

# The neutrality of Switzerland

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foreign currencies' is the nearest translation), a type that gained notoriety during the currency chaos of the early 'twenties. These operators follow the discrepancies, and find excuses for travelling from one country to another, with bundles of notes well concealed in their luggage or on their person. In addition to the France-Switzerland-Italy triangle, there are various other itineraries which ingenuity devises. Tangier is one of the centres through which, it is said, the British exchange regulations are systematically circumvented. Margins of profit are very wide, and some of these post-war profiteers have made a fortune, even though the market is rather sensitive and reacts sharply to operations on a professional scale. The strike of French Customs officials provided currency shifters with an opportunity of operating on a really large scale.

At the other extreme there is the proverbial citizen of Aberdeen who is said to have managed to have a free holiday in Switzerland. This legendary individual is said to have spent but a small part of the Swiss franc proceeds of his travellers' cheques at the modest *pension* where he lived for a week or so; with the balance he bought pound notes at a discount, and calculated that, when he reached his native heaths, he would have just half-a-crown more than when he started out. On his return, however, the watchful authorities made sure that, on balance, he had a very expensive holiday indeed — with the gracious option, which he declined, to take another and longer holiday at their expense. Or did they? The law-abiding traditions of Scotsmen are so well known that the authorities must have been pursuing a mythical figure. But the story is too good an object-lesson, in what *might* be done amid present chaos, to dismiss on that account."

**Humanitarian**

In the National Council an amount of 75 million francs (which cantonal contributions will raise to 100 million) has been voted to enable Swiss abroad — or returned home — to re-establish a fresh livelihood. This will benefit mainly those who have lost their callings in belligerent countries; claims for actual damage or loss are not affected and remain a matter for diplomatic representations by our authorities.

—oo—

The exchange racket practised by foreign tourists in Switzerland is still the theme of many fascinating articles in the English press, though none of them have found a solution comprehensible to the ordinary human being. In this connection a farcial report appeared on October 15th in the "Daily Express" for which we have not found any corroboration:

"At Britain's request, the Swiss Government has ordered heavy penalties for British visitors who buy goods with cheques drawn on English banks after they have spent the £75 they are allowed to take abroad."

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**THE NEUTRALITY OF SWITZERLAND.**

"Swiss Neutrality" by EDGAR BONJOUR. Translated by MARY HOTTINGER. (Allen & Unwin 6/-.)

This is a timely book and one that should go a long way to dispel the misconceptions which exist as to the real meaning of Switzerland's neutrality.

The author, professor of History at the University of Basle, has set himself the task of presenting a short but comprehensive study, mainly historical, of the origins and the development of Swiss neutrality. His survey shows that neutrality has been the keynote of Swiss politics from the earliest times and that it has always held a deeply rooted place in the political structure of the Confederation and in the minds of the Swiss people.

Swiss neutrality, as we know it, dates back to the 17th century but already before this period the Swiss were dimly aware that a system of neutrality was necessary for their protection and that their national existence and independence were closely linked with it. Foreign entanglements, they sensed, could be but harmful to their peculiarly constituted federation.

It has been the custom to date Swiss neutrality from the battle of Marignano. Actually the first step towards absolute neutrality was taken at the time of the Thirty Years' War. It took the form of a general prohibition of free passage of foreign troops through Swiss territory, thereby challenging the authority of Grotius, the most famous international lawyer of the time who did not admit any valid grounds of such refusal by any neutrals. For the next two centuries no foreign armies crossed Switzerland and her neutrality was respected until it suffered an eclipse in consequence of the outbreak of the French Revolution and the rise of the first Napoleon.

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Before 1815 Swiss neutrality was not considered incompatible with the practice of supplying fighting men to foreign powers. The export of mercenaries was to some extent an economic necessity and solved the problem of a steadily growing surplus population. The principle of neutrality was, however, maintained in the condition that Switzerland should have the right to send out mercenaries equally to all parties, a principle to which she firmly adhered in spite of the occasional wooings or threats on the part, mostly, of the Kings of France.

The feeling of security resulting from the wise and far-seeing statesmanship of the Swiss leaders received a rude shock when Napoleon I came to power. Strenuous efforts were made to prevent a violation of Switzerland's neutrality and the destruction of her independence. But the Emperor's brutal and uncompromising reply to the Swiss delegate who had hurried to Regensburg left him under no illusion. "Your neutrality," Napoleon said, "is a formula devoid of sense and of no use to you unless I wish it."

The absorption, which followed, of the Helvetic Republic in the French hegemony brought disaster to the Swiss people. Their long-cherished independence and their neutrality came to an end. Foreign armies waged war on their territory and they were compelled to supply a considerable number of troops to help fight Napoleon's battles.

After Napoleon's downfall, Swiss neutrality was, for the first time in history, formally and solemnly acknowledged and guaranteed by the powers who had taken part in the Congress of Vienna. In the famous pact of 1815 they recognised Switzerland's neutrality in perpetuity and guaranteed the integrity and the inviolability of her territory. This pact, with all its implications, was re-affirmed in the Declaration of London of 1920. The Council of the League of Nations thereby acknowledged that Switzerland occupied a peculiar position due to her century-old traditions and could not therefore be bound by all the conditions inherent in the membership of the League, economic sanctions excepted. This exception was removed in 1938 from which date Switzerland resumed her position of absolute neutrality.

The treaty of 1815 notwithstanding, Swiss neutrality in the course of the ensuing years was in peril on more than one occasion. Metternich, the Austrian Foreign Minister, and the government of Louis Philippe of France, both threatened intervention in Swiss domestic affairs during the wars of liberation in the 1830's and 40's and again during the troubles of the Sonderbund. But for the efforts of Palmerston, that consistent friend of Switzerland, the latter would

probably have been involved in hostilities with one or both of these. Again in 1848, the danger of a Prussian invasion was only prevented by the objections of the great powers. In the winter of 1856/57 a dangerous dispute between Prussia and Switzerland seemed to make an armed conflict inevitable. It arose out of the power politics indulged in by Napoleon I, who, in 1806, had bartered Neuchâtel to the King of Prussia in exchange for Hanover. Prussia had never abandoned her claim of suzerainty and when Neuchâtel proclaimed a republic and was admitted as a member of the Confederation, Prussia insisted on her rights and mobilised her army. Hostilities appeared imminent; General Dufour was appointed commander-in-chief of the Swiss Army and feeling ran high throughout Switzerland. It was again the intervention and mediation of England, this time jointly with France, that brought about a peaceful settlement.

For the next 80 years Swiss neutrality remained unchallenged. It was so firmly established that during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870/1 no objection was raised by either belligerent when Bourbaki's broken and exhausted army — some 90,000 men — crossed the Swiss frontier to be disarmed and interned.

The two world wars found Switzerland resolved to maintain and defend her neutrality at all costs. To her, among the countries adjoining Germany, fell the distinction, during the last war, of being the only one to remain inviolate from Nazi expansion. Her immunity, let it be said, was probably due to factors unconnected with Hitler's promise, given in the Reichstag in 1937, that he would respect Swiss neutrality.

Such, briefly, is the historical background against which the author has built up his thesis. Neutrality, he argues, is in the case of Switzerland something more than a political garb to be assumed or discarded at her whim or expediency. It is the fruit of practical experience and age-long tradition and the political system best suited to her needs and her geographical position. It is, moreover, far from being merely the narrow and self-centred nationalism of a small people. The right of asylum (described as a by-product of neutrality), the humanitarian and philanthropic services of institutions such as the International Red Cross, the constant effort on the part of the Swiss to promote reconciliation and understanding between the nations, all these are some of the noblest attributes of their neutrality.

A word of praise is due to the translator. Her rendering is flawless, the style scholarly and lucid. Brilliantly written, never laboured, her translation has all the freshness of an original version.

J.J.F.S.

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