly, that the two nations' national interests always coincided. Well, not long after the Neuchâtel Affair, England and Switzerland found themselves at cross-purposes in the Savoy question. The Swiss too readily presumed from England's past attitude that they could count on her whatever happened. The treaties of 1815 had neutralized north Savoy and given Switzerland the right to occupy the country in the event of a war between neighbouring powers. The Swiss had, however, drawn far-reaching conclusions from the treaties. They inferred from them something like a right to Savoy. When it was learned that the King of Sardinia intended rewarding Emperor Napoleon for his help to the Italian Independence movement by giving him Savoy, the Swiss made demands on France which had little legal justification. Napoleon, although favourably disposed towards the Swiss at the outset, became irritated. he cleverly played off the unity of Savoy against its dismemberment and in 1860, without first informing Switzerland, signed the annexation of the whole province by France.

Then the storm broke loose in Switzerland. There was talk among the Radicals of a military occupation of neutralized Savoy and they semmed ready to go to war against France. The Swiss Government was in a difficult position. A protest to the European great powers went unheeded. Great Britain, upon whom the new Switzerland had relied in foreign difficulties, now failed her. Palmerston was not prepared to satisfy the Swiss desire for annexation at the cost of friendship with Napoleon. In order to avoid giving annexation of Savoy the appearance of pure seizure without consideration for the wishes of the population, France organized a plebiscite. By a majority, Savoy voted for union with France while retaining the free zones with Geneva. Events passed Switzerland by and France's offer to come to an agreement with Switzerland on the Savoy question with the assistance of the powers was never fulfilled.

The cloud that passed over relations between the two countries, quickly disappeared and ties were further strengthened. Switzerland's official representation in London, a trade agency, was promoted to a Consulate general in 1852 and to a Legation in 1891. It was only then that the representatives of England and Switzerland were set on the same footing.

After the conclusion in 1855 of the treaty of friendship and commerce establishing official economic relations, trade between the two countries developed rapidly. Switzerland bought raw materials and semi-manufactured goods from England and sold manufactured goods to her. England

sought a reduction in Swiss customs duties, without, however, putting Switzerland under any sort of pressure which might have induced her to join the Triple Alliance. In her turn, Switzerland would give in in extreme cases to ensure that England would pursue its policy of free trade. During the customs war between Switzerland and France, the British Minister served as adviser to the Federal Council in economic matters.

England watched attentively Switzerland's developing political and social institutions, "the bewildering mass of reformatory measures now being ventilated", as a report states. The referendum and initiative were looked upon with great interest by many Englishmen. The British Government called several times upon Swiss judges to settle her international disputes overseas. After the Alabama affair in 1872, it was the Delagoa case in 1891-1900. The Court was made up of three judges and their decision was to be of momentous importance to England's future in Southern Africa. Swiss judges were again chosen to settle a conflict between Great Britain and Columbia.

Relations between Great Britain and Switzerland took a turn for the worse at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of this century at a time when Britain was involved in war against the Boers. On the diplomatic level they remained good; on the political level, they went through a crisis. Both press and public opinion in Switzerland were highly critical of Britain. The Boers were re-enacting , in Swiss eyes, the Swiss wars of independence against the Habsburgs. The British Government strove to check this unfriendly attitude by publishing and distributing pamphlets and leaflets about their policy, but to no avail. The official Swiss attitude of course was one of neutrality. The Foreign Office's reaction to the hostility of the Swiss press was one of anger and it even questioned Switzerland's will to remain neutral. At the second peace conference of The Hague in 1907 on arbitration, war on land and at sea, England did not side with Switzerland. On the contrary. Switzerland was considered as falling more and more under the influence of Germany. As opposition between Britain and Germany grew, the British Government became more than ever convinced that the Swiss would forgo their neutrality in the advent of a conflict. However, in July 1914, the British envoy in Berne wrote: "There is I think no question that this country will strictly maintain her neutrality, but any infringement of her frontier will be met with armed forces".

Relations became cordial again but maybe they were not quite as close as they had been in the past. One has the impression that the head of the Swiss Foreign Ministry in the post-war years was more concerned with what was happening in Europe than in the British Empire. His origins, he was a catholic and came from the Tessin, prevented him from understanding the Anglo-Saxon world. His successor in the early forties, too, underestimated the British people's will to resist and to fight Nazi agression. He was annoyed and worried at the outspoken sympathy of the majority of Swiss citizens with the British nation. And yet, as this brief survey has tried to show and as the authorities maybe failed to realize, England had intervened in European wars mainly to preserve the balance of power. Switzerland always had a fundamental interest in this balance being maintained, for it was her main guarantee of independence. Periods when the balance of power in Europe had been overthrown, had always been times of great danger for Switzerland's independence.

On the British side, and particularly during the economic blockade against Germany, there was some lack of concern for a small country struggling to preserve her political independence against heavy odds, rather like a besieged fortress. But then it should be remembered that Britain was throwing all her resources into the war. Nevertheless, her isolation from the outside world and the need to receive food supplies increased Switzerland's economic dependence on Germany.

In spite of the lack of understanding and cooling off of relations during the Second World War, there was still a certain amount of sympathy for Switzerland. I should like to quote a message which Churchill sent to Eden on the eve of the Yalta Conference: "I put this down for record. Of all the neutrals Switzerland has the greatest right to distinction. She has been the sole international force linking the hideously sundered nations and ourselves. What does it matter whether she has been able to give us the commercial advantages we desire or has given too many to the Germans, to keep herself alive? She has been a democratic State, standing for freedom in self-defence among the mountains, and in thought, in spite of race, largely on our side". It was the same Churchill who, after the war, chose to launch his first appeal for continental unity in Zürich.

Furthermore, Switzerland represented British interests in Germany, Italy and later on Japan as well as in various countries occupied by the Germans and the Japanese. She sought to organize, in cooperation with the National Committee of the Red Cross, exchanges of prisoners of war and of civilians and their repatriation. The Swiss held British contribution to European culture in high esteem and praised the efforts she was accomplishing in the war to safeguard human dignity and to defend democratic liberties.

In the post-war period relations returned to normal and officially they have remained confident and friendly since then. Our countries have often worked together, particularly in the field of economic relations, when both founded the European Free Trade Area together with five other countries who did not wish to join the Common Market at the time. Now things have changed and our two countries have gone their separate ways. Britain has become a full member of the EEC, whereas Switzerland has preferred to remain outside. Relations between our two peoples, on the other hand, have not been restored to the level they enjoyed in past centuries. Since the Second World War, the tone in Britain in regard to the Swiss has not always been pleasant and the reason is clear to anyone who was in a position to know about the last war. Like many other Europeans the British believe Switzerland's wealth was acquired as a result of neutrality and freedom from war. There is a note of disappointed love in comments such as the wisecrack of a BBC satirical broadcast that "if Switzerland did not exist, there would be no need to invent it". It is true also that in British eyes the Swiss do not take such remarks with enough sense of humour. Humanitarian assistance given in the post-war years, although taken for granted, was not entirely devoid of the suspicion that it is tainted with business motives and self-interest. For their part, the Swiss, feeling rather superior because of a long period of social peace and economic well-being, tend to be rather critical of British politics and society.

Yet, in spite of the gnomes of Zürich, in spite of criticism about Swiss neutrality, British-Swiss relations are confident and without problems.

• *Concluded*

Letter to the Editor

Sir,

The May edition of the Swiss Observer *included a short article "First Ever Loss By Railways" (page 25), in which it was stated that rail fares were increased in Switzerland last year by almost 15 per cent.*

We should like to point out that since 1st February, 1974 there has been no *increase in rail fares in our country. An original proposal by the Swiss Federal Railways to increase fares by 9–12 per cent on 1st November, 1975 was ruled out by the Swiss Government. This decision, together with the freezing of hotel and restaurant prices for 1976, was an important contribution to fight inflation. Switzerland now has the lowest rate of inflation amongst the OECD countries.*

The Europen recession hit Swiss Federal Railways hard in 1975. Reduced passenger and freight traffic in 1975 resulted in the Swiss Federal Railways making a loss of Sw.Fr. 37.6 million for the year. This follows a profit of Sw.Fr. 288.4 million for the previous year.

Editor's note – we apologise for the inaccuracy in the original report.