

And now .. a giant stride forward

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1980)**

Heft 1771

PDF erstellt am: **09.08.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689640>

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And now . . a giant stride forward

Twentieth century

As a result of the profound global changes that take place during our present century, the small Alpine republic with only one tenth of the number of Britain's inhabitants becomes a more equal partner to the former imperial giant.

Today Switzerland is the 11th largest exporter on the world list, the seventh largest importer, the fifth largest overseas investor (after the USA, the UK, Germany and Japan) and banking centre, ranks about fourth with her stock exchange and is sometimes number one as a gold market and a reinsurer.

Britain occupies the fourth place as a supplier of the Swiss (7.7 per cent of all imports in 1979), while Switzerland is in seventh position for sales to the British market (5.3 per cent of all British imports in 1979). The trade balance has usually been positive for Britain, the difference normally amounting to less than 10 per cent of the combined exchange in both directions.

There are today about 100 Swiss companies in the UK employing approximately 50,000 people in some 180 manufacturing units. This represents total assets valued at about £500 millions.

Britain is also a considerable investor in Switzerland, controlling or having major stakes in about 360 companies. New British investments in Switzerland since 1973 alone amount to about £200 millions.

Tourism between the two countries is of considerable importance. As stated earlier Britons virtually invented holiday-making in Switzerland, whereas the Swiss are only discovering in this century the touristic appeal of the British Isles and often combine their need for adventure with the

practical aim of improving their knowledge of the English language.

Obviously there are strong fluctuations in the statistics, largely as a result of exchange rate developments. 1961 sees a record number of Britons visiting Switzerland, with 2.97 million nights spent in hotels. After several devaluations of the pound this number drops drastically to reach a low in 1977 of less than a third of the former high.

Now the trend is rising again. In 1979 British visitors to Switzerland (all categories) total about 500,000. In the other direction 325,000 people leave Switzerland for visits to the United Kingdom.

At the political level, British-Swiss relations start off, at the

turn of this century, in a somewhat less cordial atmosphere. During the Boer War Swiss public opinion openly supports the Dutch settlers and manifests anti-British sentiments.

A state visit by Kaiser Wilhelm II (1912), who comes to watch manoeuvres of the Swiss armed forces, and other events arouse British suspicions of secret Swiss agreements with Germany. However the declaration of neutrality issued by the Swiss Government at the outbreak of the First World War reassures Whitehall, and so does the helpful attitude of the Swiss population, who assist British tourists trapped by the hostilities.

In December 1914 the poet and later Nobel prize winner Carl Spitteler says in a widely

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acclaimed speech in Zurich: "We ought to show a particular appreciation of what the British have done for us. Several times they have supported us in dangerous situations. Britain may not be our only friend, but she is our most trustworthy friend" (translated from German).

In the later years of the war, some 1,800 British officers and soldiers, who have been released by Germany as prisoners of war because of illness, are given careful treatment in unused Swiss hotels at major resorts.

After the war London shows its understanding of Switzerland's situation by supporting the "Declaration of London" (1920), according to which Swiss neutrality is held to be compatible with her duties as a member of the League of Nations.

During the Second World War Britain again manifests sympathy for the difficult position of neutral Switzerland who is then completely surrounded by one of the warring sides. Winston Churchill successfully opposes a plan proposed by Stalin in 1944 to violate Swiss neutrality by attacking Germany unexpectedly from Swiss territory.

On December 3, 1944, Churchill cables to the Foreign Secretary from a meeting with Stalin in Moscow:

"Of all the neutrals, Switzerland has the greatest right to distinction. She has been the sole international force linking the hideously-sundered nations and ourselves. What does it matter whether she has been

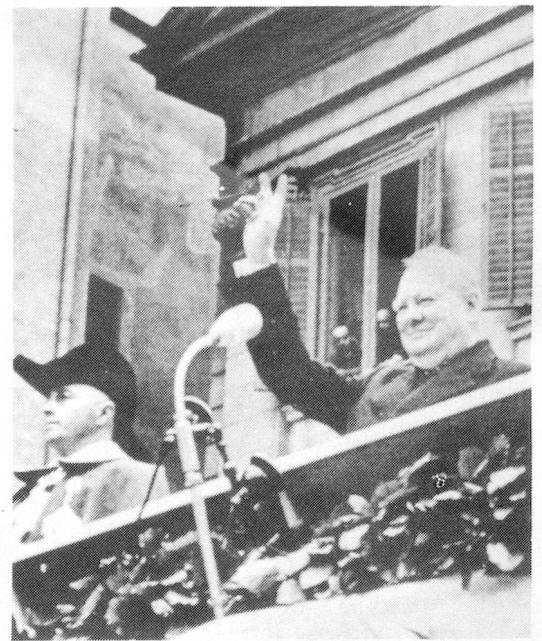
able to give us the commercial advantages we desire or has given too many to the Germans, to keep herself alive? She has been a democratic State, standing for freedom in self-defence among her mountains, and in thought, in spite of race, largely on our side.

"I was astonished at U.J.'s (i.e. Uncle Joe, for Joseph Stalin) savageness against her and, much though I respect that great and good man, I was entirely uninfluenced by his attitude. He called them "swine", and he does not use that sort of language without meaning it. I am sure we ought to stand by Switzerland, and we ought to explain to U.J. why it is we do so. The moment for sending such a message should be carefully chosen.

"Personally, I stand by the only decent neutrals in the world. Let me know in conversation whether we are together on this or not. — W.S.C."

As the Second World War draws to an end the Swiss do not forget the great English statesman. He is invited by a group of Swiss friends, and in Zurich, 1946, makes his famous appeal to the Continent to join forces and create a United States of Europe. Motivated by a similar spirit, Swiss circles support the British institution of Wilton Park (another of Churchill's ideas) by sending thousands of books in the German language to German prisoners of war in Britain, in an effort to prepare them for their return to a future Germany based on democratic principles. Wilton Park later

Sir Winston Churchill in Zurich in 1946



becomes a discussion centre for OECD-countries and still enjoys vigorous backing in Switzerland.

In 1965, on the initiative of the Anglo-Swiss Society in London, a monument is erected in Churchill's memory near Lake Thun (Canton Berne), and a year later the Winston Churchill Foundation and the Churchill Memorial Library are created in Zurich.

In the post-war years, British-Swiss relations are predominantly characterised by economic issues. As Switzerland is now one of the few countries with a freely convertible currency, and as she has a widely recognised banking system she becomes a principal trading place for transferable sterling.

Switzerland is being discovered by the City. Leading merchant banks of each country open branch offices in the other (the Swiss Bank Corporation having done so much earlier, in 1898, as one of the first five foreign banks in London). The effects of currency trading in Switzerland on exchange rates are sometimes considerable, which leads to the description of Swiss bankers as "the gnomes of Zurich", coined by British politicians.

In the field of monetary cooperation, Switzerland has the opportunity to assist Britain in several operations aimed at stabilising the pound.

As to the question of European integration, Britain and Switzerland take the same initial approach. With the Scandi-

navian countries, Austria and Portugal they create the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) in 1959. This is their answer to the Common Market with its politically more ambitious concept of supra-national institutions.

The resulting close cooperation between Britain and Switzerland in economic policies lasts formally until 1972, when Britain changes camps by joining the European Communities. The two countries continue to be partners, however, as they belong to the new economic superstructure of Western Europe, which consists of the industrial free trade zone created by bilateral arrangements between the EEC and each of the remaining EFTA member countries.

The Swiss community in Britain is now estimated to consist of 25,000 to 28,000 people (including dual nationals), the British community in Switzerland of 14,000 people.

April/May 1980

Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, accompanied by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and his wife, Lord and Lady Carrington, come to Switzerland on a four-day state visit, the first ever undertaken by a British monarch (a President of the Swiss Confederation traditionally does not go on state visits). The event underlines better than any other manifestation the excellent state of British-Swiss relations.

Concluded



Carl Spitteler, the poet (1845-1924)