

Home affairs

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HOME AFFAIRS.

by PIERRE BÉGUIN.

“Regarding a constant preoccupation”.

In Switzerland, there exists a problem which preoccupies public opinion almost constantly, but for which no solution has been found as yet. It may happen that it is not spoken about for months on end. And then, suddenly, it is taken up again by a newspaper, by some citizen or other, or by a member of Parliament. The problem in question is that of Swiss citizens enlisting in the French Foreign Legion.

Some figures have just been published on this subject, which are not lacking in interest. Of course, owing to the fact that the secret is jealously guarded by the French authorities and that every guarantee is given to the legionaries that their identity will never be revealed, no absolutely exact statistics are available. Nevertheless, it may be affirmed, without much risk of error, that there are between 3,000 and 5,000 soldiers of Swiss nationality to be found in the Foreign Legion. It may also be admitted, as an established fact that the number of Swiss citizens who enlist each year in the Foreign Legion may be estimated at between five and six hundred, and that a corresponding number of such soldiers leave the Legion, every year. These figures have just been revealed to the Swiss public. It had been thought that they were considerably lower.

If this question engrosses our attention periodically, this is due to the fact that the enlistment of a Swiss citizen in a foreign army, whatever its nationality, constitutes an offence for which the Penal Code prescribes a severe punishment. This legal disposition originates as a result of the very unpleasant memories left by a long period of our national history, during the course of which the Swiss willingly and eagerly engaged in mercenary service in foreign armies. Under the Ancient Régime, this often led to Swiss citizens having to fight against each other. It also proved an element of division among the Confederates. And that was the reason why, during the last century, it was decided that all such mercenary service should be prohibited.

This prohibition is in no way a theoretical one. It is, on the contrary, very effective. Each time that a Swiss returns to his country, after having spent five, ten or fifteen years in the Foreign Legion, he is arrested at the frontier and then sentenced to a period of imprisonment, unless he had been duly authorised before his departure — as was the case

in respect of certain officers — to serve in a foreign army. But, such cases are quite exceptional.

The offence of which the former legionary is accused, consists in having by his action impaired Swiss national defense. This offence is considered as being very serious in a country which has made military service a general obligation, in a country which possesses a system of militia from which only the sick and disabled are exempt.

Obviously, it is very difficult to do anything to prevent these enlistments. Most of the men who join the Foreign Legion are those who cannot adapt themselves to our social life and who are tempted by the thought of adventure. Nevertheless, it might be expected that a friendly country, like France, could, at least, take sufficient precautions in order to prevent any engagements being contracted on the spur of the moment or in a moment of despair. This, more especially in regard to minors. But, whereas in Switzerland a man attains his majority at twenty, and in France, when he is twenty-one, there exists a special majority for legionaries: they are admitted, without any special formalities, as from the age of eighteen. That is an anomaly against which protest should be raised. Swiss public opinion considers it to be inadmissible that this rule should be maintained. It expects from France's friendship, that this rule should be repealed, and that, at any rate, no-one under twenty years of age should be allowed to join the Foreign Legion. We owe this to our young men, even those who have gone astray.



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