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Switzerland

Tanner, Jakob

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11366>

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-178612>

Scientific Publication in Electronic Form

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Originally published at:

Tanner, Jakob (2019). Switzerland. Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11366>

Switzerland

By Jakob Tanner

As a neutral country, Switzerland was not involved in the devastating military conflicts of 1914-18. Nevertheless, concerning the economy, communications, diplomacy, secret services and war propaganda, it was intensely entangled with the “Great War.” From August 1914 onwards, the Swiss authorities governed with extra-constitutional emergency law, which was called a “plenipotentiary regime.” The government, in line with export-oriented companies, was guided by the goal of benefiting from the advantages of a continent at war. Together with its neutrality and its humanitarian mission, this criterion of utility was the backbone of the national security policy. This article describes Switzerland's internal tensions and contradictory transnational ties in the context of “total” and shows how social conflicts and political radicalization resulted in a major national strike by November 1918.

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Introduction: The First World War and Historiography

Until very recently, the years 1914 to 1918 were barely more than a footnote in Swiss written history.^[1] At the start of the 21st century, a book from 1928 was still the standard reference work on the period. The circumstances of its publication – author Jacob Ruchti (1878-?) received a commission from [Germany](#) during the war – were not explored until 2014.^[2] Recent publications have consequently written of a “forgotten economic war” and a “forgotten war.”^[3] Political debates that ignited over Switzerland’s history almost always concerned the country’s relationship with Nazism. As Swiss [remembrance culture](#) focused largely on the Second World War, memory of the “Great War” became obscured and the fact that certain actions and reactions after 1939 were repetitions from the First World War was overlooked. In as far as the war years were present in the nation’s collective memory, they served as a negative example – a scenario to be avoided in the future.^[4] However, in the late 1960s historians began to reconsider the [Swiss national strike](#) from 9 to 14 November 1918, which contrary to all the available information had been regarded as a Bolshevik-inspired attempted coup. This milestone in the history of the Swiss Confederation came to be interpreted as a corollary of growing social inequality and political polarization, for which the government and army leadership were partly responsible. Recent research into the war and events that shaped modern Switzerland, including the national strike, takes a transnational approach. It not only considers aspects of social, economic, and cultural history, as well as the history of emotions, but also evaluates the visual documents of the time.^[5]

Declaration of Neutrality and Party Truce

In the decades around 1900, Switzerland developed a positive self-image as a [neutral](#) small state. Foregoing any colonial claims and sidestepping the [imperialist](#) race, it was nonetheless closely interwoven in the global economy and colonial structures. It was, moreover, the site of international peace efforts. On 24-25 November 1912, the Socialist International hosted a major peace congress in Basel, attended by 555 delegates from 17 European countries. However, the dream of peace ended when Germany declared war on [Russia](#) and [France](#) mobilized on 1 August 1914, the Swiss national holiday.

The next day, the Federal Council (the seven-person executive head of government) declared [Switzerland’s neutrality](#).^[6] On 3 August, the Federal Assembly acknowledged and approved the international mobilization of troops and elected a chief commander of the army. A “general” of this kind is only appointed for the duration of active service in Switzerland; the successful candidate was

Ulrich Wille (1848-1925), who won out against his opponent Theophil Sprecher von Bernegg (1850-1927). At the same time, the legislative Federal Assembly handed “unrestricted authority” and “unlimited credit” to the executive. According to Swiss Federal Councilor Ludwig Forrer (1845-1921), this extra-constitutional emergency law, later described as a “plenipotentiary regime” (*Vollmachtenregime*), gave the executive special “dictatorial” powers that effectively deactivated parliamentary control and finally tipped the balance of power in government, which had been shifting away from the legislative and toward the executive since 1900. This marked an even more drastic curtailment of the policy-making system than in belligerent states such as [Britain](#) and France.

In formal terms, the constitution remained in force but was de facto displaced by the growing statutes of emergency law. In the years 1914 to 1919, Switzerland issued a total of 1,600 emergency decrees. Initially regulating the military sphere (including [censorship](#)), from 1916 on they increasingly affected the [economic](#) and social spheres. The Federal Supreme Court was not empowered to judge the constitutionality of the emergency regime. It gave the Federal Council carte blanche, thus acknowledging it substantively as legislator and legitimizing it under the rule of law.^[7]

Economically, Switzerland was hardly prepared for war. As in most countries, the idea of a short war was popular; it was estimated to last between five weeks and a maximum of six months. The country had enough bread stocks to last 60 days. Because of this short-term view, neither the Federal Council nor the army leadership made plans to tackle the country’s vulnerability due to its economic dependencies, or conversely utilize its advantages for the foreign policy it created. Gradually, however, Switzerland’s multiple entanglements with all the belligerent states proved to be a stabilizing factor and guarantor of national survival.^[8] But in the early period, Switzerland did not have a single expert on international maritime, blockade, or contraband law, resulting in confusion in a central field of wartime governance.^[9]

Another reason for the lack of long-term planning was that both the military leadership and the national government assumed that in the improbable case of a long war, Switzerland would have to ally itself with one of the belligerent power blocks. Indeed, many initially neutral countries eventually entered the war.^[10] Switzerland retained its neutrality, though increasingly treating it as a flexible concept. The army leadership did not entirely rule out the possibility of entering the war until at least 1916. General Wille called for Switzerland to participate in hostilities on several occasions. On 20 July 1915 he wrote a “saber-rattling letter” to Federal Councilor Arthur Hoffmann (1857-1927), stating that he regarded “the current moment as advantageous for entering the war if it is required to maintain our autonomy and independence.”^[11]

Swiss military staff was convinced that the greatest threat was posed by the west, especially France. Consequently, distinctly one-sided military arrangements (*Punktationen*) were made before and after 1914 with Germany and Austria-Hungary. Later, Switzerland’s talks with France (*Plan H*) aimed to remedy this bias^[12] and reflected the country’s increased reliance on the Entente Powers, especially the [United States](#), whose entry into the war came in early April 1917.^[13]

Mobilization, Active Military Service, and the Labor Market

In 1914, Switzerland had a militia army based on the principle of compulsory military service. Members of the liberal middle class and conservative families from central Switzerland dominated the officer corps. At the outbreak of war, some 220,000 men (approximately one eighth of the working population) were conscripted for active service; some 45,000 horses (about a third of the population) were also enlisted. The mobilized men served an average of 500 to 600 days in the army. Receiving little pay, and with no system to compensate for loss of earnings until the start of World War II, it spelled financial crisis for many lower-class families. The labor market struggled with the loss of some 100,000 migrant workers, called up by their national armies when the war broke out. By 1920 migration out of Switzerland had risen to at least 228,000, while the net immigration was 72,000 – including 42,000 demobilized soldiers. When the war ended, Switzerland closed its borders to prevent an influx of demobilized soldiers from the Central Powers and to protect the “national workforce.”^[14] Swiss men returned straight to their workplaces. In parallel, the women who had been employed during the war to counteract the labor shortage in the war industries were swiftly “phased out,” returning the proportion of women in industry to pre-war level by 1920.

In general terms, the country placed greater importance on export interests and the national economy than on military strategy. The size of the army fluctuated throughout the war years, tending overall to decline. By early September 1918, there were only 20,000 soldiers in service. In early November, however, substantial reinforcements were provided by a new military commando, conscripted to maintain internal order (*Ordnungsdienst*). An additional 95,000 men were then deployed along the “home front”, making up a 110,000-strong force of soldiers and officers together with border guards, and marking the highest number of troops deployed since fall 1914.^[15]

In summer 1914, the modestly furnished Swiss army would not have been able to defend the small state in military combat.^[16] Although its weaponry was subsequently expanded, one lieutenant described it in his diary as a “pocket army.” General Wille was chiefly concerned with schooling morality. In 1917, he declared that every state must have an army “otherwise it decays inwardly” and that without “military capability” there can be no “economic strength.” Wille had a distinct aversion to all forms of asymmetric warfare and hence to the concept of “people’s war.” In this respect, he had the basic support of his chief-of-staff Theophil Sprecher von Bernegg.

Wille’s insistence on drill and discipline encountered resistance and sparked protests throughout the war. In fall 1917, soldiers started to organize politically, forming unions and social-democratic soldiers’ associations, which were branded “Bolshevik mobs” by the bourgeoisie. In the first winter of the war, General Wille launched a series of morale-boosting talks for the troops, controversially appointing the reactionary traditionalist Gonzague de Reynold (1880-1970) as director. Advocates of the temperance and women’s movements (including leading exponent Susanna Orelli (1845-1939)) set up a charitable organization to cater for the troops without alcohol (*Gemeinnütziger Verein für alkoholfreie Verpflegung der Truppen*). By the end of the war, a national society for soldiers’ welfare (*Schweizer Verband Soldatenwohl*), directed by Else Spiller (later Züblin-Spiller, 1881-1948) and

supported by the federal authorities and the army leadership, was running around 1000 alcohol-free restaurants for men serving in the military; from 1916 it also provided social welfare.^[17] Contrary to many women's expectations, these efforts were not rewarded with the introduction of [female suffrage](#) after the war.

National economy: Wartime Prosperity, Poverty, and Loss of National Sovereignty

Although alpine farmers dominated the (self-)image of the nation, Switzerland was a distinctly and, in an international comparison, relatively prosperous industrial nation. In 1910, the secondary sector accounted for 44 percent of the gross domestic product; the service sector, 38 percent. Agriculture accounted for less than a fifth of the GDP.^[18] With rural industrialization and a comparatively low level of urbanization, economic sectors and social strata were spread across most areas. The entire country was heavily dependent on foreign cooperation. 15 percent of industry and 8 percent of services were directly export-oriented (textiles, watches and machines, tourism); foreign trade in 1913 (import and export) accounted for 60 percent of the GDP. About half of the nation's [foodstuffs](#) were imported, making Switzerland vulnerable to supply crises.^[19] In 1916 the trade balance was – anomalously – positive. Most foreign trade was conducted with Germany. The proportion of non-European buyers and suppliers shrank during the war from approximately 15 percent to just a few percent. A relatively large number of multinational industrial, commercial, and finance companies based their operations in Switzerland, aiming to circumvent their competitors' import barriers by relocating production abroad. Their number rose between 1910 and 1919 from 34 to 50.

Closely entwined with the European markets, the Swiss economy suffered considerable turbulence at the start of the war. Rumors of impending disaster triggered runs on banks and panic buying from retail stores. The stock exchanges in Zurich and Basel were closed for a period. The situation soon stabilized and in February 1915 the economy began to recover, aided by trade agreements with the belligerent powers.

However, working and living conditions deteriorated significantly from 1915 on. Not only was the revised Swiss Federal Factory Law suspended when the war started but wartime inflation, which raised the cost of living between 1914 and 1918 from 100 to 230 index points, caused massive economic redistribution.^[20] The real earnings and hence purchasing power of broad sections of the population were reduced on average by a quarter while many companies' turnovers and profits soared.^[21] Between 1915 and 1920, the authorities recorded taxable war profits of some 2.4 billion Swiss Francs, roughly equivalent to the employed workforce's loss in purchasing power. Savings deposits, moreover, melted away while the debt burden of the farmers, who already profited from the price increases, lightened. Many families, not only in the cities, were pushed under the poverty line. By the end of the war, some 700,000 individuals – a sixth of the population – relied on emergency support. Relief measures such as these were necessary to at least avert a famine among the lower

classes.^[22]

Where foreign trade policy was concerned, it soon became clear that the classic concept of neutrality, as a purely governmental obligation, leaving the private sector free rein within the *courant normal*, was not suited to the contemporary situation. Initially, the Federal Council had defended the freedoms and mercantile rights granted the neutral countries by the Hague Conventions and the London Declaration of 1909. But soon after war broke out, it banned the export of munitions, and private companies took over the large-scale export of militarily relevant goods such as munitions components. The profitability of the arms trade was reflected in a wave of new business launches in the industry.^[23]

Such money-making out of the war aroused suspicion on both sides. The belligerent powers started to intervene in Swiss production processes, establishing methods of “direct control.” As soon as late 1914, they started blacklisting Swiss companies. In 1915 the Allies enforced export bans and a state monopoly on Swiss grain imports. They also used quotas, exemption permits, import permits, confiscations, control requirements, administrative delays, and other bureaucratic machinations to influence the Swiss economy. Finally, in November 1915, the *Société Suisse de Surveillance économique* (SSS) was set up, modelled on the [Netherlands Overseas Trust \(NOT\)](#). It had been preceded in summer 1915 by the German-established trust agency *Treuhandstelle Zürich*, which was consolidated into the Swiss trust agency *Schweizerische Treuhandstelle* (STS), based in Bern, in September 1916. This agency, more than any other entity, embodied the control of the Swiss economy by foreign forces. At the same time, Switzerland was the only country that succeeded in concluding a series of governmental trade agreements. These did not, however, alter the basic constellation. In summer 1915, Federal Councilor Hoffmann had declared that Switzerland had only three options for responding to the tightening economic constraints imposed from without: to starve, to fight, or to submit. So, the authorities submitted. Although the Swiss government did not broadcast its loss of sovereignty, the public was aware of it. With a touch of defiant irony, the Swiss people soon redefined the SSS as the “Souveranité Suisse Suspendue.”

Openness and Isolation: Markets and Scientific Research

Major companies tried to maintain business as usual where possible, despite being affected by the British Trading with the Enemy Act, which not only prohibited cooperation with enemy firms but also enemy associations. After entering the war, the United States joined in the economic warfare, forcing Swiss firms to give up their personal, legal, and institutional ties with enemy powers. Worldwide trading companies such as *Basler Handelsgesellschaft* and *Gebrüder Volkart* (based in Winterthur) started advertising as explicitly “Swiss firms” to avoid getting caught between the economic frontlines. To defend the interests of such internationally operating companies, Switzerland extended its diplomatic service, installing company-oriented honorary consuls.^[24] Switzerland’s openness to international trade was accompanied by a walling-off tendency. In 1916, organizations such as the *Neue Helvetische Gesellschaft* and the *Schweizerische Gemeinnützige Gesellschaft*, the federal

authorities, and mercantile associations sought to fight “foreign domination” in the economy and established defensive measures involving share transferability and voting stock to take effect after the war. At the start of the 1920s, Swiss companies were largely protected against hostile takeovers by foreign investors.^[25]

In the domestic sectors, supply and demand interacted to generate innovations. Key developments included the introduction of hydropower to produce electricity in the Alps and on rivers, and the costly and pioneering electrification of the railroads.^[26] The household electric power supply was also extended. In 1917 the tourism marketing organization *Schweizerische Verkehrszentrale* was set up to support the hotel and tourism industry, which was particularly badly hit by the end of the *Belle Epoque* and the shortfall in affluent traveler clientele that the war caused.

In general terms, industry, agriculture, and finance were forced to cooperate closely with the rapidly expanding federal administration during the war years, both individually and institutionally. On a domestic level, wartime economic policy continued to serve the interests of the country’s trade, industry, and agriculture associations – Switzerland’s “private governments” – which were also well represented in the “department of industrial wartime economy” set up in July 1917. The unions, in contrast, were severely under-represented in the mediation system. Private-economy actors and entrepreneurs also played a key role in foreign relations.^[27] Swimming with the tide of the war, Switzerland sought to do more business with the Entente Powers and especially the United States from 1917 on. A “Swiss mission” to the United States in the summer hoped to secure the country’s grain supplies and managed to reach a corresponding agreement before the end of the year.^[28]

In the field of [science](#), which played a crucial role in the development of the Swiss economy, the First World War propelled tendencies that had emerged at the end of the 19th century. Industrial research came to predominate over state programs, while the two fields closely cooperated. Large, export-oriented companies focused on production processes with a high proportion of value added and achieved advances in product functionality by pursuing application-oriented research. Mechanisms of protecting intellectual property (patents, licenses, brands) were extended – after a long period of *laissez-faire* in the 19th century – and the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) carried out major reforms between 1908 and 1911. Switzerland already had a high concentration of higher education institutions (7 [universities](#) as well as the ETH in Zurich and the St. Gallen commercial academy) at the start of the war. As interest in scientific research grew in the ensuing years, companies set up or extended research departments and the number of students enrolled in the country’s universities reached a new peak. Meanwhile, the widespread use of electricity brought new economic factors into play. At the end of the war, the chemical and pharmaceutical industries, metalworking and electronic companies, and watchmaking and food-product factories were all working at high levels of efficiency. But as postwar crisis loomed, fueled by international disillusion with the concept of the self-regulating market and the rational, autonomous individual, many of them came under threat. This trauma, in turn, stimulated scientific and socio-technological innovations, for

example, in the field of business administration and psycho-mechanics.^[29]

War Finance: Monetary and Fiscal Policy

The increasingly obvious redistribution of wealth within the national economy – a result of government policy on financing the tremendous cost of the war, which many criticized as inequitable – caused mounting political tension within Switzerland. Government expenditure rose steeply after the outbreak of war. Defense spending alone, i.e. to cover the cost of mobilization, border deployment, and armament, ran to some 2.3 billion Swiss Francs by 1920 (including the cost of detachments to deal with the national strike and other [strike movements](#)). Per capita, the amount was close to the European average.^[30]

Neutral small states faced similar financing problems to belligerent states. The international gold standard collapsed at the start of the war; the Federal Treasury declared paper money legal tender, allowing the money press to be activated. The central banks of numerous countries operated as “war banks;” the Swiss National Bank (SNB) also defined itself as such (a *Kriegsbank*). The country’s rapidly growing deficits were financed by means of short-term loans (known as *Reskriptionen*). Over the course of the war, the money supply tripled. As the SNB adhered to the Real Bills Doctrine, which was thought to deflect price rises caused by increasing money supply, the problem of inflation was largely overlooked until 1918. Several attempts were made to consolidate the short-term public debt by means of bonds. Between 1914 and 1918, the Swiss Confederation issued nine mobilization bonds amounting to 830 million Swiss Francs; by the time the second was issued, in November 1914, the banking cartel and the cantonal banking association had taken over issuance. Toward the end of the war and after 1918, these were supplemented by U.S. bonds, which enabled Switzerland to acquire the necessary dollars to import goods.

From the outset, conservative federalists strongly resisted tax increases on a federal level.^[31] In 1915, a ballot was held on whether to raise a “one-off and exceptional” war tax (in two instalments in 1916 and 1917). With 94.3 percent across all classes voting in favor, it produced the closest to a unanimous result in the history of Swiss direct democracy. In 1916 the Federal Council retroactively introduced a war-profit tax as of 1915 – now asserting its plenary power – which yielded a total of 732 million Swiss Francs. In the same year, a bill to introduce stamp duty (a federal tax on legal communication such as the issuance of and dealing in securities and on insurance payment premiums) was drafted, which was passed with a narrow majority of 53 percent in spring 1917 (and supplemented by a “coupon tax” in 1921).

The Social Democratic Party proposed redressing the social balance and improving distributive justice by means of a new, progressively structured, direct federal tax. The initiative, launched in late 1916, was rejected in a national referendum of June 1918. Liberals and Catholic Conservatives made a minor concession by voting in favor of another “one-off” tax and resolved to levy a “new exceptional war tax” in spring 1919. In total, tax revenue in Switzerland contributed to financing some

35 percent of the war budget, slightly more than the average in the belligerent countries.^[32]

Unlike the international gold standard, the Latin Monetary Union (LMU) did not collapse when war broke out. But the Federal Council was aware that its frequent deliveries of Swiss coins to France might be deemed compromising to its political neutrality. Switzerland's acceptance of silver from [Belgium](#) was also controversial as it had been looted from Belgian banks by Germany to pay for its Swiss imports.^[33] As a German victory became increasingly unlikely, in 1918 the SNB tried to erase the traces of these deals by smelting the Belgian silver into bars. It intended to use them to help the clockmaking industry, a key branch of the Swiss export trade which was struggling with a shortage of precious metal. But it did not come to this: the silver bullion, which had been comparatively cheaply acquired and was now rapidly increasing in value, was likewise exported to France on a large scale. After the war, Switzerland maintained a diplomatic silence while awaiting further developments. No further mention of its participation in the LMU was made nor criticism voiced. This marks a striking contrast to the aftermath of the Second World War, and Switzerland's acceptance of looted gold from Nazi Germany's *Reichsbank*, for which it had to afford at least partial restitution *post festum* (which Switzerland claimed was "voluntary").

The Helvetian "Rift", Propaganda, and the Swiss Humanitarian Mission

As soon as the war broke out, a conflict of loyalties arose (or *Stimmungsgegensatz*, as Carl Spitteler put it) between German-speaking Switzerland and French-speaking western Switzerland, which soon came to be known as "the rift" (*der Graben*, or *le fossé*). While Germany's triumphalist rhetoric was omnipresent in German-speaking Switzerland, the French-speaking population trusted only French progress reports.^[34] Thinkers and artists on either side of the language border stridently disseminated their conflicting views. In May 1915, a German-friendly circle around the priest [Eduard Blocher](#) (1870-1942) founded an association named *Stimmen im Sturm* ("Voices in the Storm"), which used aggressive, pro-German rhetoric to warn against the specter of "language corruption" (*Verwelschung*) in Switzerland. In this way, the perceived rift became entrenched and manifested in a series of significant events. In late 1915, news leaked that the German and Austrian military attachés received the Swiss general staff's intelligence bulletin. This sparked a public outrage. Later, the acquittal of two high-ranking German-speaking Swiss officers charged with treason and [espionage](#) caused a scandal in western Switzerland.

French-speaking parliamentarians successfully motioned for the Federal Council to start accounting for its political and administrative decision-making in regular "neutrality reports." But not long after the "officer scandal," news of the *affaire des trains* broke: the press reported that trains and German-speaking Swiss troops had been secretly prepared for deployment in the event of unrest in western Switzerland. Tensions were exacerbated in May 1916 when the editor of the newspaper *Petit jurassien* was sentenced for critical reporting on German-Swiss militarism. In May 1917, police and demonstrators clashed at La Chaux-de-Fonds during a "Bastille-like storm" aiming to free Federal

Councilor Paul Graber from prison, where he was remanded for spreading antimilitarist propaganda.

As outlined above, from 1915 on, Switzerland's regional, language-based frictions were to some extent overridden by social tensions. Unity-seeking proponents of a "Swiss viewpoint" addressed both issues, demanding greater understanding between French- and German-speaking Switzerland and hoping to prevent the growing disparity within society from sparking internal conflict. Their calls for reconciliation were often linked with invocations of a European mission in which they described Switzerland as, for example, "a reconciled Europe in miniature (...), which can some time serve the large blood-soaked and hatred-riven Europe (...) as a role model."^[35] From this perspective, then, the Confederation not only was spared the ravages of war, but also was a transnational zone of mediation and provider of "good services." On the initiative of the Swiss Federal Council, contracts were concluded with states from both power groups; between 1916 and the end of the war, Switzerland received 68,000 wounded and sick soldiers.^[36] In addition, the country assumed responsibility for the repatriation of evacuees, treatment of sick refugees, exchange of interned civilians, missing persons investigations and information, cross-border exchange of the severely wounded, provision of welfare for war orphans, and prisoner correspondence.

These activities were crucially supported by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Founded on the principle of charity as a guarantor of international humanitarian law, the ICRC was awarded the only Nobel Peace Prize of the entire war in 1917. As the Geneva-based institution worked in close cooperation with the federal authorities in Bern, Switzerland was to some extent implied as laureate. Toward the end of the war, their objectives became fused, so to speak, and a "culture of neutrality" evolved. The longer the war lasted, the more firmly neutral humanitarian aid became emblematic of the nation. Humanitarian concerns and neutrality went hand in hand in Switzerland's idealized self-image.^[37]

In line with this attitude, Switzerland displayed a distinct reluctance – or inability – to pursue active neutrality. An ambitious project to conduct neutral conciliation negotiations between the belligerent parties, launched in early November 1914 by the union of Swiss women's organizations and the association of women's suffrage, came to nothing.^[38] Other advances met the same fate. In May 1917, the Social Democrat Robert Grimm (1881-1958), boldly asserting the neutrals' right to mediate between belligerents, traveled to St. Petersburg hoping to achieve a separate Russo-German peace. This was precluded, however, by the publication of telegram correspondence between Grimm and Federal Councilor Arthur Hoffmann, who was consequently forced to step down. Relations with the Allies improved under his successor, Gustave Ador (1845-1928) from Geneva.^[39]

“International Emigrants”, War on “Foreign Infiltration”, and Cultural Innovation

In parallel with constructive cooperation efforts and friendly attitudes among the population, there was "governmental hysteria about revolution and paranoia about foreign infiltration."^[40] This was partly

because Switzerland had become the theater of a media war, waged by the opposing power groups using a wide range of [propaganda](#) measures. Germany and France bought Swiss newspapers, coerced Swiss publishing companies, set up news agencies, and mounted exhibitions to disseminate their war aims. The Federal Council in turn enforced censorship of the press and banned several newspapers. In mid-1915 it issued a directive on “insults against foreign peoples, heads of state or governments.”^[41]

As social unrest grew toward the end of the war, so did fear of foreign dominance. In November 1917, the Federal Council set up a Swiss immigration police force with the initial task of surveying the resident foreign population. It also announced tighter measures against deserters and conscientious objectors to come into force on 1 May 1918. This triggered protests not only by the left wing but also by representatives of the church. When the government relaxed the regulations in the fall, right-wing, middle-class circles responded by collecting 285,000 signatures to petition for “strict measures against threatening activities by foreigners.”^[42]

With personal freedom of movement guaranteed until 1917, Switzerland became an international hub for diplomats, spies, agents provocateurs, and propagandists,^[43] as well as a base for political emigrants, nationalist anti-colonialists and artists, writers, bohemians and rebels.^[44] In 1918/19 the nation was kept in suspense by a series of “bomb trials” which painted a turbid picture of intelligence operations and anarchist activity.

[Dadaism](#), meanwhile, caused constructive confusion. Emerging in 1916 in the same Zurich lane named *Spiegelgasse* where Vladimir Il'ich Lenin (1870-1924) also lived nearby, it revolutionized the concept of art in the 20th century. Protagonists including Hugo Ball (1886-1927), Emmy Hennings (1885-1948), Tristan Tzara (1896-1963), and Hans Arp (1886-1966) organized *soirées* in the Cabaret Voltaire which radically challenged the established art scene. Utilizing the murderous slack generated by the war for their unconventional actions, the Dadaist movement torpedoed superficial notions of beauty and sublime high culture. Radiating appeal well beyond the war years, it influenced a wide range of tendencies in avant-garde art, from Surrealism to the Situationists.

These artistic developments and the political activities of Swiss-based socialists and [nationalists](#) did not often overlap personally. Despite being united in its rejection of the war, the left wing, which was radicalizing in the face of growing hardship, was incoherent and dissonant. Switzerland became a transnational platform for inter-socialist debate during the First World War. A conference in Zimmerwald In September 1915 was attended by some 40 thinkers and politicians, including Lenin (who had relocated to Switzerland in 1914), Trotsky (1879-1940), Sinovyev (1883-1936) and Radek (1885-1939). The Bolsheviks around Lenin aimed to turn the world war into an international civil war and an armed uprising against the bourgeoisie while the “centrists” around the Social Democrat Robert Grimm called for political negotiations and reforms. Although the conference culminated in the drafting of a “Zimmerwald manifesto,” the strategic divide was glaring. The “Zimmerwald movement” held two follow-up [conferences](#) (in Kiental in April 1916 and in Stockholm in September 1917), where

it affirmed its commitment in propagandistic terms to the “mass international fight against the war” (as written into the Stockholm manifesto).^[45]

Antimilitarism, Class War from Above, Social Democrats, and the General Strike Debate

Marxist theory on capitalism, the concept of class war, and internationalism were points of intersection between the Zimmerwald movement and the Swiss Social Democrats. Like their counterparts in the belligerent countries, the latter had initially approved of emergency law and war loans but in 1915 they opted out of the party truce (also known as the “*union sacrée*” in western Switzerland).^[46] Robert Grimm advanced the antagonistic view that the workers were being pushed to the edge of starvation while the country’s capital was becoming shamelessly bloated. This conflict henceforth shaped the party’s political iconography and class-war discourse and harnessed the experience of mass poverty to develop a broad political protest movement.

Dissent over military issues caused the social democratic labor movement to radicalize. In 1916 the Social Democratic Party (SPS) launched a citizens’ initiative to abolish military justice. The SPS party conference of June 1917 marked a turning point in social democratic policy on the army. Henceforth – until 1935 – the SPS opposed military loans and armed national defense. It condemned the deployment of troops to deal with strikes as a provocation and a flagrant sign of the army’s use as an instrument of “class war from above.” As the purchasing power of broad sections of the population dropped, involvement in the unions rose. Membership of the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions doubled between 1913 and 1918; numbers in the Swiss metalworkers’ and watchmakers’ federation rose even more steeply. Incumbent functionaries came under increasing pressure from the growing grassroots, which was ready and willing to protest.

Ever more strikes, demonstrations, and direct actions were mounted. Sharply increasing in 1916, they reached a climax in 1918 to match the historic peak of 1905-07. In parallel, women organized hunger demonstrations, intervening in food markets in a bid to control food prices. The association of Swiss municipal authorities cooperated with women’s organizations to try and moderate the demands of (retail) traders, often cloaked as consumer policy, and set up a “permanent bureau for food issues” to negotiate the supply of food and milk to needy families.^[47] On 10 June 1918, women led by Rosa Bloch (1880-1922) held a major demonstration outside the government building.^[48] Rail worker strikes in Zurich on 30 September and 1 October were supported by the local workers’ union and expanded into a general strike. The lengthening labor dispute, which was finally settled when the Association of Swiss Bankers agreed to concessions, sent shock waves through the middle classes.

Despite the increasing pressure, the authorities’ response to the rising protests was generally inconsistent. To try and combat food shortages and correct injustices, they introduced legislation against “social profiteering” and abolished subsidies in the food sector. But their attempts to control

prices were largely ineffective and they did not introduce rations on basic foodstuffs until fall 1917. A Swiss federal food agency, set up in September 1918, did little more to remedy the situation.

1917 saw an upsurge in public resistance to the country's arms exports and the war in general. On 17 November 1917, there were bloody clashes between demonstrators and police in Zurich, claiming four lives and leaving thirty injured, some severely. In early 1918, Social Democrats and unions protested the Federal Council's motion to introduce obligatory community service. This would have enabled the entire male population to be placed under the command of the army and enlisted to boost harvests by cultivating foodstuffs. The action group *Oltener Aktionskomitee* (OAK, named after its first meeting place, Olten) emerged from the resistance to this attempt to militarize society and sought an operating collaboration between the unions and the Social Democrats. It planned to threaten a general strike to force the authorities into negotiating concessions. In late July, the first general Swiss workers' congress, held in Basel, agreed on a program of action but voted by an overwhelming majority of 277:4 against calling a general strike.

In August 1918, the government set up a "national strike commission" to plan a military response in the event of a mass strike. The project was supported by private enterprise, which had long-term experience of coordinating anti-socialist strategies in government and business.^[49] In the following months, the labor movement managed to achieve minor concessions in the milk-price debate, but the underlying problems remained unresolved.

The National Strike of 1918: A Milestone of Democracy

The end of hostilities at the [Western Front](#) in early November 1918 also marked a culmination of events in Switzerland. The labor movement was fired by the idea that the transition to freedom opened a window to reforms. [Leonhard Ragaz \(1868-1945\)](#), a religious socialist, drew up a much acclaimed "program for Swiss citizens and those who want to become them" entitled "The New Switzerland."^[50] During this turbulent period, marked by uncertainty and anticipation, General Wille felt the time had come for a resolute strategy of "prevention." On 4 November, he wrote to the Federal Council: "If you do not want to mobilize the troops until there are sure signs of a general strike and revolution breaking out, you will always be too late." Rumors of fictional dangers abounded among the middle classes, creating a climate of fear and preparing the ground for a major confrontation. On 5 November, troops were mobilized at the request of the Zurich cantonal government. On 6 November, the Federal Council yielded to pressure from the victorious powers and ruled to expel the Soviet mission in Bern (leading to the deportation of its staff on 12 November).^[51]

The deployment of troops took the "resting" OAK by surprise and was a clear provocation to the workers, who had still hoped for negotiations. Consequently, a 24-hour general strike was called for 9 November in 19 cities.^[52] At a "revolution celebration" in Zurich the next day, marking the anniversary of the Russian [Revolution](#) and attended by 7,000, a soldier was shot (probably by

someone in the crowd) and several demonstrators were injured. The OAK proposed negotiating conditions for the withdrawal of troops but was rebuffed by the government. The Zurich workers' union then seized the initiative and announced the continuation of the strike, risking an escalation. Presuming attack to be the best form of defense, the OAK called an indefinite national strike for 12 November. A quarter of a million male and female workers participated. The strikers demanded the reformation of the national government according to the "present will of the people," under a nine-point program comprising demands such as the introduction of proportional representation (which had already been approved in a national referendum of 13 October), female suffrage, the 48-hour week, old-age and disability insurance, and the "redemption of all public debt by the property-owning" (in addition to 4 other more situative demands).

The OAK's hope to build a bridge between all wage-earners, including the bank employees who were on strike in late September, was not fulfilled.^[53] The government and army leaders tightened constraints to a maximum. Civil servants and blue- and white-collar public sector staff were prohibited from taking part in the strike.^[54] Civil vigilance groups were formed in cities and at industrial sites, and companies installed "house guards."^[55] A private civilian defense group formed in Zurich on 12 November. The Federal Assembly held an extraordinary meeting in Bern the same day. On 13 November, the Federal Council issued the OAK an ultimatum, demanding the unconditional end of the strike. There was a gross asymmetry in the two sides' readiness to use violence. General Wille had "his" 95,000-strong troops at the ready, equipped with live ammunition and rifles, many on horseback, wearing the new steel helmets. Divisional general Emil Sonderegger (1868-1934) further intimidated the strikers by issuing a "hand-grenade order."^[56] Soldiers belonging to a Waadtland battalion stationed in Grenchen shot three watchmakers and injured several others the day after the strike was called off.

The OAK could allow neither its own denigration nor a civil war. In the night of 13-14 November, it voted by a clear majority to call off the strike, swayed by the knowledge that the army was ready to use arms.^[57] Moreover, the rumor was circulating that the Allied troops – including some 200,000 U.S. soldiers near the Swiss border – would intervene in the event of a revolutionary uprising in Switzerland.^[58] Although no such preparations were ever made, it is likely that "the victorious states of 1918 would hardly have tolerated a revolution in Switzerland."^[59]

The strikers responded to the OAK's unconditional capitulation with a combination of despondency and defiance. There were some fierce protests, but most strikers followed the call to return to work. Legal repercussions soon followed. In March 1919, proceedings were opened against the authors of the general strike in division court 3 (a military court which was reluctant to hold them). They ended with convictions for Robert Grimm, Friedrich Schneider, Fritz Platten (1883-1942), and Ernst Nobs (1886-1957). Investigations were opened into 3,500 other persons, most of them rail workers, resulting in 127 convictions. The leftwing press spoke of "class justice;" the right wing found the sentencing, based on the legal minimum, far too lenient.^[60]

The national strike coincided with the outbreak of the [Spanish flu](#), the most devastating [influenza pandemic](#) to date, claiming an estimated 20 to 50 million lives worldwide. The first cases were registered in May 1918; the first major wave of infections followed in August. After easing off in late October/early November, an even more severe outbreak occurred. By the time the virus cleared in June 1919, it had caused the deaths of 25,000 Swiss, including some 1,000 soldiers. At 0.65 percent, the Swiss mortality rate was relatively high in a European comparison, a fact which sparked intense dispute over who was responsible.^[61] When General Wille had sent troops to intervene against strikers, the danger of infection had been known. The conservative right wing subsequently inverted this fact to create a specifically Swiss death cult around the military victims of the flu pandemic. A soldier memorial at Forch near Zurich, unveiled in 1922, embodied this macabre ideology.^[62]

Reforms and Americanization

The national strike was the fiercest confrontation and test of strength that the modern Confederation had hitherto faced. Historians continue to argue whether it simply failed or whether there is empirical evidence to indicate there was a “victorious loser.”^[63] At first glance, the conflict marked a defeat for the labor movement. But that is not to say it did nothing for their cause. As well as reinforcing certain convictions among the propertied classes, it also prompted them to reconsider some positions. The army, meanwhile, maintained its presence beyond the ceasefire and the end of the national strike.^[64] And the national right wing armed and expanded the civilian defense organizations set up during the national strike. On 24 November 1918, some 12,000 gathered in Vindonissa to celebrate a “people’s community” (*Volksgemeinde*). Some months later (on 5 April 1919), the organizer of this rally, [Eugen Bircher \(1882-1956\)](#), founded a “Swiss fatherland’s association” to combat “international emigration,” which brought together various paramilitary vigilante groups and displayed anti-Semitic tendencies. A Basel civilian defense group was active during the general strike of August 1919 and supported a military campaign in which five demonstrators and passers-by were shot.^[65]

In opposition to this class war from the right, the government introduced reforms aiming to promote integration. Some key demands from the nine-point program were met. A two-thirds majority in the national assembly had already approved proportional representation in a ballot one month before the national strike. The next elections were now brought forward a year. And before the factory law came back into force, the 48-hour week was introduced in 1919. The regulation was considerably eroded, however, by an increasing number of special permits for 54-hour weeks authorized in the following years. Where old-age and disability insurance was concerned, the end of the war paved the way for long-term institutional change, though it took another two decades for a corresponding welfare fund to be installed. Women did not gain the right to vote in national elections until 1971. A “federation for reforms in the transitional period,” in which such diverse figures as [Emil Klöti \(1877-1963\)](#), [Charles Naine \(1874-1926\)](#), [Karl Barth \(1886-1968\)](#), [William Rappard \(1883-1958\)](#), [Ernst Laur \(1871-1964\)](#), and [Emil Sonderegger](#) cooperated and campaigned for social improvements in the widest sense.^[66]

The national strike fundamentally changed the balance of power in Swiss politics. It had marked a fight for recognition, a mass protest against the exclusion of the labor movement from political decision-making. But unlike in many other (neutral) countries where unions and social democratic parties came to share government responsibility, the antagonism in Switzerland became entrenched. Negotiations between the OAK and the national government launched in spring 1918 did not result in alleviating the workers' sense of exclusion, so the labor movement intervened in politics from its place in the street. On 12 November, an alarmed Liberal Federal Councilor named Felix Calonder (1863-1952) announced a comprehensive program of social reforms and offered Social Democrats the prospect of two seats in an extended, nine-man government; an advance that was soon forgotten. A left-wing politician did not gain a seat in government until 1943. Nevertheless, in the first years after the war, the left wing made more of an impact than ever before on the decision-making mechanisms of federal politics. And the unions were increasingly recognized as negotiation and contractual partners, affirming their role as a regulating force (against "wildcat strikes").^[67]

The national strike was a major event in a long series of labor struggles and strikes since the 1880s. It did not mark a turnaround toward social partnership, but it did stimulate thought processes and teach some lessons. The Social Democrats started trying out new, reform-oriented strategies – in an environment where bourgeois forces were propagating a new, science-based model of "industrial relations," inspired by the U.S. efficiency craze, Taylorism and Fordism. Rationalization and scientific management were the buzzwords that chimed with people of all classes. They modernized the language and posed the old "social question" in a new way, and the United States seemed to have a functioning form of industrial modernity that could serve as a model. Building on the Swiss Mission of summer 1917, entrepreneurial reformers organized numerous economic study trips to North America from 1919 on, focusing on the United States.^[68]

At the same time, the labor movement became divided into Social Democrats and Communists (supporters of the 1919-founded Third International) and hence weakened.^[69] On a national level, the Swiss voted to join the League of Nations in a highly contentious referendum in 1920. Membership, which the Social Democrats had opposed, required Switzerland to adopt differential neutrality and combine traditional tendencies with new interests of international security. Similar to the neutral Netherlands, Switzerland managed to consolidate its position as a European center of banking and a tax haven, as an industrial center and a base for international organizations.

Conclusion

The lines of continuity and the changes impacting throughout the First World War emerged more clearly *post festum*. The centralization of government business, the building and extension of administrative structures, the greater functional importance placed on lobbies in mediation between the state and the economy, the cartelization of markets, the scientification of social issues, and the perceived necessity of national propaganda and politics of history were all products of long-term tendencies that had first arisen in the decades around 1900. Switzerland's continuing social tensions,

however, were shaped by contradictory developments. While national cooperation and participation increased, mutual mistrust remained deep and strike rates high. Class divisions in society continued to be a crucial factor in political culture until the mid-1920s, exacerbated by the middle classes' and military's response to the national strike. Most contemporaries experienced and perceived the "Great War" as a world-changing event, separating a "before" from an "after." This sense of finality diminished as the postwar period became the interwar period. In the late 1930s, the "Swiss people's community," invoked to provide the "spiritual defense of the country," became a powerful fiction. Anyone who upheld this unifying vision disregarded the political and social divisions of the years after 1914 and the clash over the national strike in 1918. That explains why the First World War came to be largely overlooked by historical research and relegated to the margins of national remembrance culture.

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Notes

1. ↑ The present essay is partly based on the findings of a research project, conducted by four universities between 2012 and 2016 and funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, on a "transnational history of Switzerland in the First World War." Consideration of the war years' context within the history of the 20th century is based on chapters 3 to 5 of my historical review: Tanner, Jakob: *Geschichte der Schweiz im 20. Jahrhundert*, Munich 2015. For more on economic history, see Halbeisen, Patrick / Müller, Margrit / Veyrassat, Béatrice (eds.): *Wirtschaftsgeschichte der Schweiz im 20. Jahrhundert*, Basel 2013.
2. ↑ Ruchti, Jacob: *Geschichte der Schweiz während des Weltkrieges 1914-1918*, Bern 1929. For more on the background to the work, see Elsig, Alexandre: *Les shrapnels du mensonge. La Suisse face à la propagande allemande de la Grande Guerre*, Lausanne 2017.
3. ↑ Rossfeld, Roman / Straumann, Tobias (eds.): *Der vergessene Wirtschaftskrieg. Schweizer Unternehmen im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Zurich 2008; Kuhn, Konrad J. / Ziegler, Béatrice (eds.): *Der vergessene Krieg. Spuren und Traditionen zur Schweiz im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Baden 2014.
4. ↑ Kuhn, Konrad / Ziegler, Béatrice: *Dominantes Narrativ und drängende Forschungsfragen. Zur Geschichte der Schweiz im Ersten Weltkrieg*, in: *Traverse* 18 (2011), pp. 123-141.
5. ↑ Rossfeld, Roman / Buomberger, Thomas / Kury, Patrick (eds.): *14/18. Die Schweiz und der Grosse Krieg*, Baden 2014; Rossfeld, Roman (ed.), *1914–1918: Neue Zugänge zur Geschichte der Schweiz im Ersten Weltkrieg / Nouvelles approches et perspectives de recherche en Suisse*, in: *Sonderheft der Schweizerischen Zeitschrift für Geschichte*, 63 (2013); Hebeisen, Erika / Niederhäuser, Peter / Schmid, Regula (eds.): *Kriegs- und Krisenzeit. Zürich während des Ersten Weltkrieges*, Zurich 2014. For an overview, see: Kreis, Georg: *Insel der unsicheren Geborgenheit. Die Schweiz in den Kriegsjahren 1914-1918*, Zurich 2013.

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8. † Sieveking, Heinrich Johann: Schweizerische Kriegswirtschaft, Zurich 1921, p. 11; Tanner, Jakob: Militärischer Transnationalismus und wirtschaftspolitischer Dilettantismus: Asymmetrien in der Landesverteidigungskonzeption, in: Olsansky, Michael (ed.), Am Rande des Sturms. Das Schweizer Militär im Ersten Weltkrieg / En marge de la tempête. Les forces armées suisses pendant la Première Guerre mondiale mondiale, Baden 2018, pp. 50-66.
9. † Ochsenbein, Heinz: Die verlorene Wirtschaftsfreiheit 1914-1918. Methoden ausländischer Wirtschaftskontrollen über die Schweiz, Bern 1971, p. 59.
10. † By 1918, the neutral camp encompassed nine states worldwide, including Switzerland. Kruizinga, Samuël: Neutrality, in: Winter, Jay M. (ed.), Cambridge History of the First World War. The State, volume 2, Cambridge 2014, p. 542.
11. † Cf. Tanner, Geschichte der Schweiz 2015, pp. 126-127; Fuhrer, Hans Rudolf / Strässle, Paul Meinrad (eds.): General Ulrich Wille. Vorbild der einen - Feindbild der anderen, Zurich 2003.
12. † Fuhrer, Hans Rudolf: Die Schweizer Armee im Ersten Weltkrieg. Bedrohung, Landesverteidigung und Landesbefestigung, Zurich 1999, pp. 63-64.
13. † Weber, Florian: Die amerikanische Verheissung. Schweizer Aussenpolitik im Wirtschaftskrieg 1917/18, Zurich 2016.
14. † Huber, Anja: Fremdsein im Krieg. Die Schweiz als Ausgangs- und Zielort von Migration, 1914-1918, Zurich 2018, p. 64, 74, pp. 78-80.
15. † Cf. Kreis, Insel der unsicheren Geborgenheit 2013, p. 123.
16. † Lezzi, Bruno: 1914. General Ulrich Wille und die Kriegsbereitschaft der schweizerischen Armee, Osnabrück 1975.
17. † Tanner, Jakob: Fabrikmahlzeit. Ernährungswissenschaft. Industriearbeit und Volksernährung in der Schweiz 1890-1950, Zurich 1999, p. 273ff.
18. † The employment statistics were as follows: agriculture, 27 percent; trade and industry, 44 percent; services, 28 percent. While this did not essentially change before 1920, value added increased in industry but decreased in the service sector over the war years. Halbeisen, Wirtschaftsgeschichte 2013, p. 123.
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20. † Zwischen den Fronten oder an allen Fronten? Eine Einführung, in: Rossfeld / Straumann, Der vergessene Wirtschaftskrieg 2008, pp. 20ff. and 53f.
21. † On social impoverishment, see Gautschi, Willi: Der Landesstreik 1918, Zurich 1968, pp. 27-43; Krämer et al. (eds.), Woche für Woche neue Preisaufschläge 2016; Hebeisen et al. (eds.), Kriegs- und Krisenzeit 2014.

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25. † Cf. Lüpold, Martin: Der Ausbau der "Festung Schweiz". Aktienrecht und Corporate Governance in der Schweiz, 1881-1961, Zurich 2008, p. 230; Rossfeld / Straumann, Der vergessene Wirtschaftskrieg 2008, p. 33.
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28. † Weber, Die amerikanische Verheissung 2016.
29. † Gugerli, David / Kupper, Patrick / Speich Chassé, Daniel: Die Zukunftsmaschine. Konjunkturen der ETH Zürich 1855-2000, Zurich 2005, p. 158.
30. † Cf. Ullmann, Hans-Peter: Kriegswirtschaft, in: Hirschfeld, Gerhard / Krumeich, Gerd / Renz, Irina (eds.): Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg, Paderborn 2009, pp. 220-232, here p. 228.
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35. † Seippel, Paul: Schweizerische Wahrheiten, Zurich 1917, p. 33-34. Cf also Spitteler, Carl: Unser Schweizer Standpunkt, Zurich 1918 (protocol of a lecture given in the Neue Helvetische Gesellschaft, Zurich group, on 14.12.1914).
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37. † Cotter, Cédric: (S')Aider pour survivre. Action humanitaire et neutralité suisse pendant la Première Guerre mondiale, Chêne-Bourg 2017, pp. 253-260.
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40. † Bürgisser, Thomas: Unerwünschte Gäste. Russische Soldaten in der Schweiz, 1915-1920, Zurich 2010, pp. 204-205.
41. † Elsig, Les shrapnels du mensonge 2017, p. 130.

42. † Kurz, Dokumente der Grenzbesetzung 1970, pp. 101-102.; Huber, Fremdsein im Krieg 2018; Kury, Patrick: Über Fremde reden. Überfremdungsdiskurs und Ausgrenzung in der Schweiz 1900 - 1945, Zurich 2003.
43. † Vuilleumier, Christophe: La Suisse face à l'espionnage, 1914-1918, Geneva 2015; Elsig, Les shrapnels du mensonge 2017.
44. † Cf. e.g. Fischer-Tiné, Harald: The Other Side of Internationalism. Switzerland as a Hub of Militant Anti-Colonialism, c. 1910-1920, in: Purtschert, Patricia / Fischer-Tiné, Harald: Colonial Switzerland. Rethinking Colonialism From The Margins, New York 2015, pp. 221-258; Kieser, Hans-Lukas: Die türkische Nationalbewegung in der Schweiz 1911-1923, in: Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte 52 (2002), pp. 321-340.
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56. † Gautschi, Landesstreik 1968, pp. 264-265.
57. † Ibid., p. 321.
58. † Ibid., p. 331ff.
59. † Ibid., p. 339.
60. † For more on the trials, see Ibid., pp. 350-359; Steiner, Sebastian: Unter Kriegsrecht. Die schweizerische Militärjustiz 1914–1920, Zurich 2018.
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Citation

Tanner, Jakob: Switzerland , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. **DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11366**.

Translated by: Hughes-Kreutzmüller, Charlotte

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