

News at random

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THE SWISS OBSERVER extends Christmas Greetings to all its friends and wishes to express confidence that 1945 will see the beginning of a new era of happiness for all.



NEWS AT RANDOM

Federal

The Federal loan of 500 million francs offered for public subscription at the beginning of last month brought in applications for approximately 678 million which will probably be retained in its total by the finance department. The result is considered very satisfactory in view of the fact that the budget for 1945 of the Confederation anticipates a deficit of 173 million francs.

The central committee of the Swiss Socialist party met at Zürich to consider the political outlook both at home and abroad created by the Russian attitude. It recorded its satisfaction at the resignation of M. Pilet-Golaz who had promptly reacted to the failure of his diplomatic activity though the non-success was largely assisted by his colleagues who were unable to grasp the situation. The committee further expressed the opinion that it was essential to modify the existing methods of appointing the personnel of our diplomatic and consular service. The Socialist party in conformity with a resolution passed in autumn 1943 will insist on occupying a second seat in the Federal Council. It was also decided to launch an immediate initiative demand insisting on the repeal of certain restrictions prohibiting activities by extreme left parties and on the full return of the constitutional personal liberty.

The managing committee of the Swiss Democratic party also met to review the position stating that the resignation of our foreign minister would clarify the principles which will guide our national policy in future. It demanded the immediate restitution of the constitutional personal liberties and thus taking account of the political maturity of the Swiss people. The party favours an enlarged Federal Council of nine members which would give a better representation and increase the confidence of the people.

A Communist delegation which called on the Federal authorities at Berne to sustain the demand for the removal of the ban on the Communist party and its propaganda was refused admission.

Socialists and other left wing interests are reported to be campaigning for the resignation of Federal Councillor von Steiger who is accused of pro-Nazi tendencies.

National Councillor Robert Grimm, the well-known Socialist leader from Berne, has been elected vice-president of the National Council with a notable majority.

During the discussion of the 1945 budget in the National Council, Federal Councillor Nobs, chief of the Finance Department, stated during the coming year that an end to hostilities in Europe may be anticipated but not a return to normal conditions. Strict economies were still on the order of the day for all ministries, the more so as the deficit on the ordinary budget alone was likely to reach 174 million francs.

According to the Swiss radio on December 4th, the President of the National Council has resigned following the Russian refusal to resume diplomatic relations. It seems to us a very strange expedient, as the President of our Lower House fulfils practically the same functions as the Speaker of the House of Commons, who simply directs the proceedings. In the place of Dr. Paul Gysler, who represented Zürich, the Council elected as its President National Councillor Dr. Pierre Aebi, a Conservative Catholic from Fribourg.

In the National Council the Zürich Democrat, Schmid-Ruedin justified a postulate that the necessary dispositions should be decreed enabling electors to record their votes where they happen to stay (like soldiers) instead of at their legal domicile.

CITY SWISS CLUB.

Messieurs les Membres sont avisés que

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L'invité d'honneur du club The Rt. Hon. Sir William Jowitt, P.C., K.C., nous parlera au sujet du "National Insurance".

Les membres sont priés de s'inscrire par écrit pas plus tard que le 8 janvier auprès de M. P. A. Moehr, Hon. Secr., Imperial House, Kingsway, W.C.2. Prière de s'abstenir de téléphoner.

LE COMITE.

An instructive debate occupied the National Council on December 12th, when Foreign Affairs came under review. An interpellation by the Berne Socialist, Ernst Reinhard, asked for particulars as to the measure taken to normalise relations with Russia. After a short exposé the speaker criticised the incompetence of the persons and means employed in that direction. The Swiss working class had stood behind the Government in the most difficult times and had come to the conclusion that a more fortunate policy might have been adopted, thus avoiding serious mistakes. To-day's situation had developed very much in favour of the Soviet Union, which represented not alone Russia, but the Baltic States, Rumania, Bulgaria and a part of Hungary. What is therefore our position if the largest European power is ignoring us? The accusation by Russia of being pro-Fascist is unjustified; at the time of our utmost danger, when we were completely encircled by the axis powers we had not sold our honour and had remained steadfast. In terminating, Reinhard insisted that the situation called for a complete change in our methods, a renewal of our diplomatic personnel and a courageous and united policy.

The Radical member for Zürich, Gut, followed with a demand that our foreign policy should be fixed within wide and liberal lines. He went over the grounds on which our integral neutrality was based—a neutrality which we were bound to follow even to-day and which unfortunately was not generally appreciated abroad. The policy of the Federal Council had always been sanctioned by the parliamentary commissions, and if mistakes had been perpetrated all the members were

equally culpable. It was unjust to talk of a secret policy. Our present isolation was the consequence of our neutrality. Councillor Gut thought that it was perhaps expedient to improve direct relations between Government and Parliament, and to keep public opinion better informed. He concluded by asserting that the small States to-day must preserve stability, character and reserve, and that a policy of weakness towards Russia was utterly false. The reply of the Federal Council to the Soviet was as just as the whole foregoing policy during the war, and we had every reason to express our gratitude to the Federal Council and particularly to M. Pilet-Golaz.

M. Pilet-Golaz, in replying to these two interpellations, began by saying that for some time it had been his earnest desire to speak frankly in this house on our international situation and outlook, all the more as circumstances did no longer impose a strict reserve. He continued that already in March last the Federal Council was disposed to re-open diplomatic relations with Russia, and efforts to this end were assiduously engaged. Himself a partisan of the necessity of normalising our relations with Russia, if only for the reason of entertaining friendly ties with all countries as neutrals, he had during the last few years watched every occasion which would give him an opening for the first step. He referred to our trade agreement of 1941, adding that since then our legations abroad had instructions not to miss any contact with representatives of Russia. It was in London that the first soundings were really undertaken, because several high Russian diplomats were there available, and because the British capital was accessible. M. Rezzonico, Counsellor of Legation, was entrusted with this mission; his first approach, far from being discouraging, induced us to pursue the negotiations further. The party, who by his training and former experience, seemed to be the most commendable for the completion of this task was M. Paul Ruegger, the new Swiss Minister, whom we were going to send to London. In the meantime military developments had created a new problem in countries subsequently occupied by the Soviets; we were very much disposed to retain our Legations and Consulates in Finland, Rumania and Bulgaria, which to our satisfaction were not disturbed. As regards the exchange of notes and the accusation contained in the final Russian memorandum of November 1st, H. Pilet-Golaz refutes the allegation as entirely untenable.

On December 14th our two houses of Parliament met in joint session under the presidency of National Councillor Pierre Aebi to elect some of the chief magistrates for the coming year. The president offered in eulogistic terms the thanks of the country to M. Pilet-Golaz for the great services he had rendered to our country expressing the hope that they may be retained in another sphere of activity. The assembly then proceeded to the election of his successor, and amongst the four candidates Professor Max Petitpierre emerged successful with 122 votes, the absolute majority being 114. The new Federal Councillor is 45, a professor of law at Neuchâtel University, and belongs to the radical democratic party. The election of the President of the Confederation was practically a free vote, the Vice-President having been Federal Councillor Pilet-Golaz; the choice fell on Federal Councillor Ed. von Steiger (Justice and Police) with a record vote of 192, and Federal Councillor M. Kobelt, the civil chief of our

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army, found favour as Vice-President, with 169 votes. Federal Councillor Pilet-Golaz was the eldest member of our Cabinet, having been elected as far back as 1928.

Persistent copious rain has been responsible for over-flowing of rivers, particularly in the western part of our country. At Sion and other districts of the Valais the fire-brigades and all able-bodied men were at times on picket as the level of the Rhône had risen considerably. L'Arve, near Carouge, has left its bed inundating gardens, cellars and the boulevard Carl Vogt. The rain has melted accumulations of snow threatening Aigle in particular. The road and railway line to the Diablerets have been cut by severe snow drifts. At several places the Montrenx-Oberland line has been badly damaged. Along the Jura, particularly the Val de Travers near Fleurier is completely submerged, and on many sectors the good old steam locomotive has had to resuscitate electric traction. The waters of the Aare have invaded the low-lying districts of Berne, the normal level of 2,7 metres having risen to 4,2 metres.

The National Council has unanimously approved a Government Bill providing for a contribution up to 100,000,000 francs towards the relief of war-stricken peoples. Apart from that contribution our people will be asked to subscribe another 100,000,000 francs for war victims.

Cantonal

Dr. med. Franz Riedweg, of Lucerne, and of German origin has been deprived of his Swiss nationality together with his wife and children; it was established that he was in charge of a German S.S. formation. Before his naturalisation he was for some time private secretary to his father-in-law a noted German field-marshal. Dr. Riedweg is known to be an intimate friend of the former Federal Councillor (and President of the Confederation) Musy.

At Fribourg the local guns fired twenty-five rounds in honour of National Councillor Pierre Aebi, the first Fribourgeois to be President of the National Council; the traditional banquet with the usual orations further commemorated the rare occasion.

As part of the festivities in connection with the 500th anniversary of the Battle of St. Jakob a/B. the Basle University has conferred the honorary degree of doctor on Federal President Stampfli and General Guisan. It is not known whether their ancestors have played a memorable part in this historic battle, but the university authorities were anxious to pay their respects to the two distinguished recipients for the great services rendered to our country during these last few years.

In the elections for the new local council in Langenthal the socialists gained four seats.

A complete change was the result of the cantonal elections for the communal council of Schaffhausen, when the Socialists, by increasing their mandates from 20 to 29 obtained control of the council of 50. All the other parties had to shed followers.

At the elections for the Grosse Rat in Schaffhausen the Socialists also scored a decided victory though they do not rule the Council. The 80 seats are distributed

as follows: Socialists 30 (21 before), Farmers 28 (33), Liberals 14 (17), Catholics 3 (1), and five belonging to minor parties.

The forest fires which took place towards the end of August last year at the Calanda, near Chur, are now definitely stated to have been caused by military firing practice. Of the 700 ha of forest, 480 were affected of which 328 were totally destroyed. The loss of wood is calculated to be in the neighbourhood of 50,000 cubic meter. The necessary re-forestation will take between 20 and 30 years, and for the Calanda to regain its previous beautiful landscape at least a century will have to pass. The liability for the damage has been accepted by the Confederation.

Damage to the tune of about half-a-million francs was caused by a fire which completely destroyed a paper manufactory at Emishofen, near Kreuzlingen; the fire brigade at Konstanz sent two motor pumps across the Rhine bridge to assist in fighting the conflagration.

At Bulle three local butchers were arrested at the instance of Federal inspectors on a charge of clandestine slaughtering. The populace violently protesting followed the procession to the prefecture; their threats were sufficiently explicit to force the inspectors to release the three captives.

The renewal of an expired passport brought to light suspicious practices at the civil registry of Casima. So far one particular misdemeanour has been established and traced back to the year 1934. As a result three officials acting at that time have been arrested; they are: Alfredo Bossi, the then registrar at

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Casima, Pietro Mercionni, a notary in Ascona and former Councillor Isidore Antognini of Chiasso. Two German nationals had paid Frs. 20,000 to the notary Morcionni — who is now being sued by them — for certificates of origin (Heimatscheine) of Casima. They obtained the documents in good faith, in fact after their receipt they motored up the Muggio valley to inspect, and become acquainted with their newly acquired birth-place and to present their compliments to the Sindaco and the registrar. However, the two functionaries were "out of town". On the strength of these certificates which showed the forged control signatures of the cantonal registry the holders were issued the original passports.

The treasury of the canton Ticino has submitted for public subscription a five million franc loan bearing $3\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. interest which was heavily over-subscribed.

A revision of the method by which income tax in Geneva is assessed will increase the revenue from this source by about two million francs annually. Incomes from Frs. 4,000 to Frs. 30,000 are affected; from the latter amount upwards the tax becomes stable at 12 per cent. instead of the existing $10\frac{1}{2}$ per cent.

The road between Neuchâtel and Serrieres was temporarily closed to traffic, the waters from the lake having flooded a large sector.

Army

A Swiss reconnoitring party busy near a lively sector of the frontier found itself suddenly in the fighting line with the result that Captain Julien Schlatter, aged 48, was fatally shot in the lung.

During a trial flight, Lt. Anton Roth, aged 29, from Zürich, crashed to death in the Bedretto valley.

Peace and tranquility has returned to the villages and farmsteads along our western frontier, as with December 1st fighting on the whole line between Geneva and Basle has ceased.

Traffic

Most unreliable, and at times contradictory reports appear both in the English and Swiss Press about the resumption of railway traffic (and incidentally the postal service) with France. On December 2nd you could read in the English dailies that "a train from Paris arrives daily at Les Verrieres at 11.20 a.m. and returns at 4 p.m." In Switzerland it was officially stated on December 6th that the French railway administration had inaugurated a daily service between Paris and Dijon for mails and passengers; as an autorail service from the latter town to Les Verrieres-Suisse was already in operation the week before it is now possible to travel from Berne to the French capital in about twenty hours.

Economical

A Swiss Sample Fair was opened on November 23rd at Ankara by the Swiss Minister in the presence of high Turkish dignitaries and representatives of industry and trade. The exhibits, made up chiefly of watches, machines, textiles and chemical products, roused a lively interest; the fair was closed on the 12th inst.

After having been in existence for seven years the agreement for peace in industry was extended last summer for another five years in the engineering and metal industry. That the arrangement for peaceful settlement of possible differences proved advantageous for the workpeople in this particular industry is shown in the social improvements obtained by these free discussions. Compared with 1939 the hourly rate of pay has been increased by 15cts., the cost of living bonus for men by 38 cts., so that the average earnings per hour have increased by 53cts. To this must be added special allowances for children. For last year alone 8,7 millions were paid out in gratuities and 6,3 millions were expended for holidays with pay.

As late as 1918/21 Swiss economy lost about 350 million francs for a single epidemic of foot and mouth disease. In 1938 a vaccine was discovered which is now produced at the vaccine institute in Basle in sufficient weekly quantities to inoculate 18,000 cattle. Since the introduction of this new combative method an extension of cases of the disease has been prevented.

A general increase in the rations allowed during the present month has taken place; from 15 to 20 per cent. more fats, butter and cheese is delivered against the respective coupons.

Humanitarian

In spite of events in western Europe, the ships chartered by the International Red Cross Committee continued to bring in valuable cargoes of relief for prisoners of war. In September 13,477 tons were unloaded at various ports, and another 6,315 tons in October, thus bringing the total from the beginning of the war up to the end of October, 1944, to nearly 285,000 tons.

The increasing scarcity of means of conveyance is one of the greatest obstacles which has to be overcome by the Relief Division of the International Committee of the Red Cross in carrying out its work.

The shortage of rolling stock which had been a great drawback for some time past, is now rendered

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almost complete by recent military events on the continent. In order to avoid paralysis of their relief work, the International Committee have been planning a scheme of transport by motor trucks.

For almost three months past, the ships sailing under the International Committee's flag have been unable to put into Marseilles. Under the supervision of a delegate of the International Committee, they docked at Barcelona, and their cargoes were unloaded and warehoused there. The International Committee applied to the American Red Cross who agreed to supply fifty trucks. These vehicles arrived recently on board the ships "Caritas I" and "Caritas II".

These are seven-ton trucks, of up-to-date build, fitted with all accessories and the necessary equipment for up-keep. They will be driven by Swiss drivers and on each trip accompanied by a convoy agent of the International Committee.

As soon as these road transports are actually running, they will enable the consignments which are forwarded by the International Committee by rail from Geneva to Germany to prisoners of war and civilian internees to be kept up at their usual rate.

* * *

Four message forms addressed by the next-of-kin to Dutch prisoners of war detained in a camp in Borneo were returned to the Central Prisoners of War Agency through the delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Tokyo. The forms which left Geneva in September 1943, were sent off from Borneo on 20th February, 1944. They reached Geneva last August. The route they followed there and back therefore took less than a year.

* * *

Based upon the article inserted into the Constitution in 1925, the Federal authorities and a Committee of experts are now working out the draft of a bill for an old age insurance, which it is hoped will meet with a better reception than did the project for a compulsory people's insurance, rejected by the Swiss people in 1929. To-day there is already a Federal fund in existence amounting to 250 million francs, which will be increased annually by an amount of about 60 millions derived from the alcohol and tobacco tax. To this must be added 2 per cent of the wages of the insured and a similar amount contributed by the employer. With a uniform old age pension of frs. 50 per month (married couples frs. 100) the annual expenditure would amount to about 400 million francs.

* * *

Dr. Max Huber, who has been a member of the International Red Cross Committee since 1923 and its president since 1928, has announced his decision to resign the presidency at the end of the year, when he will be 70, though he will continue his Red Cross work in Geneva.

At a meeting on December 4th the Committee appointed Dr. Carl J. Burckhardt to be the new president. When his mandate as High Commissioner in Danzig was terminated in 1939, Dr. Burckhardt joined the Red Cross Committee, and has been particularly identified with its relief scheme. For several years he has acted as deputy to the president, and has conducted many negotiations with both groups of belligerents.

Two additional delegates have been appointed and will be attached to the London office; they are Major Fred. Bieri and Dr. J. Imfeld.



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XMAS THOUGHTS AND WISHES.

In my last Xmas homily, twelve months ago, I expressed the hope that this Xmas would see the end of hostilities, and that the Angel of Peace would once again spread her wings over a war weary world.

It was not to be, still the spectre of war hovers unmercifully over the four continents of the earth. Hate, despair, and sorrow, are still predominant factors, sweat and tears are once more the keynote for this Xmas, 1944.

The days when we were able to celebrate Xmas with gaiety, merriment, and a carefree heart in the intimate circle of family or friends, lie far behind us, and many have almost forgotten that sacred message "Peace and Goodwill on Earth", with which this festive season used to be heralded in.

Instead of the bells which used to ring so joyfully in the towns, villages and hamlets, we hear the sound of distant guns, the stillness of the night is rudely broken by the piercing noise of the sirens, and the thunderous vibrations of exploding bombs.

Heavy are our hearts, and disturbed are our minds, and try as we like, we cannot feel happy and merry as of old, whilst millions of our fellow men are making the supreme sacrifice, undergoing endless privations, sufferings and hardship.

The once so happy family circle is broken, their members dispersed and scattered far and wide, many of the hearts that throbbed so gaily have ceased to beat, many of the faces that shone so brightly have ceased to