

Nicholas von Flue and the Confederation

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in addition to the home production of 120,000 tons in a year.

In the case of wheat, the authorities have reserves sufficient to maintain the present ration for three months, whereas before the war they kept a 10 months' supply on hand. The present bread and flour ration is ample, it must be said, even though it has to serve, too, for the great variety of pastries and cookies, which are displayed in such quantity in all Swiss towns and villages.

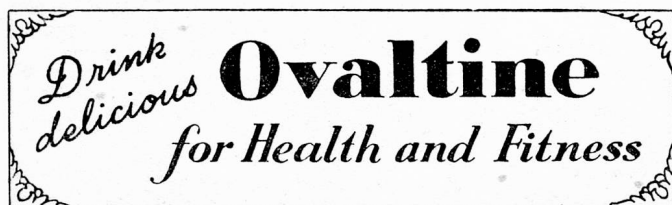
Headlines in the press like, "Argentine butter, where is our good Swiss butter?" show the perplexity of the ordinary man, who compares the present small butter ration of 300 grams a month with memories of prewar plenty, and even export. There is, however, still a great shortage in numbers of dairy herds, due to wartime call-up of men, and the migration of agricultural workers to other and better-paid jobs.

This reduction in milk supply since the beginning of the war has been estimated at some 540,000,000 litres. The lack of agricultural workers still persists, and it will take some time to make good the gaps in dairy cattle breeding. During the recent severe winter, too, there has been a further reduction of milk supply, amounting in some parts of German Switzerland to 20 per cent.

Criticism of Federal food policy has received a further impetus through the publicity given to the recent Government appeal for a halt in demands for wage increases, so as to stop inflation, and maintain the purchasing power of the franc. The authorities, it is said, should set a practical example by facilitating the import of cheaper foodstuffs from abroad, and thereby start the downward trend of prices, which is the only real way of halting inflation. To this the Government replies that any such changes must be made warily, with an eye on possible repercussions on home trades, and on the maintenance of state revenues from import duties.

What of the patient customer who has to return each month to his local food office to exchange the old ration card for a new one? The answer is that the system works smoothly, and has become so much a part of the pattern of living of the citizen that it is accepted like the payment of taxes and other civic duties. It is on the small tradesman, however, without help in business, that the burden of rationing falls heaviest. All the unpaid clerical work attendant on rationing, and the sorting of coupons, has to be done after closing hours, while profits are controlled and surveillance strict.

In a time of world shortages and postwar dislocation, the problem of feeding even a small country like Switzerland, which was not in the war, are complex and difficult. And though many talk of the country's being "administered," and not governed, because of the strict system of controls, there is nation-wide admiration for careful planning behind the rationing system, which even in the darkest days insured the distribution of available foodstuffs.



NICHOLAS VON FLUE AND THE CONFEDERATION.

(A talk given by Mr. H. Marfurt, on June 1st, 1947,
at Westminster Cathedral Hall.)

We are assembled this afternoon to commemorate a man whose name and whose picture are well known all over Switzerland. Nicholas von Flue owes his renown not only to the qualities which induced the Church to elevate him to the dignity of a saint, but to a very great extent also to his merits as a peace-maker.

It is no exaggeration to say that the existence of the Confederation was seriously endangered by the differences of opinion which had arisen between the town and the country cantons. The situation was desperate. And it is again no exaggeration if we say, what many famous historians have confirmed, that it was thanks to the intervention of the hermit of the Ranft that the diet of Stans could be concluded with the Charter which consequently became one of the pillars of the Confederation.

This fact is, therefore, reason enough for us to go through, to-day, the history of those days and to become aware of the situation that our forefathers had to face. We shall realize that the Charter of Stans has not lost its significance and its importance and that Nicholas von Flue's famous words have now for four centuries been the basic principle of Swiss foreign policy and still express the meaning and the object of Swiss neutrality.

The diet of Stans was not the first occasion on which Brother Klaus appeared on the political scene of 15th century Switzerland. He had already been an outstanding figure before in the public life of his home country, the upper valley of Unterwalden, and of the Confederation.

As a youth he took part in the old campaign of Zürich. And when, some years later, the Swiss conquered the Thurgau, he commanded Obwalden's unit. For his renowned sense of justice his fellow citizens made him arbitrator for various lay and ecclesiastical matters of local and national interest. Later on he was elected judge and magistrate and even offered the country's highest dignity of the Landammann. It was already then that he felt that God had other plans for him, and he refused. He was well-known when he was taking an active part in public life, but he became more famous still all over the country and even abroad for his wisdom and his saintly life when he had retired into solitude. It is therefore not astonishing that he succeeded in reconciling the disunited Confederates.

The dissension between the towns and the countries that manifested itself as a sequel to the campaign of Burgundy and became dangerously critical during the diet of Stans had been latent in the Confederation for several decades. It was caused by the different social and political structure of the towns and countries. It had always been the aim of the three original cantons to assist their neighbours whenever and wherever they had to fight for their independence. That is how the unions with the towns of Lucerne, Zürich and Bern originated.

The tendency in the towns, however, was to strengthen the position of municipal authority, to secure and to maintain its sovereignty over rural areas.

The inhabitants of the country which was under the domination of a town had little, or no, share in the liberty which had been the basic aim of the first alliances. But nevertheless, the spirit of freedom and the will for freedom existed in them, and they knew by experience, through their relations with the countrymen of the original cantons, what freedom meant. And the countrymen of Obwalden, for instance, felt in sympathy with their kith and kin of the neighbouring valley of Entlebuch, who were under the domination of Lucerne, so much sympathy, even, that they assisted them in an attempt to shake off the rule of the town.

The contrast became evident when Freiburg and Solothurn asked to be admitted as members of the Confederation. These two towns had fought together with the Confederates against the Duke of Burgundy. But the countries objected to the idea that the number of towns should equal the number of countries. They felt that the towns already were too powerful and that they too openly pursued a position of predominance.

Another reason for the discord was the difference in opinion about the distribution of the booty that the Confederates had made at Grandson. According to the existing charter of Sempach the booty was to be distributed among the cantons in proportion to the number of troops that they supplied. The country cantons, the populations of which were considerably smaller than that of the town cantons, found their share too small and claimed equal portions for every canton irrespective of the number of troops.

The towns resented not only the countries' objection to the admission of Freiburg and Solothurn and their trying to disregard the regulations of the Charter of Sempach, but also the countries' obstructing the policy of expansion pursued by Bern especially and favoured by the other towns. Zürich, Bern and Lucerne therefore thought it necessary to protect their common interests by a special alliance of which Freiburg and Solothurn became partners too. This step was, as far as Lucerne was concerned, contrary to the Charter of 1332, which forbade Lucerne to enter any alliance without the consent of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden.

The object of the alliance was a re-organization of the Confederation by replacing the numerous alliances which united the eight cantons in manifold ways by one union providing for a more centralized structure of the Confederation.

The countries passionately opposed these suggestions. They took their stand on the federalism of the old Charters and were determined not to give way.

Nor did the towns want to yield. The diet of Stans was the last hope of both camps. It assembled on 18th December, 1481, but, after three days' deliberations, failed to reach an agreement. The danger of a civil war was imminent.

From his hermitage Nicholas von Flue watched the situation. He knew the difficulties of the Confederates. Ever since he had left public life he had been in contact with responsible men of the various cantons. From his solitary cell he was able to advise them better than anybody else, as he saw things from a distance, from a point which was just as near the other world as it was to ours.

Nicholas von Flue realized that the policy of expansion at which the towns aimed was not inspired by the spirit that had led to the first alliances. The

will to defend themselves against those who threatened their liberty and not the desire of expansion and power united the first Confederates.

On the other hand he knew that narrow-mindedness and egoism hindered the unity of the Confederation. It was obvious that both, towns and countries, had to give way. But both parties were obstinate and tried to impose their own opinion on their opponents. An arbitrator was required whose authority could persuade both parties.

Nicholas von Flue succeeded. Such was his authority over the people that he did not have to go to Stans himself. He sent his message through the parish priest of Stans, who came to see him the night before the deputies were to leave.

The hermit's advice was accepted. The towns renounced their separate alliance. The countries were prepared to receive Freiburg and Solothurn into the Confederation and to keep to the established way of distributing the booty. A new Charter was signed, which confirmed the previous ones and maintained the federal character of the Confederation. There was no centralization and no predominance of the towns.

The Charter of Stans distinctly reflects Nicholas von Flue's exhortation, which was willingly accepted then and is still accepted by the Swiss of to-day:

"Do not make the fence too wide, so that you may more easily live in peace, harmony and concord, and in the freedom for which you fought so hard. Do not burden yourselves with foreign matters and do not unite with foreign rulers. Beware of discord and selfishness and watch over your country and stand by it. Do not plot war, but if someone should attack you, then fight bravely for your freedom and for your fatherland."



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