

# Napoleon and Switzerland. Part II

Autor(en): **P.M.B.**

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# NAPOLEON AND SWITZERLAND

## PART II

**DURING** 1799, Switzerland became the battlefield of Europe.

The country was invaded by French, Austrian and Russian armies. Two battles were fought near Zurich. In the first, the Archduke Charles of Austria defeated Massena, in the second Massena beat the Russian General Korsakov. A Russian army led by General Souvarov, coming through the Gothard to join Korsakov, was baited all the way and finally stopped at Schwyz by the troops of General Lecourbe. Learning that Korsakov had been defeated and that his escape route on the plateau was barred, Souvarov made one of the most fantastic retreats of History. Escaping towards the Voralberg, his army climbed through four high passes in ten days. 6000 men and all his artillery were left behind, either on glaciers or at the bottom of precipices.

The country was torn by political strife. The "Federalists" and the "Unitarists" were struggling for power. The Federalists won in 1801 but the Unitarists took control in 1802. A civil war broke out and the Helvetic Government escaped to Lausanne. A Federalist army was about to enter the Canton of Lemman when Bonaparte intervened and ordered a break in the hostilities. A French army entered the land and the days of the Helvetic Republic were counted.

Bonaparte convened sixty-three delegates from the Swiss cantons, forty-five unitarists and fifteen federalists. Five delegates from each of the two parties, joined with French senators, were appointed by Bonaparte to draft a new constitution. After having heard the voices of the two opinions, Napoleon presented the assembly on the 19th of February 1803 with a new constitution, called the "Act of Mediation".

Switzerland was no longer to be a unified state and was to revert to a federal constitution. To the thirteen cantons of the old Confederation were definitively added six new ones—but the boundaries drawn during the Republic were completely overhauled. These new Cantons were Saint-Gall, the Grisons, Aargau, Thurgau, Tessin and Vaud. Thus the Confederation of 19 cantons was created. It was the Switzerland of today minus the Valais an independent republic, Neuchatel, a principality belonging to Prussia and later given by Napoleon to one of his officers, Marshal Berthier; Geneva and the Jura, were part of France.

The Cantons regained their sovereignty and the "Waldstätter", or four original Cantons, reinstated their landsgemeinde. Federal power was entrusted to a Diet which met twice yearly in the director Canton. There were six of these: Fribourg, Bern, Zurich, Solothurn, Basle and Lucern. The first magistrate of the country

received the title of Landamann of Switzerland. The Diet was composed of deputies from the cantons. Those with more than 100,000 inhabitants had the right to two seats, those with less, one.

The Act of Mediation brought ten years' peace to Switzerland. The country breathed again and could devote itself to its agriculture and industry. In that period, Pestalozzi founded in Berthoud and Yverdon an institution universally renowned. The Bernese Fellenberg created a model school for poor children. Father Girard acquired an international reputation for the new methods he introduced in the schools of Fribourg.

An engineer from Zurich, Conrad Escher, undertook the drying-out of the marshes between the lakes of Zurich and Wallenstadt. He dug a canal carrying the waters of the Linth directly into the Lake of Wallenstadt and a second one between this lake and the Lake of Zurich. These works, completed in 1818, protected a vast area from periodic floods, making it amenable to agriculture. This was the first federal enterprise of importance.

But during the whole period covered by the Act of Mediation, the Swiss were severely oppressed by the Emperor. A military treaty imposed in 1798 had utterly ignored Swiss neutrality. Switzerland was bound to furnish France with four standing regiments of 4000 men. Constantly decimated by the Napoleonic wars, the figure had to be brought down to 12,000, and even then, the authorities had to stoop to every means of recruitment. Napoleon further required of the Diet that it should refuse the right to enlist mercenaries to foreign powers not allied with France. During the Russian campaign, the Swiss regiments were soon reduced by hardships and sickness. They showed great courage in covering the French retreat over the Beresina and took their share in saving the main French army from absolute annihilation. In the end, only 700 Swiss, some permanently disabled and crippled, returned home.

When the tide had changed, Napoleon suffered a momentous defeat at Leipzig. His armies retreated to the Rhine and Switzerland found itself in the Allies' way. When the Diet realised that the enemies of Napoleon were nearing the border, it hastily declared the neutrality of the "Confederation Helvetique" and levied troops with the intention of enforcing the respect of this neutrality. The army was placed under the command of General Rodolphe de Wattenwyl. Its 12,500 men were to face 16,000 Austrians. Realising that all resistance was useless, the general disbanded his troops, causing many a soldier, ashamed of this affront to national honour, to destroy their arms and cry of treason. In December 1813, the Austrians penetrated the country through Basle and Schaffhausen and, in interminable columns,



made for France through Neuchatel and Geneva. The Jura suffered greatly from this passage. A detachment of this army liberated Geneva. The Valais became free from French domination at the same time. This was the end to the Act of Mediation.

Napoleon's defeat gave new hopes to the supporters of the old Confederation, who thought that the time had come to re-establish it. The old patrician families regained their former powers in many Cantons and Bern invited its former subjects, the people of Vaud and Aargau, to recognise its authority again. They refused and found a sympathetic protector in the Russian Tzar, Alexander the 1st, before whom Frederic de la Harpe and Jomini, a Swiss strategist employed as a General in the Russian Army, had pleaded their case.

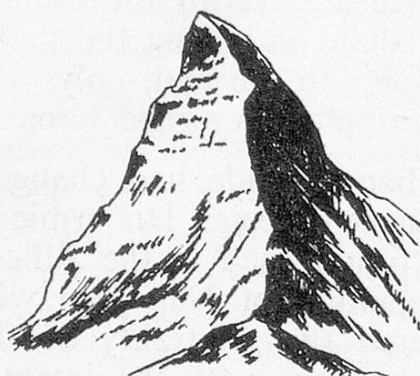
A Diet assembled in Zurich in 1814. It was boycotted by Bern, which convened the "true confederates", i.e. the Cantons of the old confederation in a separate Diet in Lucern. But the Allies ordered the dissolution of this second Diet. Finally, all the cantons met in Zurich, thrashed out a new constitution in a "Federal Pact" and presented it to the Congress in Vienna. The Confederation and a number of Cantons had sent their own delegates to defend their specific interests in front of this vast assembly, Reinhard for Zurich, de Montenach for Fribourg, Wieland for the Confederation, Frederic de la Harpe for Vaud and

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Pictet de Rochement for Geneva. The latter secured the commune of Carouge from Sardinia. After Waterloo, a second Congress met in Paris. Pictet de Rochement defended once again the interests of Switzerland and the Congress declared both Swiss Neutrality and Independence to be in the real interest of Europe. Neuchatel, Valais and Geneva were definitely integrated to the Confederation. The old bishopric of Basle was tied to the canton of Bern and now forms the Jura. The country had at last found peace after progressing during twenty painful years from a medieval confederacy to the Confederation which it still is today.

[P.M.B.]

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## Swiss Society Group Travel 1972

The Society is submitting to its members three different itineraries for consideration. Please make use of this opportunity to be in Europe during the time the Olympics are held and the 50th anniversary of the Swiss Abroad is celebrated. Suggested itineraries are:

1. Auckland - Papeete - Easter Island - Santiago - Buenos Aires - Rio de Janeiro - Zurich - Singapore - Sydney - Auckland. With several longer stopovers. Cost approx. \$1065. Group of 15.
2. Auckland - Papeete - Mexico City - Chicago - Zurich - Hong Kong - Sydney - Auckland. One long stopover each in Mexico and Hong Kong. Group of 40 or more. Cost approx. \$850.
3. Auckland - Papeete - Vancouver - New York - Zurich - Bangkok - Hong Kong - Auckland. One long stopover each in New York and Hong Kong. Group of 40 or more. Cost approx. \$850.

These are three suggestions only, please choose the one that suits you best. The departure date and also the route could change. Interested members should contact the Secretary NOW—**Mrs R. Messmer, 15 Fortification Road, Wellington**—answering the following questions also:

- (b) Duration of complete trip (i.e. 6 - 8 - 10 weeks, etc.).
  - (a) Month most suitable for departure.
  - (c) Which of the suggested itineraries would suit you best?
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