

Switzerland during the war years (1914-1945)



Brother Klaus who preached unity to the Confederates in the 15th century protects his land as war rages. Painting from 1944 in the Emaus chapel, near Bremgarten in the canton of Aargau. © FDFA, Presence Switzerland

In the first half of the 20th century, Switzerland lived through not only two world wars but also an interwar period that saw a dramatic economic downturn and major political unrest. Although Switzerland was spared the direct impact of both wars, the country's development was heavily influenced by political events abroad.

The wars exposed the Swiss economy's dependency on imports and exports. The global economic crisis of 1929 plunged the country into a depression that would last many years.

Domestic politics was marked by tensions between the centre-right parties and the Left. Relations between the two sides became particularly strained following the General Strike of 1918. This tense climate prevailed until the 1930s, when the political forces closed ranks in order to head off external threats. National solidarity was sealed with the election of the Social Democrat Ernst Nobs to the Federal Council in 1943.

Switzerland prior to the First World War



"Helvetia" and "Argentina": 1st August celebrations (Swiss national day) in Baradero, Argentina, 1907. © Musée historique Lausanne

The turn of the 20th century was an era of sustained and rapid economic growth. The value of exports doubled between 1887 and 1912. A third of the population derived an income, either directly or indirectly, from foreign trade. Per capita, Switzerland was the world's leading exporter of machinery and, for a time, was even the top export nation, outstripping the United Kingdom and Germany.

The textile industry (textiles and clothing) was by far the largest employer in Switzerland. In 1900 almost half of all industrial workers were employed in this sector. However, many Swiss continued to emigrate. Between 1900 and 1910, 50,000 people left their homeland. Yet, Switzerland remained a country of net migration due to the influx of foreigners, most of whom found work in the construction industry. At the outbreak of the First World War foreign migrants accounted for almost 15% of Switzerland's population, the highest in Europe.

The First World War (1914–1918)

As a small neutral state, Switzerland was spared the ravages of war during the First World War (1914-1918), although its army, led by General Ulrich Wille, was mobilised. Tensions simmered between German-speaking and French-speaking Switzerland because the former tended to sympathise with the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary, and the latter with the French, British and their allies. Swiss politicians and military personnel severely tested national cohesion by disregarding the principle of neutrality and negotiating with Germany and Austria-Hungary.

There was also mounting social unrest. During the war, men were conscripted to guard the Swiss borders for hundreds of days at a time. They received only meagre pay and were not compensated for the income they lost during their compulsory military service. The price of food and rent doubled due to supply shortages. Since the state printed money to cover the costs of mobilisation, inflation rose, slashing the value of people's savings.

The National Strike (1918)

The economic hardship created by the war had a profound impact on workers. In November 1918 the situation reached boiling point in Switzerland, Germany and elsewhere.

A national general strike was called, in which over 250,000 workers took part. The Federal Council sent in a large troop contingent to quash the protest. The number of direct victims was low (four fatalities). However, Spanish flu claimed the lives of 3,000 soldiers involved in the operation. Most of these men came from rural areas and this is one reason why relations between workers and farmers remained strained for a long time.

Some of the protestors' demands were quickly met, such as the election of the National Council by proportional representation and the establishment of a 48-hour working week. However, it would be many years before other demands, such as women's suffrage and an old-age pension scheme, were answered.

The inter-war years (1918–1939)

A popular initiative in 1918 established a system of proportional representation. As a result, the Free Democratic Party (FDP) lost two-fifths of its National Council seats and its absolute parliamentary majority in the 1919 elections.

The main beneficiaries were the Social Democratic Party and the newly formed conservative and Protestant Party of Farmers, Traders and Independents (BGB). Despite the success of the Social Democrats, most members of Parliament considered them unfit to govern because of their rejection of the army in the wake of the General Strike. They also suspected them of being "internationalists" who wanted to follow the example of the Soviet Union and bring about a Communist revolution in Switzerland.

To counter the rise of the Social Democrats, a "bourgeois block", or coalition of centre-right parties, was formed. The FDP continued to dominate the Federal Council despite the election of a second Catholic conservative in 1919, followed by a member of the BGB in 1929.

The Social Democratic Party used the instruments of direct democracy – referendums and initiatives – to champion the causes of the working class. Their election to government, primarily in industrial centres and large cities, as well as in a number of cantons, saw the Social Democrats gradually evolve from a party of confrontation and class war to one of reform. This shift ultimately led to a split in 1921, with the left wing of the party forming the Communist Party.

The economy



Unemployed men attending a bricklaying course in 1932. © 2003 Swiss National Museum Zurich

The post-war depression in the early 1920s, but especially the global economic crisis of 1926-1936, hit Switzerland hard. The value of its exports shrank by a third, and the number of people out of work rose from 8,000 (0.4%) in 1929 to 93,000 (4.8%) at the height of the crisis in 1936.

The textile industry never recovered. The major banks too found themselves in dire straits; in 1936 their total assets were slashed by 50%. The protracted nature of the economic depression was largely due to the Federal Council and National Bank stubbornly adhering to a deflation policy. They finally devalued the strong Swiss franc by 30% in 1936.

Foreign policy

To avoid another global conflict, the international community established the League of Nations in 1920 and made Geneva its headquarters. In a referendum, a wafer-thin majority of Swiss citizens came out in favour of joining the supranational organisation. The League of Nations accepted the "differential neutrality" of Switzerland, which meant that the country was obliged to participate in economic but not military sanctions.

Opposition to joining the League of Nations was primarily due to the fact that the defeated Central Powers of Germany and Austria were excluded (initially) from becoming members. Switzerland also fought tooth and nail against the accession of the Communist Union of the Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR), which was established in 1917. Until 1944 Switzerland maintained no diplomatic relations with Moscow. Despite Swiss opposition, the USSR finally became a member of the League of Nations in 1934.

The Federal Council and the majority of the population regarded communism as being worse than Mussolini's fascist regime, which came to power in Italy in 1922. Under Federal Councillor Giuseppe Motta, Swiss foreign policy in the 1930s played down the fears of the Raeto-Romansh region that Italy would lay claim to the southern Alpine valleys (irredentism).

It also failed to condemn Italy's invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in 1936 or to impose the sanctions demanded by the League of Nations.

Emergence of the Frontists

Following the rise to power of the National Socialists in Germany in 1933, right-wing "fronts" sprang up in Switzerland. Their supporters came from the self-employed middle class and from the farming community, and their leaders were often young intellectuals. Drawing inspiration from the regimes in Italy and Germany, their ideology was based on three main tenets:

Leader principle

The Frontists preferred the adoption of the "Führerprinzip" (leader principle) which would abolish the system of parliamentary democracy that they considered corrupt and inefficient.

Corporatism

Capitalism should be replaced by corporatism. Employers and employees should work together in corporations and so resolve their conflicts.

Nationalism

The Frontists were highly nationalistic and rejected anything that was "international" (such as communism, freemasonry, pacifism, "international Jewry" etc.).

Initially, some Conservatives saw the Frontists as allies in their struggle against Communism and socialism. Nonetheless, the Frontists could never count on broad support among the population because the nationalist and racist ideology of the National Socialists and the centralist Führer state of the Third Reich was incompatible with the Swiss system of local autonomy, federalism and multilingualism. The Frontists managed to have one of its members elected to the National Council, although his tenure lasted for only one legislative period.

An initiative by the Frontists and other far-right groups, who wanted to impose their political programme by constitutional amendment in 1935, was rejected by more than 70% of the voters, but enjoyed the backing of several Catholic conservative cantons.

Spiritual Defence of the Nation

In view of the political and military threat posed by the expansionist Third Reich, the major Swiss parties and leading members of society put their ideological differences aside in favour of the "spiritual defence of the nation". In 1935 the Social Democrats acknowledged the need for an armed national defence. Class war was replaced by support for finding a peaceful resolution to the opposing interests of management and labour, which led to the 1937 "Labour Peace Agreement" between employers and trade unions in the machine and metal industry. In return, the centre-right acknowledged the Social Democrats as a democratic, left-wing opposition party. The successful popular referendum of 1938 on the reform of the federal finances was the first sign of the negotiating ability of a broad coalition of parties and associations.

Depending on the political party concerned, the "spiritual defence of the nation" was based on different principles. Parties at the extreme ends of the political spectrum also imbued it with undemocratic and antiparliamentary overtones. Nonetheless, all parties involved shared the belief that Swiss independence from its two totalitarian neighbours (Germany and Italy)

had to be secured at all costs. They also believed that Switzerland should stay clear of the foreign and the "Unswiss", and reject Nazi ideology and its ideas of "Volk", "race", "blood" and "Führertum" (strong leadership).

To fend off the territorial claims of fascist Italy (irredentism) and to shore up linguistic diversity, Raeto-Romansh became the fourth national language of Switzerland in 1938.

Outbreak of the Second World War



Construction of anti-tank obstacles in the 1940s. They were also nicknamed "Toblerone" due to their resemblance to the famous Swiss chocolate bar. © Theo Frey/Swiss Federal Archive Bern

Before and during the Second World War, Switzerland's main goal was to preserve its independence and to stay out of the fighting.

To contain the threat of invasion Switzerland had already begun to increase its defence budget in the 1930s. It also stepped up the long-neglected training and arming of recruits and built national defence structures.

When war broke out on 1 September 1939, Switzerland mobilised 430,000 combat troops and 200,000 reserves. The Federal Assembly appointed Henri Guisan, from the canton of Vaud, as General of the Swiss Armed Forces, in other words the army's commander-in-chief.

Initially, the national defence strategy focused on preventing German flanking movements south of the French Maginot line via Switzerland. In 1939 Switzerland therefore concentrated its defensive positions along its northern border (the "Limmat Line").

The National Redoubt



Operating theatre in a military hospital, around 1940. © Theo Frey/Swiss Federal Archives Bern

The unexpectedly swift defeat of the French in June 1940 posed serious problems for Switzerland because the entire country, with the exception of a small stretch of border that Geneva shared with Vichy France, was completely surrounded by the Axis powers of Italy and Germany.

During the invasion of France, the Swiss air force had to contend with violations of Swiss air space by German aircraft. They shot down a number of German aircraft, losing some of their men in the process. Guisan issued an order forbidding any further air combat so as to avoid antagonising Hitler unnecessarily. In 1940 and again towards the end of the war, Switzerland was the victim of accidental bombardments by the Allied Forces. Schaffhausen was worst hit, with 40 people losing their life during an American aerial attack on 1 April 1944.

The German victory over France in the summer of 1940 left most of the country feeling anxious and downcast. In a controversial radio address, which had been approved by all members of the Federal Council, the President of the Swiss Confederation, Marcel Pilet-Golaz, spoke of the need to adapt to the "new circumstances" and to leave behind the "old ways".

A speech by General Guisan to senior officers was later seen as a counterpoint to the stance of the government. Delivered on 25 July 1940 on the Rütli meadow, General Guisan outlined his "Réduit" (redoubt) strategy, which would involve most of the army withdrawing to the Alpine redoubt and leaving the densely-populated Swiss plateau without any permanent defence. The thinking behind it was that Switzerland would continue to serve as a key Alpine transit route for the Axis powers provided that they left the country in peace. However, should the Axis powers invade Switzerland, the National Redoubt would ensure that these vital links between Germany and Italy were permanently severed.

The withdrawal to the Redoubt and the relocation of the war to southern and eastern Europe led to the demobilisation of much of the Swiss army, thereby increasing the workforce available to employers.

Daily life during the war



"Closed until 3 July due to active service". During the war, Swiss men had to perform several weeks of military service (active service) as part of relief service, on average 800 days per soldier. © Swiss Federal Archives Bern



Ration card for flour and lard. Rationing of staple foods began on 30 October 1936 and was finally lifted in July 1948.

Even before the outbreak of war, the people of Switzerland were told to stockpile food, and given instructions on how to prepare their homes in the event of air raids. Under the Wahlen Plan arable land practically doubled (with most land given over to growing potatoes). The level of self-sufficiency rose from 52 to 59%. Rationing and price controls also helped to spare the Swiss people from the massive supply shortages and high prices experienced during the First World War.

In addition, soldiers who served during the Second World War, received compensation, unlike their compatriots in 1914-1918. The funding of these payments through the deduction of a given percentage of the person's salary would later serve as a model for the Old Age and Survivors Insurance (AHV/AVS).

Despite the emergency powers granted to the Federal Council, the Swiss parliamentary system continued to run smoothly during the war years. Popular referendums and elections were still held, and in 1943 the National Council was re-elected on a rotating basis.

The majority of the population rejected the Nazi and Fascist ideology and the threatening Third Reich. The leading pro-Nazi party, the National Front, had only 2,300 members in 1939. Switzerland outlawed this party, as well as other fascist organisations and the Communist party in 1940.

Most Swiss newspapers – German-language ones in particular – sympathised with the Allies. Indeed, shortly after seizing power, Hitler banned their distribution in Germany. However, during the war the Swiss press was careful to measure their language, particularly given that there was post-publication censorship of unsympathetic articles on the grounds that they could worsen the country's already fraught relations with Germany.

Swiss radio broadcast weekly programmes by Jean-Rodolphe von Salis in German and René Payot in French. These were widely listened to in occupied Europe, where their sober analysis of the war significantly shaped public opinion.

"The term neutrality has been misused in Switzerland. We are on the verge of fetishising an abstract concept and overlooking the real and straightforward concept of independence. When we come under threat, we should not remain neutral but fight for our freedom."

René Payot, (1894-1970), broadcast on Radio Genève, 1 January 1940

The Swiss economy



Transporting timber in the mountains, 1940. © Theo Frey/Swiss Federal Archives Bern

Before the war Germany was one of Switzerland's most important trading partners, although the economic crisis and currency controls hampered these exchanges. During the war exports to Germany rose sharply. In contrast, trade with the Allies was extremely difficult due to the fact that Switzerland was surrounded by the Axis powers. Exports to the Allies only amounted to one-third of Swiss exports to the Third Reich. Between 1940-1942, 45% of all Swiss exports were destined for Germany or Italy. These were mainly (machine) tools, machinery, iron and steel goods, precision instruments, vehicles and chemicals. However, Switzerland also exported arms and ammunition to Italy and Germany, which the Axis powers were directly able to use to continue their war effort.

Under the 1907 Hague Convention firms in neutral states were permitted to trade freely with belligerents. This included the export of weapons, though only by private manufacturers. Switzerland, however, also exported weapons made by state-owned manufacturers. Likewise, it subsidised the export of arms to the tune of CHF 1.1 billion (referred to as the "clearing billions"), which it had to honour following bilateral negotiations with the Third Reich, in order to ensure national economic supply and boost employment.

With few natural resources, Switzerland depended on imports from Germany and Italy, which controlled all access routes. These goods included coal, iron, petroleum products, seed and raw materials for its factories and food. Given that these were goods which its two belligerent neighbours also needed, Switzerland made a number of concessions in return. Transit rail traffic continued to pass between Italy and Germany via Switzerland, and the Swiss National Bank bought gold from the German Reichsbank, even though the directors knew that the gold had been plundered from the central banks of occupied countries ("Nazi gold").

"Six days of the week the Swiss work for Hitler's Germany. On the seventh day they pray for an Allied victory."

Swiss wartime saying

Refugee policy (1933-1945)



Refugees from France at a reception centre in Jura, 1940. © Theo Frey/Swiss Federal Archives Bern

After the Nazis seized power in Germany and up to the autumn of 1933, some 2,000 refugees (mainly Jews and intellectuals) fled from Germany to Switzerland. By the end of 1938, after the annexation of Austria, refugee numbers had reached 10,000. They were not welcomed with open arms. Times were tough and many Swiss people feared that the new arrivals would take their jobs. Communities with links to the refugees, such as Jewish or workers' organisations, were entrusted with sheltering and caring for them.

In 1938, after negotiations with Germany and despite resistance from Heinrich Rothmund, the chief of the aliens police, the Federal Council accepted the addition of a 'J' stamp on the passports of German Jews, which would allow the Swiss authorities to distinguish between Jews and other Germans. Rothmund and the federal government, as well as large parts of the population shared the view that Switzerland should not be swamped with people who

were unable to assimilate to the Swiss way of life. Yet, at the same time the police chief categorically condemned the Nazis' barbaric treatment of the Jews.

In June 1940 a large number of French and Polish soldiers fled across the Swiss border in Jura after France fell to the Germans. Under the terms of the Hague Convention, soldiers from either of the warring sides who took refuge in a neutral land had to be interned there, at the cost of their country of origin. These internees were generally set to work either on farms or on building projects. During the war over 100,000 soldiers were temporarily interned in Switzerland.

Overall, Switzerland took in over 180,000 civilian refugees, of whom some 55,000 were adult civilians, half of whom were Jews. Nearly 60,000 children spent some time in Switzerland recuperating, and more than 66,000 frontier refugees briefly resided in Switzerland during the fighting.

In a telegram sent from Geneva in 1942, Gerhart Riegner, a German Jew who fled to Switzerland in 1933, was one of the first people to alert the world to the Nazis' plans to exterminate the Jewish people.

At precisely the time when Germany started deporting the Jews from Western Europe to concentration camps (August 1942), Switzerland announced that it was closing its borders: "Refugees fleeing on racial grounds, such as Jews, are not entitled to political asylum." This move led to intercessions by religious leaders among others, and to a parliamentary debate which ended in the Federal Council moderating its decision somewhat. As a result, the sick, pregnant women, those over 65, and children under 16 travelling alone, as well as parents with children under the age of 6, and people with close relatives in Switzerland were not to be turned back. It is estimated that during the war some 20,000 Jewish refugees were turned away at the border and around 10,000 visa applications were refused.

Although the federal authorities provided refugees with accommodation, a large part of their care was left to church and humanitarian groups. Many Swiss people actively helped the refugees, in some cases breaching official policy. For example, Paul Grüniger, who was the chief of police in the canton of St Gallen, was sacked for helping refugees as far back as 1938. There was also Gertrud Kurz, referred to as the "Mother of the Refugees", as well as the Swiss Vice-Consul in Budapest, Carl Lutz.

Switzerland's behaviour during the Second World War had bright and dark sides, including the export of weapons to Nazi Germany, the acquisition of plundered Nazi gold and its official refugee policy. When the war was over, the banks made no effort to inform possible heirs of the dormant assets of Holocaust victims. In some cases, they made the search even more difficult by wrapping the claims process in red tape.

While these problems were not unknown, they were almost never discussed in Switzerland until they became the subject of intense international interest in 1996. The country faced criticisms that it had prolonged the war by supplying the German war machine with arms. All these allegations were investigated at the end of the 20th century by a commission set up by the Federal Council and headed by the historian François Bergier. In its report, published in 2002, the Bergier Commission concluded that Switzerland had accepted a large number of Jewish and other refugees during the Second World War. Nonetheless, it had refused entry to many others and even handed over some refugees directly to the Germans.