

Home affairs

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HOME AFFAIRS.

by MAX NER.

The navigability of the Upper Rhine, that is to say that part of the Rhine which flows between Basle and the Lake of Constance, has once more been brought into the light of public interest through a statement of the present position contained in a Report of the Federal Council, submitted to Parliament. The Council of States proceeded immediately to discuss this problem, and took cognizance of the Report of the Federal Council in a favourable sense. No further Resolutions had to be passed. The purpose of the Report was merely to set forth the present position of this development project.

From this Report it once more became apparent that, in this matter economic, traffic, technical, financial and political aspects are to be found. The fact that the Rhine is also the frontier stream between Switzerland and Germany, gives rise, moreover, to international questions.

Up to the end of the last century, the Rhine, between Basle and Lake Constance, served chiefly as a navigational way. With the improvements brought to road traffic, the importance of transport by water declined. Then, later, when the progress of technique made it possible to exploit the forces of the Rhine through the construction of big electricity works, an improvement occurred in the prospect for navigation along the Upper Rhine. This was due to the fact that the weirs built in the proximity of the electricity plants, dammed the Rhine along wide stretches, thus creating more favourable conditions for navigation. Locks had to be built, of course, at the works, so as to enable the ships to surmount these obstacles.

Since then, the navigation of the Rhine, below Basle, has been developed on a large scale, this with the active participation of Switzerland. The majority of heavy goods, such as coal, oils and cereals, in order to get to Switzerland, are conveyed from the sea, by waterway. For a highly industrialised inland country like Switzerland, this convenient connection with the sea is highly important from the economic aspects, as in this way transportation is simplified and freight comes considerably cheaper.

For a long time past, the realisation of these facts has inspired the wish to make it possible for navigation, on a big scale, to be extended to Lake Constance, via Basle. Austria, also, being as she is a riparian State of Lake Constance, is extremely interested in this project. Great interest also exists in South Germany. And, in Switzerland, it is the Eastern regions which hope to obtain, from the opening up of this waterway, cheaper freight rates than those which they have to pay for the transport of goods from Basle, by rail or by road.

On the other hand, of course, the Federal Railways and the motor carriers trade will suffer the loss of receipts from the transport of those goods which will be shipped along the Rhine directly to the places where the said goods are to be used.

A State Treaty with Germany, concluded in 1929, provides that new discussions on this matter shall take place as soon as economic conditions would

appear to be favourable for the carrying out of this development project. The latest Report of the Federal Council to the Federal Chambers, serves the purpose of examining the question of the profitableness of such a venture, at the present time.

Compared with 1929, the necessary conditions have changed during the intervening thirty years, in so far that various power stations have been erected since then along this part of the Rhine. Moreover, another four power stations must still be built, or the existing plants must be transformed, before any navigational ways can be started upon. Furthermore, it is considered that the work of regulating the Rhine between Basle and Strasbourg, which is now almost completed, should first be finished and its results put to the test.

Shipping to Basle has developed tremendously during these last thirty years. At the same time, however, competition between rail and road transport has become very acute, and the question must be freshly examined as to how competition on the part of a waterway extended as far as Lake Constance, will work out.

A new factor has come into being, meanwhile, in that the possibilities for the peaceful utilisation of atomic energy in a probably not too distant future, will mean a complete change in the necessary conditions for the construction of hydraulic plants for the production of electric power. It is not possible however to say to-day, whether a utilisation of atomic energy will lead to a decrease or an increase in those transports which would come into question for conveyance by water.

More recent projects for the creation of a waterway which will serve to connect Lake Constance with the Danube, lend a new aspect to the problem of navigation along the Upper Rhine. All these things show that one cannot possibly count on any decision being taken in the near future, but, nevertheless, the satisfactory fact emerges that the plan for making the Upper Rhine navigable has not lost any of its interest or importance.

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