

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: - (1984)
Heft: 1814

Artikel: ...we must not turn our back on the unfortunate
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689033>

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Gloom mongers say: 'The boat is full.' But . . .

A LIBERAL policy towards refugees is part of Switzerland's humanitarian tradition. Over the centuries, Switzerland has benefited from the many fresh impulses that fugitives from other countries have provided.

Today, just as in World War II, gloom-mongers are declaring that "The boat is full". But if Switzerland is to remain a standard-bearer of neutrality and solidarity, it must not turn its back on these unfortunates.

The Swiss Red Cross and other relief organisations need continuing and growing support.

“One of the most precious sovereign rights is the right to grant asylum. From time immemorial we have opened our doors to political refugees with the utmost liberality, usually not out of sympathy with their character of teachings, but on humanitarian grounds. This has frequently caused us problems, and since 1815 it has been almost the only issue over which we have had repeated trouble with our neighbours. However, we have always held fast to this sovereign right, and we intend to do so in the future.”

This resounding declaration of intent by Swiss Federal Councillor Numa Droz, addressing the National Council on March 20 1888, was made after a period in which Switzerland had come under particularly heavy pressure from the surrounding monarchies in connection with the political activities of refugees to whom it had granted asylum.

Let us look at some of the historical milestones in Switzerland's exercise of this "precious sovereign right".

Especially during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation periods of the 16th and 17th centuries, the Protestant areas of Switzerland (Basle, Geneva, Berne and Zurich) offered refuge to large numbers of Huguenots, Waldenses and Locarnese.

In addition to very substantial aid from private sources, some Swiss cantons (there were then only eight) were at times spending

up to a fifth of their revenues on refugee relief, and it is even said that special taxes were levied for this purpose.

In proportion to Switzerland's small population at that time, the number of refugees (some 160,000 Huguenots are reckoned to have moved either into or through Switzerland) must have represented a heavy burden.

In the past Switzerland even received – and resisted – outright military threats from neighbouring big powers on account of its protection of foreign fugitives.

In 1837, for example, it nearly found itself at war with France over the granting of asylum to Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, the later Emperor Napoleon III.

However Switzerland certainly had no cause to regret the sacrifices it made. Fugitives from abroad provided fresh impulses in commerce, science, the arts and industry.

Many a famous Swiss was born of a refugee family. And at the time of the "Neuchâtel Deal" and the preparations for the first Geneva Convention of 1864, Switzerland was very glad to enjoy the special favour of Napoleon III.

What the Federal Council's declaration of 1888 failed to mention, however, is that Switzerland's treatment of individual refugees was by no means always as generous as the official line implied.

Not infrequently considerable restrictions were placed on the sort of work that refugees could engage in, and if their numbers were swelled by further inflows or high birth rates they were often encouraged to look around for a permanent abode elsewhere.

There were also periodical outbreaks of friction with the native population, who accused the newcomers of lack of adaptability, excessive political activism or even disregard of the law. To that extent, therefore, the present situation in this country regarding refugees and asylum-seekers is nothing new.

In the past, just as today, each new wave of refugees was viewed

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By Kurt Bolliger, President of the Swiss Red Cross

by the people of the time as a totally new phenomenon. It was never easy to take an objective view and put the problem in its proper perspective.

Government policy very frequently had to bow to public attitudes or reasons of state, but the relief organisations, notably the Red Cross, consistently championed a humanitarian standpoint.

In August 1949 the International Red Cross managed to secure the acceptance by a diplomatic conference of four new conventions designed to take account of the bitter experiences of World War II regarding the lack of legal protection for civilians and refugees.

Let us look briefly at the development of Switzerland's refugee policy over the last fifty years.

During World War II, Switzerland, completely encircled for several years by the Axis powers, was confronted with an influx of refugees in numbers that had never been anticipated.

Moreover, the average length of stay of those who arrived was inevitably much longer than had usually been the case in the past.

From as early as 1942, when civilian refugees numbered about 12,000 (approximately 0.36 per cent of the country's population at,

that time), there were increasingly loud calls of "The boat is full!"

Against the background of racial persecution in Germany, Italy and the occupied countries, which culminated in the policy of physical extermination of the Jews (though this was not clearly realised in Switzerland until towards the end of the war), the authorities were faced with some extremely difficult decisions, and their actions at that time have since been sharply criticised in the report of Prof. C. Ludwig (1955) as well as in many other publications and radio and television programmes.

In particular a decree was issued in 1942 which stated that "refugees for racial reasons only, for example Jews, are not to be regarded as political refugees" is now considered to have been a death sentence for thousands.

When the war ended in mid-1945 Switzerland was sheltering some 115,000 military and civilian fugitives. During the course of hostilities altogether about 300,000 people had taken refuge in Switzerland for longer or shorter periods.

Since then apart from the "normal flow", Switzerland has had two big waves of refugees to cope with.

After the collapse of the Hungarian Revolt in 1956 about

14,000 Hungarians came to this country. Some moved on to permanent places of asylum elsewhere, but most stayed.

Although at that time only 11 years had passed since the end of World War II, some very tricky situations arose, partly because the Red Cross was at times overstretched, and partly because the relief personnel had no experience of the sort of tasks involved.

However, as the refugees were from a European country no major problems occurred. The same was the case in 1968, when some 12,000 Czechs and Slovaks fled to Switzerland via Austria after the crushing of the 'Prague Spring'.

The people of Switzerland reacted to the tragic events surrounding these mass exoduses with outrage and an unprecedented upsurge of solidarity.

Everyone wanted to help. Moreover, the economy was booming, and extra labour was therefore welcome.

The experience gained in these emergencies provided a basis for Switzerland's new Asylum Act of October 5 1979, which entered into force on January 1 1981.

The provisions of this new law were based on the assumption that new applications would run at about 1,000 a year – a number which, it was considered, could be processed with reasonable dispatch by the available staff (there was already a ceiling on the personnel complement of the responsible government office).

Unfortunately from 1979 onwards the number of asylum-seekers grew apace. In 1983 some 8,000 new applications were filed.

Moreover, unlike the refugees of the past, who had usually been to some extent familiar with the living conditions, climate and customs of this country, this new inflow consisted mostly of people from Africa, Asia and Central and South America, together with members of ethnic minorities – for example Tamils from Sri Lanka – who suddenly appeared in grow-

ing numbers in the Berne region.

Among the contingents that have been admitted through legitimate channels are approximately 10,000 refugees from South East Asia ('boat people' and others) and the 2,000 or so Poles who have sought refuge here since 1981.

At the end of 1983 the total numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers in Switzerland was in the region of 44,000. This represents about 4.5 per cent of all foreigners living in Switzerland and 0.6 per cent of the total resident population.

Although these numbers certainly cannot be regarded as threateningly large, the relief organisations – notably the Red Cross – are encountering increasing difficulties in arranging accommodation and employment for refugees in this country.

Donations from the public also seem to be on the decline – a consequence of the economic recession in some industrial sectors and regions.

Even members of the generation which back in the 1950s and 1960s was so deeply critical of the lack of humanity shown to the victims of World War II are now complaining that "More is done for the refugees than for us".

In various recent cantonal and national ballots appeals to the "full boat" attitude have evidently paid off. Officials at all levels who are involved in the decisions on asylum applications are not to be envied.

Increasingly they find themselves caught in the growing conflict between the expectations of the refugees and the demands of militant campaigners against what is claimed to be an excessive foreign presence.

With the backlog of applications now running into thousands, the personnel complement of the responsible federal department is clearly inadequate.

For the next two years the Federal Parliament has authorised 72 additional staff (less than half the number requested by the Federal Government).

Parliament has also approved by large majorities a revision of the barely three-year-old Asylum Act.

The new provisions are aimed at speeding up the handling of applications. It is understandable that some of the relief organisations see this streamlining as a move that will weaken refugees' legal position.

Others, however, believe that shorter waiting times mean a more humane treatment of applicants.

Recent unfortunate incidents caused by lower-echelon officials who were evidently acting under the pressure of increasing public hostility towards foreigners are highly regrettable and must not be allowed to happen again if Switzerland's reputation as a generous provider of asylum is to be preserved.

We must all bear in mind the true proportions of the problem and realise that the present number of refugees in Switzerland is in no way a threat to jobs, housing or security in this country.

It needs to be pointed out again and again that there are now over 10 million refugees in the world and probably an equal number who have been displaced within their own countries.

A large number of these people have already been living for long periods in refugee camps, often under very difficult conditions.

Pakistan, for example, is at

present providing refuge for almost 3 million freedom-loving Afghans, who, with their sheep and goats, have caused erosion problems over wide stretches of the host country, with possibly catastrophic consequences in the long term.

Refugees on the march or in camps are increasingly liable to be the target of violent assaults or to be used as hostages, as for example in the Lebanon, Lesotho, Central America and along the Thai border.

Particularly vulnerable are the Vietnamese and Cambodian "boat people" in the pirate-infested South China Sea.

Switzerland's Ambassador Schnyder, former United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, has recently submitted a disturbing report on this subject to the United Nations.

More and more, as in the Lebanon for example, refugee camps are being misused as military bases, which means that their residents become hostages. This too is a clear violation of international law.

In the name of neutrality and solidarity, it is our moral duty to make an appropriate contribution towards the provision of relief for these unfortunates.

The mistakes of the 1940s, epitomised in the inglorious slogan "The boat is full", must not be repeated.

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