

# The languages of Switzerland

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand**

Band (Jahr): **17 (1953)**

Heft [2]

PDF erstellt am: **12.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-942597>

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### A Swiss Law on Economic Defence

The possibility of world-wide conflicts forces all nations to prepare for events which may disrupt normal international relations. Mr. Zipfel, Swiss delegate for works projects, has been asked by the Federal Government to work on a new law for Economic Defence. Whereas the law actually in operation is concerned only with the stockpiling of raw materials and foodstuffs, the new draft covers the whole field of economic defence, including questions of wartime finance, transportation, price control, and farm production. Once in force this law would give the Government extensive additional powers. Of its 26 articles, 19 assign new responsibilities to the Federal Government and 4 extend the authority of the Federal Legislature. These proposed measures are partly of a preparatory character; partly they consist of stand-by powers for national emergencies.

### Tax-free Reserves in Swiss Industry

Tax-free capital reserves set aside by Swiss industry in accordance with existing legal regulations, now amount to 83 million francs. These funds are earmarked for investment during times of depression and 543 companies are participating in the plan. During the last quarter of 1952 20 million francs have been newly registered. The popularity of the scheme is partly due to the fact that a number of individual States, following the example set by the Federal Government, have recently passed corresponding laws providing for the fiscal exoneration of similar works projects reserves. The success of the plan during the first year after going into operation is considered highly encouraging.

### Passenger Traffic in Swiss Internal Navigation, 1952

Over 7.6 million passengers have been transported on the Swiss lakes navigation system in 1952. The Vierwaldstatter Lake, with over 2 million visitors, drew most of the traffic, while the Lake of Geneva and the Lake of Lugano had each over one million passengers. Next in line were the Lake of Zurich, the Lake of Thun, the Rhine River between Constance and Schaffhausen, the Lakes of Brienz, Neuchatel and Morat, the Lakes of Bienne, Constance and Zug, and, finally, the Greifensee Lake and the Lake of Hallwyl. Compared with 1950, the total number of passengers was approximately 400,000 higher. In fact it has been exceeded only three times during the past fifty years, notably in 1947 and 1949, when passenger traffic reached a level of more than eight million people.

### 1952 a Good Year for the Swiss Tourist Trade.

In 1952 total guest nights passed in Swiss hotels were 21,700,000. In this total, foreign guests participate with 9.7 million nights.

### The Re-export of Strategic Supplies to Eastern Countries

There has been some talk recently, in the United States and in other countries, about Swiss exports of strategic materials and supplies to eastern countries. It will be recalled that for more than a year an agreement has existed and still exists between Switzerland and the United States affecting the re-export of American-made goods of a military character. As the Swiss see it, this gentlemen's agreement has worked successfully in the past. A system of controls, autonomously adopted and applied by the Swiss authorities, effectually checks all tentatives to circumvent existing regulations, which, incidentally, are fully compatible with the traditional Swiss policy of neutrality. The products directly involved are those of American origin only, the normal Swiss trade with the eastern countries is in no way affected by these regulations.

## THE LANGUAGES OF SWITZERLAND

By G. THURER.

Human speech means communication, yet foolish men have turned language into a cause of, or pretext for strife. This aberration began when the nation became a god. In a number of countries, language was regarded as the outstanding characteristic of the nation and its strongest bond of union. It was at that time that this political doctrine was formulated: "All human beings speaking the same language belong to the same vital community and must be united in one country." It was followed by a second: "Anyone not speaking that language must leave the country or change his native tongue." Since the power State as a rule aims at keeping its people in the country, it favoured the change of language on the part of those not speaking the national tongue. With that, a tension was set up between the unified language of the country and the linguistic minorities, who were loath to abandon the language of their fathers. At times this tension grew into a conflict which might have led to civil wars. Those in power therefore declared that the existence of other languages was a threat to the safety of the State; they must be suppressed at whatever cost. It was in particular the totalitarian State, in which the individual was a mere atom, which used force in standardising the national language. The more uniform each State became with regard to its language, the more that language was idolised by order of the State, while the languages of neighbouring countries, often themselves those of the suppressed minorities, were treated as heresies. Thus the tension spread to foreign policy. Languages led to wars, and the struggle for bilingual regions broke out. Such, in brief outline, is the history of Europe in the age of nationalism. The word "nation," however, points, not to

the same language but to a common origin, yet even a people of such strong nationalist feeling as the Italians under Mussolini descends from at least a dozen different tribes, though it possessed a common language. The state of affairs in Germany was similar; since Luther there had been a common language, since the Romantic epoch the desire for a single German-speaking State, and since Bismarck the aim of a strong German Empire. Even in the middle ages, France and Spain were fairly coherent, firmly ordered States. In Moscow, in the same way, Russian became the common language of a population of 200 million. About the same number speak English as their mother tongue, while 200 million more use it as a second language in India, China and Japan. An outstanding example of the multilingual State was Austria-Hungary, with 12 million Germans, 10 million Hungarians, 6 million Czechs, 2 million Slovaks, 5 million Poles, 4 million Ukrainians, 6 million Serbo-Croats, 1 million Slovenes, 3 million Rumanians, and 1 million Italians and Ladeins. Czechoslovakia inherited, with the northern part of the dual monarchy, the tension between its five language groups. Belgium often suffers from the contrast between the French-speaking Walloons and the Flemish.

It would therefore seem to be something of a miracle that Switzerland, with her multiplicity of languages, knows nothing of such conflicts. She was at all times the living refutation of the Nazi doctrine that the salvation of a people resides in the unity of its language, for nowhere in Europe were there so many languages in so small a country as this, yet internal peace was nowhere so secure as here. We must ask why. The answer is that Switzerland did not solve the language problem by force, but naturally, by insight and mutual considerateness.

Of the 4½ million Swiss, 73 per cent. speak German, 21 per cent. French, 5 per cent. Italian and 1 per cent. Romansch. This state of affairs once caused a German student to remark: "You Swiss are a democracy, yet you have a German-speaking majority. Why don't you settle this language problem by plebiscite?" That young man understood neither democracy nor the language situation in Switzerland. True democracy is not the rule by force of a majority which simply out-votes all minorities; it aims at a livable life even for the minorities in the common State. But that is only possible where there is freedom. And that is why the Confederation attaches more value to freedom than to unity of language. Indeed, the people of Switzerland are deeply attached to this multiplicity of language, for it lends variety to life. That is why all German-speaking Swiss use, beside the common written language, a dialect in social intercourse. As a rule, the Swiss is eager to learn the languages spoken by his fellow-countrymen. He is the more ready to do so, since, by a unique stroke of luck,

the three main languages of Switzerland, German, French, and Italian, are also the three main languages of European civilisation. The citizen of Zurich who learns French is not only learning the language spoken on Lake Geneva; it will serve him in Paris, in Canada, in the north of Africa, while his fellow-countryman who learns German is acquiring not only the language of a small people, but one spoken by some hundred millions all over the world. Even with Italian he can be at home in Sicily and Tripoli. Thus anyone who learns the three chief national languages of Switzerland is at a great advantage in the markets of the world, while at the same time he has the key to that part of world literature in which Goethe, Voltaire and Dante wrote. It is only the little Romansch group which does not cross the frontier. Yet how anxious Switzerland was to maintain this language was shown in 1938, when the little mountain people moved that their language should be raised to the same rank as the others. In a general vote over 90 per cent. of the electorate voted in favour, and in the whole history of Swiss voting, there had never been a poll with so high a percentage of "Yeses," though its result was to fulfil the wish of only a hundredth part of the population. Since then, the "language clause" of the Federal Constitution has run: "German, French, Italian and Romansch are the national languages of Switzerland. The official languages of the Confederation are German, French and Italian."

What does that mean? In the National Council and Council of States every member may speak in one of these three languages and require the interpretation of any other. All statutes must be drawn up in these three languages, which are legally equal. Every Swiss has the right to hear judgment pronounced by the Supreme Court in one of these languages. The constitution provides that this supreme judicial body, consisting of 20 judges, shall also be representative of the three official languages. But even though there is no constitutional obligation to do so, in the election of the Federal Council, matters are generally so arranged that there are two representatives of French-speaking and one of Italian-speaking Switzerland. In other words, though German-speaking Switzerland accounts for rather more than five-sevenths of the population, it lays no claim to send five representatives to the Federal Council, but rests content with four, provided that the other language groups are adequately represented. Indeed, the Confederation, far from suppressing the two smallest language groups, grants them considerable sums for the maintenance of their national character, which is somewhat endangered by the freedom of movement and establishment in the country.

This policy of the protection of the weaker is in the best democratic tradition. In adopting it, the Confederation was able to point to the



excellent work done in Government and administration for generations by such cantons as the tri-lingual Grisons and the bi-lingual Valais and Fribourg. And just as the linguistic borders do not lie along cantonal frontiers, they do not coincide with denominational differences. If they did, the whole problem would be much more acute. It goes without saying that all four languages are represented in the press, while the generous recognition of linguistic minorities also extends to the radio; there are three German-speaking, two French-speaking and one Italian-speaking stations. It is to be hoped that their work may prove something of a mission to the world. This small, neutral country has proved that, given good will, understanding, welfare and loyalty are not only possible among people speaking different languages, but that those languages themselves mean an enrichment of life. Of that, Switzerland is a living example.

## RANDOM NOTES

### Strange rules and regulations

In the Canton of Wallis there still exists a regulation that men's underwear is not allowed to be hung on the same clothes-line as female garments, out of decency, of course. But this is harmless compared to a rule in Maryland in the Southern States of the U.S.A., where, when a young man pays six visits to the same girl he has to marry her; so he needs to watch his steps. Then, in Waterloo there exists a rule whereby hairdressers are not permitted to eat or chew garlic between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. (quite rightly so, too!). But in Chicago there is a rule making it compulsory that all cats have a bell around their necks so that birds do not cross their paths.

### Women are Getting Stronger

Women are getting stronger, not in muscular strength, but in number. One hundred years ago Switzerland counted per thousand inhabitants 494 male and 506 female. After the last census it is approximated that there are 482 men to 528 women. The reason for this difference may lie in the fact that at present many female labourers have come from neighbouring countries, whereas a foreign male labourer finds it harder to enter Switzerland. The talk about the "weaker sex" is not always right, this time the women have the "upper hand."

### Who Talks the Fastest?

It belongs to the good manners of the Basler and the Zuercher to tease one another about their fast talking. In the recently celebrated friendship week between the two cantons they must have had plenty of occasions to outdo one another. Yet it is proved that neither the Basler nor the

Zuercher are the fastest talkers. An investigation has shown that the French out-talk most of the other people. They manage 350 syllables per minute, then follow the Japanese with 310, the Germans with 250 and the English, who prefer to chat more at ease with 220 syllables. That even this is yet fast talking shows if you compare it with the speech of the Polynesians, who are satisfied with 50 syllables. This, however, does not absolutely mean a disadvantage if you consider how far we in Europe got with our fast talk.

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Printed by McKenzie, Thornton, Cooper Ltd., 126 Cuba St., Wellington. for the Swiss Benevolent Society in New Zealand (Inc.).