

# What other people think of us : the spirit of Switzerland in 1939

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## WHAT OTHER PEOPLE THINK OF US.

## THE SPIRIT OF SWITZERLAND IN 1939.

By ELIZABETH WISKEMANN.

(Fortnightly Review.)

To no onlooker country can the recent events have been more immediately and profoundly shocking than to Switzerland. Herr Hitler's seizure of Austria provided in itself an uncomfortable precedent. From a military point of view Switzerland became more vulnerable when the Vorarlberg was annexed by the Reich. In August Lord Runciman was sent to Czechoslovakia in order to press upon the Czechs plans for their Swissification. But, in September, Herr Hitler made short shrift of such projects, condemned the conception of a multi-national state, and proceeded to break up the Czechoslovak Republic with the helpless consent of Great Britain and France, and in spite of French treaty obligations. The British Government spoke of guaranteeing the newly projected frontier of the Czechs and the Slovaks, and then sat back while Germany, Poland and Hungary reduced them *ad absurdum*. It could but be supposed that the internationally guaranteed neutrality of Switzerland might at any moment become meaningless. Indeed, in the German *Nationalsozialistische Monatshefte* a campaign was soon begun, according to which Germany claimed to re-interpret the neutrality of the Swiss; in future they were to renounce all public criticism of the totalitarian States and in fact to allow their Press to become part of the Rome-Berlin propaganda machine — a long first step towards annexation and *Gleichschaltung*. The hitherto close economic relationship between Germany and Switzerland was also, according to German theories, to complete the subjection of the Swiss.

In the Nazi view Switzerland is an anachronism and will soon be swept away in the "racial" age in which we live. The Hitler Youth, for example, is taught that the German-speaking three-quarters of Switzerland will inevitably be absorbed by the Nazi Reich, while the French and Italian portions will in all probability fall away to France and to Italy. It is all the more remarkable that the demoralizing events of 1938-39 and the intimidating presence of the Germans along their extended frontier with Switzerland have neither demoralized nor intimidated the Swiss. On the contrary pro-Nazi, or even pro-German influence, has lost ground. It is not altogether pleasant to speak with a Reich-German accent in Switzerland to-day. Racial ideas seem to have made no progress at all, even among young people of the age which in other countries shows itself particularly susceptible to crude ideologies. Among Swiss officers whose training has often been largely German, and who used to show pro-German sympathies, a change seems to have taken place; Colonel Wille, who was once regarded as the leading pro-German officer, has now expressed himself strongly against the present Reich and has even made gestures towards the Social Democrats.

Immediately after the German annexation of Austria the pro-Nazi "Front" lost all its ten seats on the town council of its stronghold, Zürich. A few pro-Nazi publications have been suppressed, and others show signs of discouragement; their tendency to-day, like that of anxious Nazi propagandists in the United States, is no longer to indulge in unprofitable abuse of democracy, but to concentrate upon anti-Semitism, which, at least, appeals to the medical students of Zürich University. The most notorious pro-Nazi paper in Switzerland at the moment claims to be the organ of the E.S.A.P. or *Eidgenössische Sozialistische Arbeiter Partei* (Federal Socialist Workingmen's Party), but its backers in so far as they are Swiss have lately shown reluctance to continue to throw their money away. It is interesting that no paper in Switzerland, however pro-Nazi, has dared to talk frank Germanic racialism; it has only praised the methods of the Reich.

Clearly, one of Switzerland's most difficult problems is to carry through the reorganization, economic and military, which the circumstances of to-day demand, without sacrificing her federal character and her individualistic quality. The Catholic Conservatives have always been enthusiastically federalistic, partly, no doubt, because they represent the minority religion. It is among them to-day that one hears anxiety expressed with regard to the various extensions of the activity of the Federal Government. If Switzerland lost her federal character, the federalists point out, the French and Italian-speaking Swiss might begin to develop a minority mentality, while so long as cantonal activity is great this will not occur; some of the cantons are, of course, bi-lingual, i.e., the cantonal and language frontiers do not coincide. While the German-speaking Swiss majority is most keenly alive to the Reich German menace to Switzerland and all that it implies, the French-Swiss are nowadays showing an increasing solidarity with the German-Swiss. Until recently influential conservative circles in French Switzerland, those represented

by the *Journal de Genève* and the *Gazette de Lausanne*, were not unfriendly towards Nazi Germany, and in the Blum period, seemed far more afraid of France. These people were inclined to regard anti-Nazi feeling as the natural alarm of the "red" towns of Basle and Zürich, and their intense dislike for the Geneva Socialist, M. Nicole, and the French-Swiss Popular Front made them unsympathetic towards the democratic anxieties of the cantons closer to Germany. This French-Swiss conservatism now looks with greater suspicion towards Berlin. Among the Italian and Romansch-speaking Swiss there seems, but for very few exceptions, to have been less dissent from the German-Swiss point of view all along.

The decentralization of Switzerland even to-day is a remarkable, if delightful, phenomenon. Each canton uses different school text-books, and the school-child grows up to regard himself first as a citizen of the canton of Vaud or of Berne or of the Ticino; Swiss consciousness only comes later. The increase of military organization, which is essential, if even Swiss neutrality is to be at all adequately defended, is automatically a piece of centralization, and it is generally agreed that the economic problems of to-day necessitate an increase of the activity and authority of the Federal Government. The limitation of particularism in certain directions may actually constitute a step towards a more exact democracy. The Social Democrats at the moment are collecting signatures for an initiative which proposes that the Federal Council of Ministers (the Central Government executive) shall in future be elected by the people as a whole, and not, as the constitution at present lays down, in joint session of the two Houses of Parliament. In the Council of States (*Conseil des Etats*) the small conservative cantons are equally represented with the rest, and this gives extra weight to the conservative element in the united Federal Assembly.

The Socialist initiative now being launched was in fact occasioned by the election of the industrialist and financier, Dr. Wetter, to be Minister of Finance last December. There was a widely spread feeling at the time that the Social Democrats should now be represented in the Federal Council, which at present consists of two members of the Catholic Party, one member of the conservative Peasant Party and four Free-thinking Liberals: Dr. Wetter, like his predecessor, belongs to the Free-thinking Party. Along with the proposal for the direct election of Federal Councillors it is now also proposed that their number shall be increased from seven to nine. While the direct-election plan is unlikely to go through, public opinion seems to be in favour of the extension of the Council of executive Ministers. Various meetings of the Free-thinking Liberals have been expressing themselves in favour of this, although the increase is aimed at bringing Socialists into the Federal Council, and the Free-thinking Party is politically opposed to the Socialists. These, together with the Catholic Conservatives, are the three big parties in Swiss political life, the Free-thinkers having 48 members in the National Council and 15 in the Council of States, the Socialists 50 and 3, the Catholics 42 and 18, in the two Chambers respectively. Parliamentary elections are due next autumn, together with the election of the whole Federal Council.

The president of this Council is now M. Etter, a Catholic Conservative, whom one may meet any day in Berne waiting at the Government buildings bus-stop when it is time to go home to lunch. M. Motta, President for so many years, has since 1920 been Minister of Foreign Affairs. M. Motta is very much opposed to the idea of bringing the Socialists into the Government coalition, but the feeling of the country as a whole is probably against him. For there is a general feeling that he is too ready to compromise with the dictatorships. The Socialists, and the Young Catholics, who are strong in Lucerne, condemned his recognition of the Franco régime as too hasty, and they regard him as altogether too weak in defending the liberty of the Swiss press. In the newspapers and at meetings protests have been loud. In February, for instance, a Young Catholic railwayman named Abegg denounced M. Motta as an enemy to the League of Nations and a dishonour to Switzerland; Abegg has in consequence been suspended from his job, and M. Motta is to bring a case against him. While many of the Swiss, including a section of the Free-thinking Liberals, feel restive with regard to the policy of the Federal Council, it is not at present true that the Swiss press has ceased to be free. A commission of journalists is responsible for preventing journalistic excess, but it is perfectly possible to publish all items of news and all comments which avoid exaggerated abusiveness. If the reasons for suppressing the *Journal des Nations* last autumn were perhaps not sufficiently clear, it has been seen that some pro-Nazi publications (the *Schweizerdegen* and the *Schweizervolk*) have also been banned.

The economic pressure which Germany is able to exert upon most of her small neighbours seemed at one time to be very considerable in the

case of Switzerland. It was not that Switzerland itself, a highly industrialized State, was a particularly good market for German manufactures, nor a source of raw materials, but the Swiss hôteliers were eager to be on good terms with a country which could offer such enormous numbers of tourists, while Swiss bankers were in the habit of investing large sums of capital in the Reich. Proximity, moreover, caused Switzerland, in fact, to import more from and export more to Germany than any other country. Switzerland's deficit was — hypothetically at least — balanced by the payment of interest upon her investments. Since her devaluation in 1936, however, Switzerland has been able to export more to other countries, while Germany is becoming less and less able to buy. At first French currency weakness and Germany's appetite for mechanical imports useful for armaments concealed this tendency, but it has now become clear. The number of German tourists has greatly declined, but the Germans have more than been replaced by French, by Dutch, and by British visitors. Meanwhile the Swiss have extracted some of their capital from Germany, and, by increasing their exports, are more nearly able to balance their foreign trade accounts. At present the economic danger provided by Germany is something quite different. Swiss unemployment, in spite of serious and partly successful efforts to reduce it, is still substantial; especially in the Rheintal in the canton of St. Gallen near the old Austrian frontier the lace-makers are in very great distress. When Germany seized Austria attractive rumours of employment for everyone came across from Vorarlberg, and disturbed the loyalty of St. Gallen, but the rumours are less attractive now, and the Swiss authorities are pushing on with relief measures. Germany has another trump card. She is short of skilled labour herself and has brought some hundreds of Swiss watchmakers into South Germany; it remains to be seen how they will react to German conditions and whether a German watch industry of dangerous competitive strength will be established.

Apart from unforeseeable international developments or some machiavellian intrigue, unemployment is Switzerland's most serious weak spot in her relations with Germany. It has been seen that the different racial groups and the different political parties have been drawn into closer co-operation by recent events. In the cantonal elections in Zürich this March, although the two big competitors, Free-thinking Liberals and Social Democrats fought a vigorous electoral campaign, the identity of their chief aims for the present was astonishingly exact and could be summed up singly as the defence of the country as it now is. On the very frontier of Swastika-Germany the Free-thinking party's election appeal was headed by a figure with sword and shield guarding the mountains of Switzerland with the legend — *Freisinn* (a free conception of life) — printed beneath it. The special appeal to the young electors included these words. "The most beautiful pages in the history of Swiss civilization are those which tell of readiness to help the persecuted and those who are hungry in body and soul." The Free-thinking Party is regarded by the Left as too rich and conservative, but the Social Democrats might have used the same words.

It is interesting, too, that though it is officially condemned there is a silent boycott in Switzerland against goods from Nazi Germany. In the most exposed towns, Basle and Schaffhausen, there are Social Democrat authorities who watch the activities of the German railway and customs officials with the greatest care. Youth organisations among students and others have multiplied since the Czech crisis and the Munich surrender, and the big majority of the population is preparing itself against the possibility of a sudden attack. In two years one milliard Swiss francs have been spent upon extra military expenses, the period of military service has been increased, and all men from 20 to 60 have their instructions with regard to mobilization. Meanwhile most of the women students of Zurich, for example, have volunteered for hospital work, etc., and the Swiss towns have rehearsed their air raid black-outs.

Though the Federal Government assumes incredulity towards rumours of a sudden German invasion of Switzerland, with a view to the intimidation of France, the ordinary man is well aware of the danger. Many Swiss people are more afraid of some new Nazi trickery, some money-or-your-life bargain which might, as in the case of the Czechs, speedily turn their independence into helplessness. Though they probably know that they could not hold the Germans up for long, most of the Swiss long for frank invasion rather than the possible alternatives. Every Swiss man is a soldier with his gun at hand in his home; if the frontier is touched those guns will be fired, the people swear, whatever *not d'ordre* they receive. To-day they have reason to hope that France and England may help them, and many are eager to save Europe by their example, even at the cost of a desperate war.