What is the Swiss sense of national unity? [to be continued]

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WHAT IS THE SWISS SENSE OF NATIONAL UNITY?

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PART FOUR

Now we come to the last of the three aspects of the Swiss sense of national unity: First, the national view of the past was considered, history, and then, the national view of the present, of the stereotype with which Swiss people see themselves and their country through patriotic eyes.

Finally, we come to the range of ideas concerning the future. It there any idea which is viewed as the goal of national life? A great and sublime aim at which all common endeavour is directed? There is one, and it could be called the idea of the national mission. Every nation has such an idea; there is the British idea of " rule, Britannia ", there is the American desire to make the world better and safe for democracy, and there is the French will to develop and lead the European cultural life. In Switzerland, similar ideas have existed since the eighteenth century, and they have been changed by every generation. The history of the Swiss idea of a national mission is a most complicated one. The three basic points of Switzerland's mission in Europe and the world may be summarised as follows: to be a model of a democratic republic, a model of better understanding amongst nations and the desire to help humanity by rendering charitable services.

The first idea of mission, the republican and democratic idea, is the oldest one. It emerged at a time when nearly all Europe was ruled by kings, princes and emperors, and when the democratic confederation in the heart of the continent felt itself a very lonely exception. French publicists like Montesquieu, Rousseau and Voltaire wrote in their books that, Switzerland was a model and example of democratic life, comparable to the republics of ancient Greece and Rome. Very soon, the Swiss people became very proud of this fact. Many of them urged that it should be the great task and mission of Switzerland to propagate democratic and republican ideas all over Europe. In the years of revolution in the nineteenth century, some Swiss politicians even suggested helping the democracies struggling for life in Germany, Italy and Poland and to assist them with armed forces. Switzerland, however, remained neutral. But there was nevertheless always the feeling of being a pioneer and champion of democracy. The idea of a democratic mission was and still is one of the most important factors of Swiss political thought.

The second idea of national mission is, as was stated above, the idea of being a model of peaceful coexistence of different nations. This idea emerged in the context of German, Italian and French nationalism. Especially in Italy and Germany, there was a strong movement characterised by the slogan of " One language — one nation — one empire ". This slogan obviously was a tremendous challenge to Switzerland, the country being composed of groups with three cultures and four languages. For Switzerland, this challenge was a question of to be or not to be. If the cohesive force of common language had been stronger than the Swiss sense of national unity, the country would have been torn to pieces. How could this dangerous challenge be met? The first answer was given by the Zurich-born lawyer, Johann-Conrad Bluntschli. He said " Yes, Switzerland seems to be an exception to the general tendency that men speaking the same language should live together in the same State. But not Switzerland is abnormal — the general development is wrong. For men speaking different languages must be able and willing to live together peacefully. Switzerland is the model of this higher principle of peaceful coexistence ". And Bluntschli also expressed the idea which is still alive that Switzerland must become a mirror, a small live portrait of the coming Europe where all peoples live side by side in spite of their different cultures and languages. This idea of national mission has grown and grown during the decades, and some publicists in the aftermath of World War I even talked about a " Helvetisation of Europe " (*eine Verschweizerung Europas*), to be the only possible solution of how to ensure peace on the troubled and suffering continent. Today, this idea has, of course, lost some ground because of the contemporary process of unifying Europe as represented by the Common Market. But nevertheless, Swiss and foreign publicists still call Switzerland a model for the future European Community, particularly stressing the advantages of a federalistic solution over the centralistic solution as advocated by the European Economic Community.

The third of the Swiss ideas of national mission is the humanitarian or charitable idea. It is older than the Swiss State or than the Swiss national feeling itself, for it has always been a Swiss tradition to offer asylum to refugees. But since the second half of the nineteenth century, there has been a movement towards elevating this general notion of helping humanity to a special national mission. This movement has found its expression in the fact that the Swiss national flag, the white cross on the red ground, served as the model of that symbol of the great humanitarian organisation, the Red Cross. Whenever Europe had the misfortune of being involved in war, neutral Switzerland considered it as her particular national mission to help. Today, this humanitarian mission has been given a new aspect by the so-called " third world ", the developing countries, and the need for technical assistance. The most typical modern expression of this idea of mission was formulated by Federal Councillor Petitpierre in 1947, the device of " Neutralité et solidarité ", neutrality and solidarity.

All these three great ideas of national mission, if considered in the context of the Swiss sense of national unity, have one common function: By giving to all Swiss a common aim and purpose, they act as a strong unifying force. Since all are in some way or some degree engaged in the common task, everyone feels himself a member of the great national team, and thus the national community will become more closely allied and integrated.

(To be continued.)