

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: - (1977)
Heft: 1735

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Download PDF: 10.12.2025

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

The Swiss Observer

Published Monthly at
63/67 TABERNACLE STREET
LONDON EC2A 4AH
Tel: 01-253 2321
Telegrams: Paperwyse London

EDITOR: George Sommer
Editor's telephone: 01-892 5920

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Switzerland

Is a small country condemned by its very smallness not to know greatness?

C.-F. Ramuz: Besoin de grandeur

Switzerland is situated at the heart of Europe

Its climate is influenced by the ocean from the west, by the continental land mass from the east. Arctic air flows to it from the north, warm and moist air from the south. A typical wind is a dry, warm katabatic wind known as the *föhn*. It blows down the Alpine valleys from time to time, putting the Swiss out of humour.

There is no all-Swiss climate. The topographical relief of the country is too varied to permit of such a thing. There are three main divisions: the Alps, the Swiss Plateau, the Jura. The Alps are formed of masses of granite and gneiss, of crystalline massifs and limestone, the Swiss Plateau of molasse strata, the Jura of chalk. *«The Swiss are proud to have made such fine mountains»* says Ludwig Hohl, a writer living in Geneva.

The Swiss work within narrow confines

One quarter of the country consists of snow-covered mountains, ice, rock, scree. Only one half is arable, comprising the Swiss Plateau, parts of the Jura and the river valleys in the foothills. This is where Swiss everyday life chiefly takes place. Geology decides the economy. There are 153 inhabitants to each square kilometre (396 per square mile), so that the population is dense. Geographically speaking, Switzerland is a rather cramped country and is becoming more so as buildings

advance. Statisticians estimate that in the last few years 20 to 30 square metres of ground have been built upon every minute.

Steppeland grasses grow in Switzerland

Not everywhere, but in the dry Canton of the Valais, where the geographer would designate some areas as rocky steppe. Mosses and lichens found in polar regions also grow in Switzerland, and palms and mimosas from the Mediterranean. The forests consist of coniferous and deciduous trees, pines, firs, larches, beeches and chestnuts. The Arctic and the subtropics meet. In the Jura there are «lakes» of cold air at Siberian temperatures, in the southern Alpine valleys there are islands of very low rainfall. In a city such as Zurich the temperature rises to 30 degrees Celsius (86° F) in the shade on summer days, and in winter it has been known to drop to -25 degrees Celsius (-13° F). In winter the lowlands are full of cold air and a high mist shuts them off from the sky. Above this mist the weather is bright and warm and attracts Swiss and foreign holidaymakers. South of the Alps more rain falls than to the north, but it falls less frequently. The western plateau is on the dry side, as it lies in the rain shadow of the chains of the Jura. Here most grain is grown, but not enough for the country to live on.

«Le Milieu du Monde»

The continental watershed runs through Switzerland. It extends from north-east Russia to the Pyrenees. There were once plans to construct a waterway between the North Sea and the Mediterranean. All that has remained of