

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: - (1980)
Heft: 1770

Artikel: The land where time is catching up...
Autor: James, Brian
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689094>

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](#)

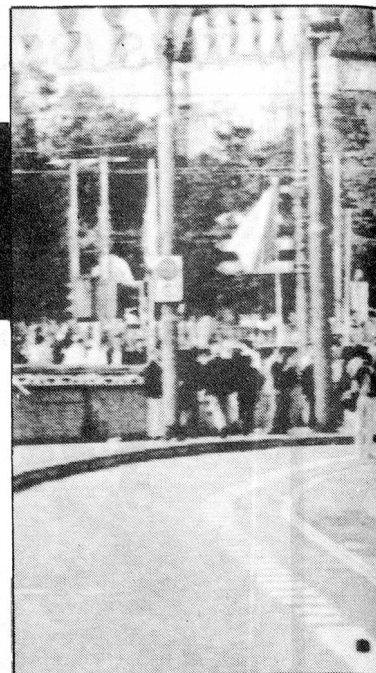
Terms of use

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: 18.01.2026

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

How did it all start — and why? Brian James of the Daily Mail and distinguished Swiss journalist Gottfried Keller consider the youthful violence in Zurich.



The land where time is catching up . .

EVERY parent who has ever stood open-mouthed to hear a teenager screaming "Why don't you ever, ever listen?" before slamming out into the night, will know how the city of Zurich has been feeling.

Two more nights of rioting in the streets, bringing the total of arrests to more than 1,000, the numbers hurt to 50 and cost of smashed storefronts to £250,000 have left these stolid Swiss looking upon their young in a fascinated horror.

Civil disorder in Switzerland? It seems as absurd as if the city fathers had been set upon by flocks of cuckoos from those appalling clocks.

Switzerland, surely, is about fondue and banks, yodelling and numbered accounts.

While the rest of Europe has been ravaged by wars and revolutions Switzerland has stood in the centre as slim, prim and uninvolved in the change around her as a pea-stick.

It is probably the thing we envied most about the Swiss. Their peace. The German-Swiss phrase for law and order translates to calm and order. For years they have lived by its letter.

Swiss are made of three races: German, Swiss and French. Yet they have no racial problems. They have three languages, and yet no one has ever needed to threaten to fast-until-death to keep each of them alive. They have two firm, vigorous religions and yet they lack, thank heaven, recent martyrs.

The Swiss seem to have more banks than anywhere else in the world and fewer bank robbers. They have the homes of the great insurance companies, and perhaps fewest claims — burglaries are few, vandalism almost unknown.

They have cities where you walk knowing you will not need to run from muggers, nor trip on unmade pavements, nor be offended by litter.

They have prosperity, no

unemployment to speak of, and though inflation of late has climbed steeply the Swiss solution has always been then let's work a little harder, earn a little more.

Switzerland is not a paradise, of course, despite scenery that brings millions flocking even when its weather is at its worst. But still a land-locked island of sane, sensible people free to make a comfortable way in the world.

And a place certainly, to bring up children who will be well-fed, well-educated, perfectly equipped to take over the businesses and trained to respect and sustain this belief in 'calm and order'.

Except, suddenly, thousands of those children have taken to the Zurich streets, pelting the police and battering and burning property.

And suddenly the burghers of Zurich are talking, quite seriously, of calling in the troops, warning of soon seeing 'dead on the streets' and fear, openly, the coming of 'international terrorism'.

Most frequently of all, they ask 'why?' The Education Minister for the Zurich Canton, Alfred Gilgen, has blamed 'anarchist trouble-makers out to destroy the system'.

Is the answer perhaps nearer this . . . that the Swiss are suffering from too much calm, too long a period of peace, too settled an economy, too much prosperity?

That they have given their kids

By Brian James

all they could ever want . . . except a challenge?

That answer makes a lot of sense after you walk the streets where it's happening. There is little outward sign of turmoil. The Swiss are efficient, and they were measuring for new windows almost before the last glass in the Bahnhofstrasse stopped tinkling.

But the signs are there in the way people leap up from pavement cafes at the siren of an approaching ambulance — peering up the road as though expecting Cossacks. They are there in the police spotter plane making slow circles 200ft. above the streets behind the central station.

At the centre of those circles is a disused, decayed, graffiti-emblazoned factory. This is the Jugendhaus — 'youth house'. Or it was until 5am the other Thursday when the police charged in, shut the place down and precipitated another week-end of street violence.

Certainly these youngsters seem to have a grievance. It's about the self-regulating 'commune', arts, crafts, and music centre for the 'alternative culture' they have been promised since 1953.

Three times the city has given them somewhere, a disused civil defence bunker, a warehouse,

and recently, the Jugendhaus. Three times they have taken the premises away. Twice, because it made prudent financial sense to put the buildings to other use, the last time because the police said the centre was a haunt of criminals and drug pushers.

The police say they found weapons. The young say the 'weapons' were one air-gun and kitchen knives from the centre's kitchen.

The students' version is partially supported by Peter Furst, a young Zurich journalist who gained the confidence of those in the Jugendhaus and spent days inside.

"Yes, I saw people taking drugs. I talked to runaways from youth prison. But the sensible ones were beginning to get control.

"They formed groups that provided a 24-hour basic medical service . . . to help alcoholics . . . to put kids in touch with parents. That sort of thing. They even started to get 'heavy' with anyone dealing in drugs".

The Swiss suspect all change. Peter Furst: "You hold a parade here about ecology, or pollution, or even wildlife . . . and people come out of the pavement cafes to shout 'Go home to Moscow'.

"So you can imagine how they are reacting to this. The Swiss know they have an image, that this is a place where the world can leave its money, no risks, no noise . . . just calm and order.

"Anything that threatens that



Police water cannon on the Limmatquai

image is bad for business".

Which is why the Swiss authorities have begun 'leaning' on TV to give 'proper' coverage of the riots. And why a leading newspaper held a meeting of all staff to inform them that Zurich stores and finance houses were threatening to withdraw advertising if too much 'sympathy' was shown to the rioters.

Yesterday the trial began in Zurich of Baader-Meinhof gangster Rolf Wagner, behind a cordon of machine guns.

Zurich scarcely needed this reminder of the spectre that haunts them.

Furst said: "Ask me how many militant brick-throwers and I say 200. Ask me how many more will come to the streets and shout... maybe 10,000. But ask me how many people feel as they do... frustrated by a society that thinks only of making money, and I tell you it's fifty thousand. Or maybe ten times that".

That is the real fear, that this crass dispute over a piece of decayed Zurich real estate will escalate into a national youth upheaval just when the Swiss were thanking their gods they had gone unscathed through the decades that had brought savage student disorder from Japan to France, Holland to Italy, Scandinavia to the US.

It would be a savage and ironic price to pay simply for not listening.

ZÜRICH'S Bahnhofstrasse, the street leading from the main railway station to the shores of the lake, has long been famous for the beauty and elegance of its shop-window displays. It has, rightly or wrongly, often been called the most beautiful shopping street in Europe.

Today however, the Bahnhofstrasse and the neighbouring Limmatquai are a sad sight. Dozens of shop windows are boarded up and shuttered, and many of them look like so many London shops looked after an air blitz during the last war.

During the last two months or so Zürich has been the scene of unrest, destruction, looting and repeatedly of fierce fighting between groups of young hooligans and the police.

The latter have been using water hoses, tear gas and rubber bullets, and the former have usually started their demonstrations by smashing shop windows and car windscreens, followed by emptying rubbish bins into the road and setting the contents alight with so-called Molotov cocktails.

The mess thus created, as well as the smell, is hard to describe. On top of the actual damage done, practically all the traffic in and around the affected districts came to a complete standstill.

So far the damage done during the last two months by destruction and by looting of extremely valuable goods runs into millions of francs. One does not, at the moment of writing, see how all this is going to end. But it is a sad fact that no one can safely go into downtown Zürich any more on a

Wild hordes on the Bahnhofstrasse

By Gottfried Keller

Saturday evening without the risk of being caught up in one of those street battles.

It all started by a group of youngsters — hippies, outcasts, drug addicts and others — protesting against a delay on the part of the authorities in handing over to them a nearly derelict house as an "Autonomous Youth Centre".

When the town council finally agreed to hand over the house, on condition that a political party should act as the responsible supervising authority — a condition which the Social Democratic Party accepted — the youngsters escalated their demands, this time by asking for a very substantial sum of money to restore and run the house.

Again the town council gave way and voted a credit of Sfr. 140,000, but the next move on the part of the youngsters was to demand double this sum.

The council thereupon started to blow hot and cold, occasionally instructing the police not to interfere with any demonstration and then again instructing them to stop demonstrations with "all the means at

their disposal". The council has obviously lost its nerve and does not know any more what to do next.

Now recently the police, acting on information received, raided the Youth Centre at dawn and arrested, provisionally for identification, some 40 youngsters, 14 of whom were kept because arrest warrants were in force against them.

In the centre the police found drugs, weapons and ammunition, as well as stolen and looted goods. On the orders of the town council the centre is now closed, against which decision the youngsters once again decided to demonstrate.

While their intention to demonstrate is by some people considered as a more or less legitimate means of protesting against delaying actions on the part of the authorities, it is a sad fact that hundreds of youngsters have joined in the last (the so far last) street battle out of sheer lust to destroy something.

It goes without saying that the public is deeply worried and there has even been talk of the necessity of forming a kind of citizens defence corps against Zürich's wild hordes.

● Gottfried Keller's monthly Letter from Switzerland will be resumed in the next Swiss Observer.