

Switzerland through Russian eyes

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SWITZERLAND THROUGH RUSSIAN EYES.

Of the many books on Switzerland written by non-Swiss authors none has impressed us more than the stimulating and provocative study "SWITZERLAND IN PERSPECTIVE" by George Soloveytschik, published by Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, price 21/- net; a handsome volume of some 300 pp., complete with maps, statistical tables and index.

The title of the book is appropriate and well-chosen. It is, indeed the perspective of a shrewd observer who deals with his matter objectively and does not allow the obvious sympathy he feels for the Swiss influence his judgment. His verdicts are often severe and apt to make the Swiss reader wince, but it is impossible to doubt the author's sincerity or to dismiss as undeserved all of his unsparing strictures.

Mr. Soloveytschik, a Russian intellectual of pre-Soviet vintage has, in the course of a long residence in Switzerland, acquired a profound and extensive knowledge of the Swiss, their customs and their institutions. His book is a searching critical survey of their cantonal and federal politics, their economic affairs, national defence, banking and insurance, industry, the Press, the tourist trade as it affects them rather than the tourist, foreign relations and the ways and manners of the men and women who form the heterogeneous population of the Swiss confederation.

Mountaineering, winter sports and the scenic beauty of the land are scarcely touched upon, and but the barest outline of its history is given. Stress is laid upon the human characteristics of the people and their leaders and upon the unique and sometimes misunderstood system of their government in which the communes, the cantons and the ordinary voter cling to the privilege, jealously guarded, of being and remaining the "Sovereign".

The historical section of the book is a model of its kind, well documented, skilfully condensed and brilliantly written. Of the William Tell legend which holds so firm a place in the hearts of the Swiss people, the author contends that it is devoid of historical foundation. It was unknown before Tschudi introduced it in his history and until, further expanded and adorned by Johann von Muller, the great historian, Schiller, in 1804, turned it into a powerful drama. The identical story, he adds, is told by a twelfth-century Danish historian and is common to many old ballads throughout the world.

The diversity of Switzerland's languages arouses the author's interest as it does that of every foreign observer. Schwyztuertetsch, the idiom of almost three quarters of the population and 500 years older than Luther's bible is, in his view, a precious possession, worth cultivating and preserving, not omitting even that curious and widely-used expression "Cheib". The belief that the Swiss are good linguists he considers to be a myth and he is most critical of the way in which they mutilate, in their guttural fashion, as he puts it, the language of Schiller and Voltaire whenever they attempt to speak it.

Political events within the last fifty years provide the author with a fruitful field of observation and trenchant criticism. The chapter entitled "A curious deviation" makes painful reading. It describes the penetration of German influence during the years preceding the first World War and the disintegration of national unity it threatened. German predominance, he avers, persisted in varying degrees until the collapse of the Nazi regime brought it to an end.

Coming to more recent times, the author acclaim Motta as one of Switzerland's greatest statesmen. This appreciation is qualified, however, by the assertion that Motta's leadership, outstanding though it was, suffered from marked pro-Hitler and pro-Mussolini leanings and an inability to understand the British. Of Motta's immediate successor he has little good to say but he bestows unstinted praise on such public men as Petitpierre, Minger and Stucki also on Spitteler and Prof. Rappard whom he frequently quotes. He pays a glowing tribute to General Guisan, made famous by the services he rendered his country in the last war and whose popularity in Switzerland he compares with that enjoyed by Winston Churchill among the British people.

Whether one agrees with the author's conclusions or not, and however galling some of his criticism may be, it must be admitted that he has produced a survey of Swiss affairs which conveys a wealth of interesting information and constitutes a fearless and balanced judgment on the social and political conditions of modern Switzerland. The outspoken manner in which he has treated his subject may cause resentment but the critical method is surely preferable to indiscriminate adulation. Probably the best thing the over-sensitive reader can do is to accept the author's plea, expressed in the preface, that the Swiss may see in his book a testimony of friendship.

J.J.F.S.

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