

Switzerland's place in the world

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SWITZERLAND'S PLACE IN THE WORLD.

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Switzerland is a small country surrounded, in the heart of Europe, by three great powers, Germany, France and Italy, and by the historical remnants of a fourth, Austria. Its soil is as barren as its subsoil is poor. Its population owes the real prosperity which it enjoys, in spite of these handicaps, to the institutions of public instruction and to the traditions of political freedom and of economic effort it has inherited from previous generations as well as to their legacy of material wealth.

Thanks to its permanent neutrality and to the respect with which its small but efficient army was considered abroad, Switzerland escaped the horrors of the World War. It escaped, however, neither the threat of famine nor the internal commotions engendered by the divergent sympathies of its German, French and Italian-speaking population.

As a lasting result of these experiences five distinct consequences may be noted. In the first place, the army, based on the principle of compulsory service, and of course, intended solely for purposes of defence, has seen its already real popularity still further enhanced. Second, permanent neutrality has become more firmly enshrined in the sanctuary of national traditions. Third, the political influence of the dwindling peasant population, who like to remind the country of their services in times of scarcity, has undoubtedly increased. Fourth, the intervention of the state in all economic matters, which the blockade to which Switzerland was subjected during the war had brought about, has, although relaxed after the armistice, still remained in force to a degree which would have been deemed intolerable before 1914. Fifth and finally, the national centralization which had been accentuated under the political and economic stress of war conditions received a severe check.

It has become more clearly recognized, in view of the divergencies of international outlook which the war revealed, that local autonomy remained a condition of concord in a country whose population lacked linguistic and religious homogeneity.

Democratic equality, political freedom and racial tolerance, which have ever more been realized by preceding generations, remain the ideals of the Swiss nation. The progress of Fascism in Italy and the rise of National Socialism in Germany have, of course, been closely followed in Switzerland, the former perhaps with more interest and the latter with distinctly less sympathy.

Both these political systems, which so violently offend against all Swiss ideals, have been considered with something of the amazed curiosity and self-complacent skepticism with which conservative bankers consider the pranks of adventurous and reckless speculators on the stock market.

Some youthful enthusiasts, it is true, mainly in the universities, doubtful about their own professional future in these times of depressing unemployment, disgusted with the lack of personal leadership which is characteristic of Swiss democracy, and impatient with the admitted slowness and alleged inefficiency of political administration under parliamentary conditions, have sought to organize various so-called "fronts."

But these movements, undoubtedly to some extent inspired by the recent happenings in Italy and in Germany, have so far been without any real influence on the life of the country. Furthermore, even their promoters are always very careful, when expounding their novel and not all too profound political philosophy, to repudiate their foreign models.

Doubtless, in Switzerland as elsewhere, the prevailing economic and political crisis has strained the structure of congressional institutions designed for more normal times. In Switzerland as elsewhere, the executive has been intrusted by the Legislature with extraordinary powers to meet extraordinary emergencies.

No responsible individual, however, and no influential group, has challenged the fundamental principles of democratic government and of political freedom. In its attitude toward the victims of racial and political intolerance, the Swiss people have shown much reserve. This reserve, however, has been due to the fear that indiscriminating hospitality toward foreign Jews and others in times of acute unemployment might lead to anti-Semitism and distrust of foreigners rather than to any sympathy with those before whose persecution they have flown.

In the realignment of European states which has been going on since the end of the war, Swit-

zerland, therefore, clearly belongs to the north-western group of democracies, steadfastly opposed to the group of southeastern dictatorships.

In economic policy, Switzerland's recent history and present tendencies are characterized by two outstanding facts: growing reliance on the state and increasing protectionism. The first is so universal a consequence of war and post-war conditions all over the world that it cannot serve to illustrate Switzerland's peculiar position.

The second is much more surprising. That a small country, so completely dependent upon its imports for its very existence, on its exports and on the tourist traffic for its prosperity; that a nation which, in relation to its numbers, is one of the world's principal creditors; that a state on which the doctrine of free trade is imposed by the express provisions of its own constitution, should turn resolutely protectionist, is a phenomenon that calls for an explanation.

The explanation is threefold: parliamentary, social and monetary. Ever since the '80's of the last century, various economic groups and especially the peasants, threatened by the growth of foreign competition, demanded and step by step, by political logrolling, obtained higher customs barriers in favour of their products. Unemployment on the labour market in the two post-war crises appreciably strengthened their care in the eyes of the man in the street and of the Legislature.

Finally, the complete upset of the trade balance led the Government to protect its balance of payments by strictly limiting imports, in the hope that it might thus be able to maintain the gold standard to which the country is still deliberately faithful. Foreign protectionism and reduced purchasing power abroad had narrowed the markets for Swiss exports, while currency depreciation in various countries, notably in Germany, had enormously swelled imports.

As a result of these conditions, Switzerland must therefore to-day be counted among the states which pursue most actively a policy of contingents and reprisals. It is not, of course, when compared to its great neighbours — to say nothing of the United States — a highly protectionist country. But it is no longer, like Belgium and Holland, one of the most liberal.

The fidelity of Switzerland to the gold standard and its adherence to the gold bloc are due both to its tradition of commercial honesty and to the social structure of its population. Inflation, which would undoubtedly relieve the public treasury and tend to improve the conditions of the heavily mortgaged peasant class, as well as the prospects of its exporting industries, is resented both as a breach of faith and as an assault upon the savings of the community. As investments in fixed interest bearing bonds are extremely widespread among a people whom necessity has long taught to practice economy, public sentiment has so far been resolutely opposed to all monetary experiments.

As a further consequence, Switzerland has to-day become the most expensive country in Europe and possibly in the world. Thereby the importance of its tourist traffic has been greatly reduced. Its exporting industries find it more and more difficult to compete in neutral markets with foreign competitors whose costs of production are as a rule appreciably lower. Because Switzerland has always specialized in production of the best and therefore the most expensive goods, the result is perhaps less catastrophic than might have been expected.

In spite of all these developments, there is no doubt that the Swiss people would welcome not only a fall in the cost of living, but also a general demobilization of contemporary protectionism. The present commercial policies are contrary not only to their real interest but also to their better judgment. These policies are practiced with reluctance as a temporary makeshift and with the steadfast hope that they may soon be generally abandoned.

One last feature of Switzerland's place in the world remains to be discussed, its love of peace. In spite of all official statements to the contrary, the love of peace is unfortunately not universal in the world to-day. To be sure, no people as a whole love war, but not a few prefer war to the renunciation of certain national aims.

Switzerland entertains no ambitions which even a victorious war, if it were conceivable could satisfy. Furthermore, as the home of a small and socially heterogeneous people it would have everything to lose in becoming implicated in international violence. In spite of its not inglorious military traditions, its present pacifism is therefore profound and sincere.

Until the end of the world war, the main instrument of its pacifism was its traditional neutrality. When Switzerland was invited to join the League of Nations, it was confronted with the necessity of taking an extremely difficult decision.

To be sure, the main purpose of the League of Nations, as of guaranteed neutrality, was and is the maintenance of peace. While neutrality, however, seeks peace in isolation, the League seeks peace in international solidarity. One cannot logically both remain pledged to permanent and unconditional neutrality while assuming the obligations inherent in the principles of mutual protection.

The problem which thus faced the Swiss people in 1919 was solved with more diplomatic skill than logical consistency. In view of its special position Switzerland was expressly authorized to join the League as a regular member, while remaining true to its traditional military neutrality.

Since 1919, the evolution of the League has both strengthened and weakened the position of Switzerland. The reluctance of all states to come to the aid of the victims of foreign aggression, which recent events have revealed and which is the fundamental cause of the impotence of the League, has relieved Switzerland of a peculiar embarrassment.

On the other hand, the secession of Germany from the League has again increased that embarrassment. To be neutral in a universal League of Nations is impossible in the abstract, but relatively easy if a universal League effectively maintains peace. To be neutral in a League so limited in membership as to become comparable to an alliance, however, is not only impossible in the abstract, but also very embarrassing and perhaps even dangerous in the concrete.

There is, therefore, no country in the world, which more fervently hopes for the return of Germany to the League of Nations, and which is more persistent in its advocacy of the principle of universality than Switzerland.

To sum up: Switzerland's place is that of a small state surrounded by powerful and often antagonistic neighbours. To maintain its security and its independence it has therefore sought refuge in a policy of permanent and internationally recognized neutrality. While determined to avoid all entangling alliances and consequently worried over recent developments of the League of Nations, to which it is firmly attached, Switzerland is, of course, not without external affinities. By linguistic ties it is related to Germany, France and Italy. By reasons of its political ideals it belongs to the western group of free democracies. As an importer of foodstuffs and raw materials and an exporter of manufactured products it is the same excellent country.

With the United States, Great Britain, France and Holland it shares the to-day somewhat doubtful privilege of being a creditor nation. Through its economic and monetary policies it is a member of the gold bloc, in which its principal associates are France, Italy, Holland and Belgium. In its foreign policy it is in the closest sympathy with the Scandinavian countries and Holland.

As Switzerland has no ambition with the legitimate aims of any other state, its general interests, political and economic, are closely bound up and in fact identical with those of Europe and of the world.

Ch. Sc. Monitor.

NEWS FROM THE COLONY.

THE CONCERTS OF M. AND E. FREY-BERNHARDSGRUETTER.

There is no better means of taking our thoughts back to the care-free days of our youth, than spending an evening listening to the simple and unadorned songs of our mountains. They convey to us abroad a new meaning every time we hear them and refresh and harden us for our daily task.

In their concerts Herr und Frau Frey-Bernhardsgrütter fully succeeded in creating a truly Swiss atmosphere. Folklore songs, jodels and "Urechige Humor" vied with one another to give us of their best. The jodeling of Frau Frey was as fresh and uncurbed as the trilling of the nightingale; her vigorous voice betrayed not the slightest fatigue during a four hours' practically continuous performance. Herr Frey reminded us of one of the partners in Laurel and Hardy; his facial expressions were as amusing to watch as his jests were original. Though he refused to broadcast the latest "Minger" jokes, his daring sallies evoked roars of laughter. When the Monday concert commenced more than an hour after the advertised time he excused himself by remarking that there seemed to be a large number of Bernese in the Colony.

Apart from other engagements the visitors gave two concerts at the Union Helvetia, and one at the Schweizerbund; the latter was graced by the attendance of Madame Paravicini. The concerts were badly patronized by the members of the Swiss Colony, but we are sure that Herr und Frau Frey must be well pleased with the reception and ovations they found in their audience.