Napoleon and Switzerland. Part I

NAPOLEON AND SWITZERLAND
PART I

NAPOLEON was born two hundred years ago and his name has been in headlines, so I opened the history books to learn of his bearing on Swiss history. Although all the Emperor's experience of Switzerland was a hurried march through the Valais on his way to Marengo in 1804, he has left harsh memories in the country. His mark was, it appears, not as deep as that left by the French Revolution, which spilt over into what was then Switzerland and therefore deserves to be recalled. Most refreshing of all, this rediscovery of the past reminded me that the Swiss had on occasions actually experienced "rough times" . . .

The turmoil of the French revolution had repercussions all over Europe. Switzerland was no exception. The **Club Helvetique,** founded in Paris by exiles from Fribourg, Vaud and Geneva, circulated pamphlets throughout Switzerland spreading the new ideas of the Revolution. The subjected domains of the Confederation wanted equal rights. The people of Vaud were claiming the abolition of the feudal rights of their Bernese masters. They were celebrating openly the triumphs of the Revolution and these gestures of emancipation were duly repressed.

The inhabitants of the Bishopric of Basle, backed by the French, revolted and proclaimed the "Raurician Republic". Some years later, the French Directory annexed this territory (the actual Jura Bernois) which became the "Departement du Mont Terrible". A revolution flared up in Geneva in 1792. The aristocratic government of the city was overthrown and a number of its partisans executed. But the townfolk turned against the revolutionaries. There was a general reconciliation after which complete political equality for all was proclaimed by a new government. Trouble was brewing in the Canton of Zurich. The inhabitants of Stäfa manifested against the excessive patrician authority of Zurich and had to suffer severe reprisals. The valleys of the Valtelina, Bormio and Chiavenna, subjected members of the Grison League, were claiming for equal rights. In early 1797, Napoleon was in Milan after having defeated the Austrians in his remarkable Italian Campaign. He met the representatives of the Grisons and told them to give autonomy to the three valleys. The envoys demurred, an attitude which cost them the loss of the valleys. They were annexed to the newly created and ephemeral Cisalpine Republic and definitely lost for Switzerland. At the Congress of Vienna in 1815, they were given to Austria. This was Napoleon's first intervention in Switzerland.

A Swiss Revolution sprang up in the Canton of Vaud. A patriot established in Paris, Cesar-Frederic de la Harpe, asked the French Directory to support the people of Vaud's claims

against Bern, a request favourably received. The whole canton became restless and claimed for a general reunion of its representatives. Bern refused and set about suppressing a movement that had gone too far. It was too late. An assembly of delegates from the townships and communes of Vaud met in Lausanne. General Menard, whose French troops were massed on the border, guaranteed their protection. This spurred the assembly in proclaiming Vaud's independence from Bern and in promulgating the "Republic of the Leman". The Bernese bailiffs were chased away. A revolution had been carried through without the loss of one human life.

The government of Bern decided to reconquer the country of Vaud, but General Menard dispatched his aide-de-camp to dissaude it from this project. On his way to Berne, the aide-de-camp was halted by Swiss soldiers in Thierrens, a skirmish took place and a hussard of his escort was killed. Menard seized the incident as a pretext for invading Switzerland.

The Confederates failed to unite against the invader and left Bern alone to face the enemy. Bernese troops were hurriedly called to arms and put under the command of Charles Louis Erlach. But the authorities lacked in decision. They accepted a cease-fire asked by General Brune, who had replaced Menard. The General did not feel strong enough to beat the Bernese alone and the cease-fire was to give time for General Schauenbourg to come down from Alsace and bring him help. When everything was ready, Brune marched on Morat and Bern, to be stopped at Neuennegg by a determined Bernese army. But the same day, Schauenbourg, who had advanced through Solothurn and pushed the garrison out of Fraubrunnen, beat the Bernese completely at Grauholz, killing 900. On that same afternoon, Schauenbourg made his entry in Bern.

The French seized the treasures of the State, emptied the arsenal and ransomed the citizens of the town. Even the three bears of the pit were not spared: they were sent as a trophy to the Directory in Paris.

The fall of Bern was followed by that of the whole Confederation. Geneva was soon annexed and became capital of the French department of the Leman. In the spring of 1798, the French imposed a new constitution on Switzerland. This constitution had been thought out by Peter Ochs, a magistrate from Basle, and approved by the French Directory. The "Helvetic Republic" was to replace the old 13-cantons Confederation. It was to have 19 cantons, the new ones carvedout of the existing cantons, many receiving entirely new names. Such was the case of the Canton of the Leman, the Oberland, the Rhetia, the Cantons of Säntis and Baden. The country was governed by a centralised Directory of five members and by two chambers: the Great Council and the Senate. It formed one single state and for this reason was called

"Republique helvetique une et indivisible". In fact, for the first time in its history, Switzerland was united. French and Italian became official languages together with German. But the cantons were no more than prefectures, subdivided into districts and administered centrally in the French style. Geneva, Neuchatel and the Jura were not included in the Republic. Some years later, the Valais was detached from it and became the "Rhodanian Republic". In 1810 it was annexed to France to become the Simplon Department.

The Helvetic Republic did its best to apply the ideals of the Revolution: it proclaimed freedom of belief, a free press, trade and industry, equality of all before the law and the abolishment of feudal rights. But French troops remained in the country, which apart from the Grisons was virtually under their control and the French representative Rapinat, behaving like a pro-consul, squeezed all the money he could out of the cantons and their citizens.

Neither was the Republic received everywhere with sympathy. The mountaineers of the small cantons were indignant at the suppression of their landsgemeinde and were hostile to the Revolution's lay ideals, which, they thought, would upset their traditional religion. They refused to acknowledge the new republic and took up arms under the leadership of an officer from Schwyz, Alois Reding. The Swiss Directory charged General
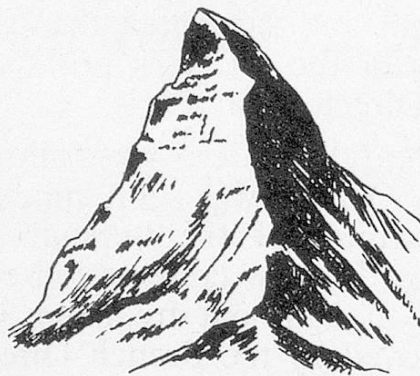
Schauenbourg with crushing the rebellion.

The French marched on Schwyz but were driven off. The insurgents having committed the tactical mistake of uncovering a vital pass, they had to retreat towards the South where they met the French at Rotenturm. Attacking the French columns with fury, women, children, old men, the whole folk taking part in the fray, they put the French to flight. They repeated the same feat on the morrow, causing severe losses to the French. Reding realised however that he could not hold out much longer. His men and women were worn out. The people of Schwyz held a lansgemeinde, and decided to negotiate with the French. The other rebel Cantons, Glarus, Unterwald and Uri followed Schwyz and reintegrated the Republic.

The Helvetic Directory imposed on every Swiss citizen the obligation of swearing allegiance to the Constitution and the people of Niedwald refused to comply. They took up arms and chased the Helvetic authorities away. The 9th of September 1798, French troops attacked Niedwald. Its inhabitants, men, women and children, armed with axes and scythes, put up an admirable resistance but, overwhelmed they had to retreat towards Stans, which they defended to the last extremity. The French massacred 500 inhabitants of the valley. Stans and the neighbouring villages were set afire. The Directory asked Pestalozzi to take care of the many orphans borne of this disaster.