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BETWEEN BLOCKADE AND COUNTER-BLOCKADE.

By Dr. H. BUCHI, Basle.

Kindly translated by C. J. Bernheim, Esq.

The outcome of the military operations in May/June 1940 drew Switzerland away from the firing line. Since then the Swiss Authorities had only to take the necessary measures to meet the new situation and keep the military preparedness ready for all eventualities. The acute danger of being drawn into the terrible conflict, has, at least for the present, disappeared. At the same time tranquillity prevails in our foreign policy. This, however, does not prevent very delicate problems cropping up from time to time for decision or at least consideration.

The position in the economic sphere is quite different and it absorbs in ever increasing measure the care and attention of the Swiss people and its authorities. A country which, like Switzerland, depends so much on its industry and export and is moreover cut off from direct access to the sea, cannot hope to escape from the economic reactions of the war. All the more is it remarkable therefore, that a country squeezed between two blockades has been able, up to now, to secure its requirements and maintain a standard of living which is ever the wonder and also the envy of visitors from other parts of the Continent. No doubt conditions have deteriorated in an increasing degree. The ever widening rationing, the increase in the cost of living (which to-day amounts to no less than 30 per cent.) as well as the new drive in the so-called cultivation battle, are all outward signs of it.

The Swiss people know that they cannot expect to escape from the difficulties brought about by the war. They know too that up to now, things have gone undeservedly well for them as compared with the rest of Europe. Moreover, they certainly know that they have yet to stand the test and they fully realise also that for difficulties not to get too great will not depend merely on their good will and appreciation of the economic situation, but much more on the understanding by the countries at war of the peculiar position of Switzerland. So far, there has been no lack of such understanding abroad. Germany has sent us important raw materials, mainly coal and iron. Italy kept its harbour of Genoa open to us. England allowed sufficient quantities of the necessary foodstuffs and raw materials to pass through her continental blockade so that, up to now, no distress has been felt and our industrial organization was able to carry on. Finally, the Axis powers, who control all the roads of transport to and from Switzerland, have not interfered in any way with the Swiss Export trade as long as it did not clash with their own blockade against England.

In spite of this welcome help from abroad, the situation in Switzerland has become more and more unsatisfactory and is reaching a critical stage on account of the announcement of an English embargo on raw materials. Should this raw material embargo be in fact strictly applied, it would mean that the last gap in the double blockade, that is the gateway for Swiss imports, will be blocked. In the course of the present war, Switzerland has lost one access after another to the world markets. The most severe blow for her was the collapse of France in 1940. It brought about the loss of safe access to the sea and Switzer-

land found herself surrounded, either directly or indirectly, by Axis powers and thereby put into quite a different situation to that of 1914/18. The maintenance of the economic neutrality has become much more difficult. In the first place, Switzerland tried to meet the emerging dangers in widening the few remaining openings in and out of the country and secure some new ones. Unfortunately, at first the war in the Balkans and later on the war in Russia closed up some more doors to Swiss foreign trade. The never-ending negotiations connected with foreign trade agreements have not been able to alter the situation materially, at best they only eased it up a little. They were of course based on a give and take policy whereby Swiss exports of industrial and agricultural products had to meet rather substantial demands. The most important and at the same time typical trade agreement of this kind was the German-Swiss clearing agreement of July 18th, 1941. Apart from the previous sphere, it also included Alsace, Lorraine, Luxemburg and Lower Austria. The heaviest charge which arose here for our country was the financing of our exports on the basis of the Swiss-German-Belgian-Dutch and Norwegian clearing within a limit of 400 Million Francs until the end of 1941 and a further 400 Million Francs up to the end of 1942. As for the rest, this agreement was substantially the same as the preceding ones with the Reich.

Switzerland could not prevent it that, owing to the course of the war, her trade relations reverted extensively to the European continent and for her trade with oversea countries to diminish; her foreign trade became of necessity "continentalised" without however freeing her from her dependency upon world trade. Only in this way was it possible to keep the all important Swiss industrial organization in function and keep off unemployment, with all its social and economic dangers, from our country. In this connection, the Swiss Government took particular care to maintain with all its strength the principle of economic neutrality and not to make any concessions in this domain. In hard negotiations with Germany lasting eight months, it succeeded for instance in obtaining concessions for our export trade with countries opposed to the Reich. The Swiss Government cannot be held responsible for the change which, as stated above, has taken place in the structure of the Swiss export trade.

In spite of this, it seems that just this clearing agreement between Switzerland and Germany is likely to become the starting point for a new tightening of England's blockade policy against Switzerland. This more severe application of the blockade certainly falls into line with the efforts made by the British authorities to tighten it up generally around the Axis countries and to intensify the economic war. This is clearly to be seen from the English announcement that Switzerland will continue to be allowed to import her necessary food requirements as well as other goods for her own needs within "reasonable limits" but that on the other hand the facilities so far granted for the import of raw materials for the Swiss Industry can no longer be granted.

When English official circles declared, in making this announcement, that this decision did not mean any reprisal on the part of England but simply the acknowledgement of a state of affairs for which neither Switzerland nor England could be made responsible,

there is no doubt that this statement is in accordance with the facts. This explanation does not, however, alter in the least the actual deterioration of the trading relations between Switzerland and England nor does it alter our painful realisation that, should the new English blockade decision be rigorously applied and the necessary navycerts no longer be issued, the economic and social situation of Switzerland will certainly become very strained indeed. Switzerland must now wait and see. If her imports of essential goods through the last line of supply are to be cut off, it will affect the very means of existence of our country. How essentially important this last import route is for Switzerland can be appreciated from the fact that, in order to remove the goods lying in Lisbon, a lorry service through Spain was organized with financial help from the state beside the existing shuttle-service between Lisbon and Genoa. This was done in order to secure, in case of a further intensification or a possible extension of the war — America — a last reliable passage for in and out traffic. Anyone familiar with Swiss economy knows that with the maximum extension of cultivation at home and production of "Ersatz" — products, also with a planned guiding of both production and consumption together with a total rationing, a certain amount of relief is attainable without however solving the difficult problem of Swiss economy.

Our attitude corresponds with our policy of neutrality, our vital interests and the structure of our economic life. That is why the expectations in our "besieged fortress" are based on the hope that England will duly respect Switzerland's right of existence thereby sparing us dangerous social troubles and a stronger lining-up with the so-called European new order.

Even then the situation of Switzerland will still be quite serious enough.

GOOD-BYE TO AUTUMN.

Flowers no longer reign.
Supreme in splendid garb
Though royal rose
And hardy chrys
A while prevail.

Silent Battles scarce avail
'Gainst might and crush of time. —

Leaves spattering like rain
Laid low by icy rime,
Complete our span of gloom.

Yet autumn spreads delight
In many woodland scene
Motley tints remain;
Summer's parting mien!

Anon on sunny heights
Manse or cottage seen
Show creepers red aflame
All colours put to shame.

No war or human shifts
May human kind despoil
Of nature's holy gifts.

J.J.E.

SWISS BIRTH-RATE ALARM.

Under this title the "Catholic Herald," November 14th, is publishing the following statistics. We do not know whether the comments reflect the true position and the general census taking place next month will possibly produce a different picture.

The drop in the birth-rate from 37 for every 1,000 inhabitants in 1928, to 15 for every 1,000 inhabitants in 1937 is viewed as alarming. The birth-rate in the neighbouring countries for 1937 was 14.7 for France and 19.7 for Germany. In 1938, the German rate had risen to 20.3.

In 1900 there were 90,000 children born in Switzerland, but only 61,000 in 1937, notwithstanding a population increase of 800,000, which would indicate 120,000 births as the normal rate for 1937. As in other countries, the lowest birth-rate is found in urban communities.

However, a higher birth-rate generally is reported for the Catholic Cantons of Lucerne, Uri, Nidwald, Fribourg and Valais.

For the whole of Switzerland, the surplus of births over deaths is 3.7 per thousand, but it is 8 per thousand for the Catholic Cantons. To maintain the stability of population there should be an average of three children to a family; but out of 100 families, 30 have no children, 20 have one child, and 20 have two children.

Federal Councillor Etter, a Catholic, presiding at a meeting at Berne, said that measures to protect the family in Switzerland are imperative.



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