

# The Diplomatic Position of Switzerland

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## THE DIPLOMATIC POSITION OF SWITZERLAND.

*In reading the news from foreign countries and about the activities of the United Nations organisations, many people have often wondered why Switzerland is so seldom mentioned in connection with international matters and events and in relation to the many sided affairs of the United Nations. The fact is, that Switzerland is not a member of the United Nations politically, but that she participates and co-operates in many social and economic branch activities of this world wide organisation. Hence, while international politics are always in the big news, little is heard of the many beneficial side activities of the United Nations in which Switzerland helps and does its part.*

*The following article by Dr. Max d'Arcis (published in the issue of "The Swiss American" paper in New York gives a good and short outline of Switzerland's diplomatic position in the present international field and in relation to the United Nations organisations. Ed.*

### Introduction.

The attitude of Switzerland in her relations with other States is extremely simple: She endeavours in all circumstances to maintain the best possible relations with every country. Such a policy may, however, meet with difficulties at times. It is only possible because Switzerland has, centuries ago, once for all renounced all territorial or political ambitions. This renunciation is, without doubt, a pledge of peace. But it can also be interpreted as a sign of weakness, or as a form of egoism.

Such interpretations are so common, that we have often been reproached for our neutrality. However, this neutrality — which is the pivot of Switzerland's foreign policy — has never been an easy way, for this country, of escaping danger or shirking her responsibilities as a European nation.

Neutrality is much more than that. It still remains today what it was yesterday, viz. the cornerstone of Switzerland's foreign policy. And there are precise reasons for such permanence, reasons which we must make clear in this exposé. That is why neutrality is continually put forward and why it holds a dominant position in our discussion, for it remains at the basis of all of our relations with the other countries.

### Neutrality, Our Historical Constant.

Swiss neutrality is not only a principle of foreign policy, but just as much, if not more a principle of home policy, which is essential to the cohesion and the very life of the Confederation. It assumed this character after the Battle of Marignano, when the Swiss troops had, after a defeat by the new French artillery, retired into their mountains and had definitely given up the idea of extending what would now be called their "vital space." This attitude was just as much influenced by reasons of home policy, as by the military defeat. It retains its full value today, when so many small States are asked to adhere to groups of countries,

or to political principles, which expose their independence to danger.

As the basis of every nation's policy we can discover a certain number of dominating trends, which sooner or later prove to be decisive factors for successive developments in history, and which often influence the general policy of many contemporaries. The ways and means that are employed may vary, but the constant tendencies of history remain more or less the same throughout the centuries. Thus we see Soviet Russia revert to certain of the bold projects of Peter the Great, for their own purposes. And we observe, that Great Britain occasionally neglects European policy, in order to attend to her overseas problems, though she now stands under the menace of fire from the Continent, while her insular position is probably less strong than in the past. At the same time France seems to be pre-occupied with the security of her eastern frontier like the ancient Romans, who engaged the Gauls to protect the Rhine line, and like all the kings who succeeded to the throne of France.

There is a permanence in history by reason of the fact, that the same causes lead to the same effects, despite the material progress achieved in the course of centuries. The policy of each country is decided by some principles, which are as permanent as the causes which begot them. Such tenets are neither vague nor utopian; on the contrary, they are the expression of practical necessities, such as the defense of territories, the holding of great lines of communication or the



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maintenance of national unity. One should see nothing else than this in Swiss neutrality. It is one of the "constants" in the history of the Confederation, one of her dominating trends.

### The Nature of Swiss Neutrality.

International law distinguishes two kinds of neutrality: occasional neutrality, and perpetual or permanent neutrality. The former is that of States which, on the occasion of a conflict, decide to take this attitude for the moment. Then they resume their liberty of action, as they only bound themselves for a particular, clearly defined case. This neutrality involves a certain number of rights and duties, which were specified in the International Convention of 1907.

The second form of neutrality is really only a development of the first. It does not differ from it essentially, however it is more complete. It would be a mistake to think that occasional and perpetual neutrality only differ by their duration. The permanence of the second extends its scope and confers upon it a general character, which occasional neutrality does not possess.

The neutrality of Switzerland does not involve any limitation of her sovereignty. It was freely chosen by the Confederation, and its existence was only recognized later on by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, and for the second time in 1815 by the Congress

of Vienna. At this Congress the Powers solemnly recognized that "the Neutrality and Independence of any foreign influence whatever are in the true interest of Europe." Finally, for the third time, an international recognition was affected by the Council of the League of Nations, which declared on February 13, 1920, that "the Perpetual Neutrality of Switzerland and the Guaranty of the Inviolability of her territory are justified by the interests of general peace, and are consequently compatible with the Pact." This recognition was not imposed upon Switzerland. She had even asked for it and she did not obtain it without some difficulty.

However, while neutrality does not limit the sovereignty of the Confederation, it imposes certain obligations. The very fact that she has made this politico-juridical principle her own, obliges Switzerland to remain faithful to it, to be willing to render it durable, and even to make it respected — if needs be by force of arms. Neutrality could, therefore, not serve Switzerland as an easy means of keeping out of the great movements of international policy when it would suit her, and to participate in them when it seems advantageous to do so. From this point of view Swiss neutrality is an indivisible unit, it may be considered as a fixed point in the moving constellation of political combinations. Its existence is justified by this fixed stability, which must be a guaranty for other countries just as for Switzerland herself.

From the preceding statements one must, however, not draw the conclusion, that Swiss neutrality is an absolutely unalterable principle. It does imply certain nuances, and it is subject to certain fluctuations. Like every living principle it evolves with the times and circumstances, although its basic element remains the same.

Thus no one would have imagined in the XVIIth Century, that neutrality could prevent the passage, across the territory of a neutral country, of troops on their way to attack a third country. In accordance with the ruling conceptions of those days, the Roman Catholic Cantons of Switzerland considered themselves justified to authorize, during a long period, the passage of Spanish troops through their territories, on their march from Milan to Flanders. They would have been most surprised, if anyone had reproached them with failing to maintain their neutrality. Such an interpretation would no longer be admitted today.

Even in the XVIIIth Century we still find the Confederation interpreting the principle of equal treatment rather capriciously, and authorizing belligerents to come and raise troops on her territory. Those times have changed completely. Not only has mercenary service for other countries been abolished as an institution, but Swiss citizens who join foreign armies commit an offense, termed impairment of the defensive power of the mother country, and are punished under this indictment. In the course of time Swiss neutrality has, therefore, become extremely strict on the military level.

In the economic field it has undergone a more subtle evolution. Nothing in international law prevents a neutral state from maintaining economic relations with belligerents, and nothing obliges her to treat all of them on an absolutely equal basis. The modern conception of total warfare can, no doubt, find

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a pretext for criticizing this interpretation of neutrality. But the facts speak for themselves, as Switzerland has, in the course of two world wars, always endeavoured to maintain normal economic relations with both camps. If this was prevented at times, it was the consequence of very special circumstances, as from 1940 to 1945, when Switzerland was practically surrounded on all frontiers by the axis powers. Ought she to have solved the problem by discarding all economic relations with foreign countries? That would have been interpreted as a hostile attitude towards countries, from which she then had everything to fear. By such action she would have condemned herself to irremediable suffocation.

There remains the question of moral neutrality. On this point the position of Switzerland has always been perfectly clear and firm. Switzerland is a country, whose citizens entertain very strong feelings concerning the freedom of thought. Moreover, she is an agglomeration of three races, of three cultures and of four languages, and it would not be compatible with her constitutional institutions to frustrate the natural affinities of one of these races or cultures for a neighboring country of the same race and the same culture. It is for this reason that the Swiss government has always rejected the idea of moral neutrality. At the most it advised its population to keep within certain limits. However, no-body has ever been coerced into displaying a pretense of neutrality in contradiction with his personal feelings.

If, during the last war, the population of Alemannic Switzerland often took an even more anti-Nazi attitude than the French-speaking population, it ensued in an absolutely spontaneous manner, because the German-speaking Swiss felt more deeply than the rest of the country the moral rupture with the nation, which in peacetime normally brought support to their own culture. This explains their tendency to stress all the more clearly their disapproval of political conceptions, which they could no longer recognize.

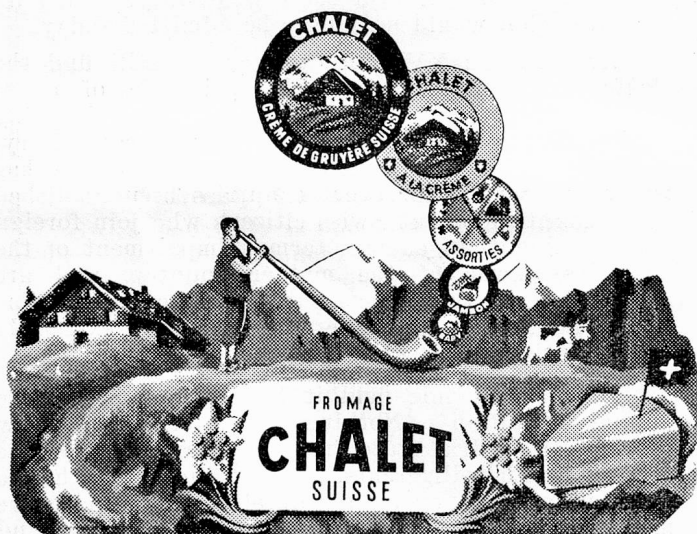
#### Neutrality As a Principle Of Home Politics.

Two essential traits of the Swiss character are his need for independence and his strong national feeling,

traits which make possible this co-habitation of communities, that differ in race, culture, language and religion. But neutrality is the indispensable complement. Without this necessary element the Confederation would perhaps have been split up into its parts under the effect of the centrifugal force of external attractions. Throughout our history foreign alliances were a cause of discord among the Confederates. And beneath the interior motives of much domestic warfare, which rent Switzerland in former times, one can nearly always discern the influence of such an attraction emanating from one of our great neighbours. During the reign of Henry III of France, the French alliance with Switzerland was a cause of profound discord among the cantons. Moreover, the XVth Century, which was one of the most sorrowful periods of our history, was entirely perturbed by religious conflicts, which more than once led Roman Catholic and Protestant confederates to fight each other on the battlefield. During all these religious hostilities the separate alliances, concluded by the cantons with foreign cities or countries, contributed in no small measure to an aggravation of dissensions between the federated cantons, whose individual diplomatic activities were only taken over by the Federal Government, which was created by the Constitution of 1848, and which also merged their separate military forces into one Army.

Though Switzerland was able to celebrate the 660th anniversary of her Confederation in 1951, she had needed more than five centuries to find her own equilibrium, for as late as 1847 the Sonderbund War plunged the country into a serious internal crisis. Thus one may say that Switzerland only found her "perfect shape" in 1848. How many obstacles she had to overcome, how many storms she had to weather, to reach her ideal form!

On more than one occasion, during the centuries, very little would have been needed to explode the confederation by internal quarrels. An example is the Diet of Stans, where her existence was saved in the last moment only by the mediation of St. Nicholas von der Flüe (Covenant of Stans, Dec. 22, 1481).



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The internal pacification of Switzerland was therefore a lengthy process, and national feeling was able to affirm itself only by degrees, until her centripetal force grew stronger than the centrifugal action of the racial, cultural or linguistic attractions of neighbouring countries. The main reasons for this development are seen in the facts that in the XVIth century she abandoned all former aspirations to further conquests and power, and that at the beginning of the XIXth century she had her neutrality confirmed by the Congress of Vienna, after having occupied natural and almost perfect frontiers. In this sense neutrality became a principle of home policy.

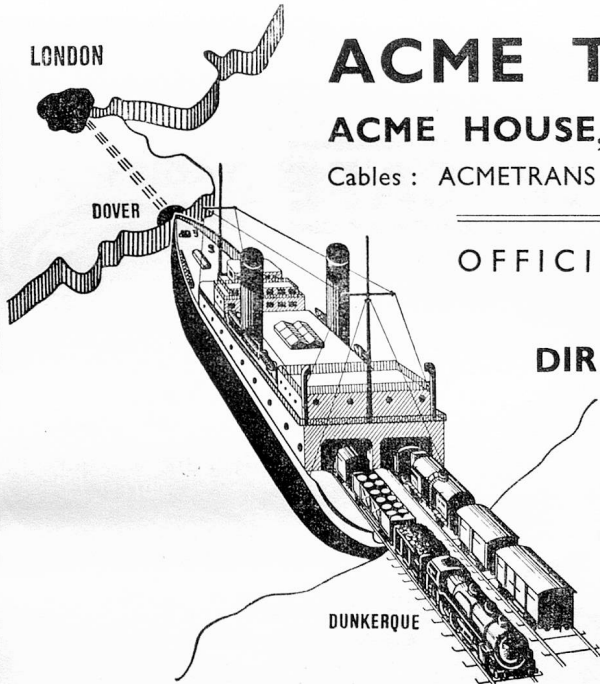
Some readers may think that these are matters of the past, and that today Switzerland forms such a coherent entity, that from a viewpoint of home policy, neutrality no longer holds the same importance for her as in former times. This would be a wrong appreciation of the situation.

The internal equilibrium of the Confederation is stable because the Swiss know how precarious it is, and because they feel the imperious necessity of safeguarding it by constant vigilance. In this country, which produces the most precise watches in the world, it is scarcely surprising that one knows how to regulate, with jealous care, the excellent but delicate mechanism of national unity. You may own the best chronometer in the world. If you drop it, it will cease to function. The internal peace of the Confederation would be compromised — like the function of a chronometer — by a violent shock. Participation in

a war, into which the country would be drawn by its adhesion to a system of alliances, would be such a shock. Such a war would inevitably engender an internal conflict. This was very clearly felt during the war of 1914-18, when our press openly spoke of a chasm between French-Switzerland and the Alemannic Switzerland. At that time the German-speaking Swiss were much more attracted by Germany than in 1939, while the French-speaking Swiss freely sympathized with the cause of France and her allies. Public opinion was so divided in this small country, that Switzerland could have hardly survived a war, whose objective would not have been only to defend her territory, after a violation of the neutrality, by one of the belligerents. In this case, however, her national unity would have strengthened by the general desire for independence, which is common to both parties.

In the course of the recent World War the situation was a very different one. Switzerland remained officially neutral as before, but the population was practically unanimous in its moral opposition to the IIIrd Reich. The Hitler authorities did not fail to complain of this and they more than once exerted pressure on the Swiss Government, to make it change its attitude. Here again such a unanimity was only made possible by neutrality. But this must not be misunderstood. The attitude of Alemannic Switzerland was due more to the instinctive repulsion of the Swiss against a totalitarian régime that was contrary to their traditions, than to hostility against a nation upholding their own culture.

*(to be continued.)*



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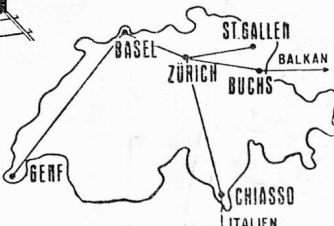
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