

Version 2.0 | Last updated 24 January 2017

# Domestic Politics and Neutrality (Switzerland)

By [Carlo Moos](#)

**Neutrality is a fundamental problem in modern Swiss history and played a pivotal role in both world wars. During the Second World War the danger came from the outside, while during the First World War Switzerland was also threatened from within. From 1914 to 1918 a rift endangered Switzerland politically, as the western part of the country was concerned about the future of France, while the eastern part had strong ties to Germany. Several crises of neutrality made the situation during the war more difficult, amongst them an affair of two colonels from the General Staff and a peace mission by a federal councillor and a social-democrat member of parliament. The division within the country continued after the war, especially in relation to the creation of the League of Nations.**

## Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Concepts of Neutrality](#)
- [3 Differences in Swiss Self-Image as a Challenge to the Swiss Politics of Neutrality](#)
- [4 Attempts at “Active” Neutrality and a Spectacular Violation of Neutrality](#)
- [5 Differential Neutrality instead of Integral Neutrality at the End of the War](#)
- [6 A Closing Remark](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

## 1. Introduction

At the outbreak of war in 1914, Switzerland found itself both politically and militarily under threat: many believed that the German assault against [France](#) would violate Swiss [neutrality](#), just as it had

violated Belgium's. Still, the Swiss population was not united in its perception of the war or view of neutrality. In different parts of the country, the populations' sympathies had grown further apart since the formation of the German Reich. French-speaking western Switzerland perceived the French defeat and the creation of the German Reich during the years 1870 to 1871 as a catastrophe, while in German-speaking eastern Switzerland a general feeling of joy prevailed. The tension culminated in severe rioting between 9 and 12 March 1871 after the German victory celebration at the Tonhalle of Zurich.

The east–west antagonism dragged on during the following decades and was occasionally exacerbated by events, such as the official visit of [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) in 1912, for which a full military manoeuvre was arranged. The fact that by the outbreak of war in 1914 the Swiss federal assembly (*Bundesversammlung*) had appointed [Ulrich Wille \(1848-1925\)](#) – “an offspring of Prussia” – to the position of commander-in-chief, was perceived in western Switzerland as a provocation. This bore no good expectations for the aftermath, as the fracture through the country – metaphorically described as “a rift” (*“Graben”*) – deepened further. The poisoned atmosphere also had repercussions in foreign policy. The central government, aware of the country's internal divisions, understood that its neutrality had to be maintained; it had to ensure that the belligerents would continue to respect their commitment to Switzerland's non-belligerent status. Whether the Swiss in the east were pro-German or the Swiss in the west pro-French was not significant for the security of the country *per se*, but became a significant security issue when the government realized that the French and the Germans might hold the Swiss state accountable for the opinions of its population.

The full and unlimited powers granted to the government (*Bundesrat*) by the Federal Assembly on 3 August 1914 (analogous to those of 30 August 1939) strengthened the central government. As a consequence of the obtained [Vollmachten](#), the central government was freed to a large extent from parliamentary control. The same applied to the policy of neutrality, over which the people's representatives had almost no influence. The *Bundesrat*, however, gave periodical accounts about the measures it took and submitted so-called “neutrality reports” to the parliament.

## 2. Concepts of Neutrality

Neutrality is – in spite of its clear aim to maintain non-belligerency – essentially a fluid concept, in which several variations may be discerned:

- Military neutrality is the classic form of neutrality, according to Article 15 of the 1907 Fifth [Hague Convention](#) in case of war on land, and means taking no part in the wars of other states, treating all warring sides equally, and not placing one's territory at the disposal of any of the belligerents. The convention mentions the rights and the duties of the neutral side, but hardly refers to the attitude of the warring parties towards the neutral country.
- Political neutrality is an enigmatic concept. In the case of Switzerland it was always

dependent on the circumstances, in spite of the many claims made about it being “constant”, “everlasting”, “eternal”, “unlimited”, “unconditional”, or “all-encompassing”. In the context of the emerging [League of Nations](#), neutrality was interpreted as “differential”, thus allowing it to take part in economic sanctions. In the dying phase of the League of Nations and explicitly from 1938 onwards, neutrality was again interpreted as “integral”.

- Economic neutrality is realistically not feasible, as Switzerland's role as a financial hub, as the land of transit via Gotthard, and as an exporter of armaments and other goods during the Second World War clearly demonstrate.
- Neutrality of attitude is, strictly speaking, impossible in a democratic society, but may be forced upon a population through censorship.

These different forms of neutrality are interconnected, but their fundamental aim is to secure the rights of the state to decide its own foreign policy, especially to secure its role as a non-belligerent, and to allow for necessary trade and economic exchange. However, a basic problem remains: although neutrality exists primarily as an international status negotiated between states and was, at least during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “an important and active idea in [international law](#), international politics and international idealism”,<sup>[1]</sup> Swiss neutrality nevertheless appears in the First (and also in the Second) World War – in spite of the fact that the major powers had granted it in a treaty in 1815 – as a self-determined declaration of the will of the state, whose perception and recognition could not be enforced on other states. While the great powers were willing to respect Switzerland's neutrality from 1914 to 1918, the German Reich's brutal disregard of Belgium's neutrality at the beginning of the war in 1914 is an example of a blatant unwillingness to respect a state's neutrality. Although the powers had protected Belgian neutrality between 1830-1839 and 1914, this breach reflects the sharp contrast between “the limited-war practices of nineteenth-century Europe” and “the [total-war](#) ethos that evolved during the First World War”.<sup>[2]</sup>

In modern Swiss history, neutrality was always a fundamental problem, at least since its endorsement at the 1815 Second Peace Treaty of Paris. It was particularly discussed in the Regeneration era of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and during the world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The concept was, and still is, especially controversial as it relates to supranational organisations: from the Holy Alliance, through the League of Nations to the United Nations, and all institutions connected to the project of “Europe”.

In addition to the problem of realizing and communicating neutrality externally, the problem of rooting it mentally within the neutral country remained a difficult task. In this case, differences were and are discernible not only between the (more progressive) cities and the (rather conservative) countryside, but also between Switzerland's linguistic regions. Thus, the Swiss Bureau of Statistics shows that, since the First World War, language differences have shifted to match views on foreign relations.<sup>[3]</sup>

During the First World War, it was clear to the entire governing body of the nation – both to politicians and to those in the military – that neutrality must be safeguarded at (almost) all costs. In practice,

however, personal sympathies could gain the upper hand with both the general public and with political or military leaders – and most of all with General Wille, who in the summer of 1915 even considered entering the war on the side of the central powers (*Mittelmächte*).<sup>[4]</sup> The national government, however, though also mostly pro-German, operated in a more consistent manner, perhaps because the language minorities were represented among its members by men such as [Camille Decoppet \(1862-1925\)](#) from Vaud, [Giuseppe Motta \(1871-1940\)](#) from Ticino, and the Rhaeto-Romanic [Felix Calonder \(1863-1952\)](#) from Grisons. However, the greatest neutrality crisis in those years was triggered by [Arthur Hoffmann \(1857-1927\)](#), who tried to be as even-handed as possible, but was strongly pro-German.

As Roderick Ogley stated in 1970, “the idea of neutrality is simple enough. It means, obviously, not taking part in others’ quarrels: that is, for states, keeping out of other states’ wars” – but “keeping out of other states’ wars is, or can be, a difficult and hazardous enterprise”.<sup>[5]</sup> This was the real Swiss challenge during the First (and again during the Second) World War.

### 3. Differences in Swiss Self-Image as a Challenge to the Swiss Politics of Neutrality

Ceremonial proclamations, like the federal government’s declaration of neutrality on 4 August 1914 are one thing; their acceptance inside and outside the country’s borders is something else. The Swiss citizens’ self-images broke down according to language region and was rarely so diverse as during the First World War; the majority of the German-speaking Swiss supported Germany, whereas the francophone language group mostly sympathized with the French. Immediately after the beginning of the war, a number of men, amongst them the theologian [Leonhard Ragaz \(1868-1945\)](#), from the University of Zurich, and [Paul Seippel \(1858-1925\)](#), a professor of French at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (ETH) Zürich formed a group. Its intention was to bridge the gap between the language groups of the country. In mid-November 1915 Seippel organized a conference of university lecturers at which the intellectual independence of the country was discussed. Since there was no self-sufficient Swiss culture, he argued, the country had to be “*un centre de culture européenne*”; neither exclusively German nor exclusively French, but open to all directions. From then on, Seippel propagated intellectual neutrality based on a higher, all-Swiss interest, and favoured an “idiosyncrasy” whose core was constituted of “*une petite Europe réconciliée*”.<sup>[6]</sup>

An early culmination within the anti-rift-movement was [Carl Spitteler’s \(1845-1924\)](#) speech, “Our Swiss Standpoint”, delivered in Zurich on 14 December 1914. Spitteler argued that, in the interest of the country, given the internal conflict, a neutrality of the *ethos* (*Gesinnung*) was necessary. Hinting at the concept of “the nation of the will”, Spitteler asked whether maintaining a Swiss state – that is, a political entity vis-à-vis foreign countries – was desired. If so, then it was necessary to notice that beyond the borders are our neighbours, but on this side of the border are “more than neighbours, namely our brethren”; the difference is “tremendous”, since even the best neighbour could “fire at us

with his guns". In this context, neutrality meant "to keep the same distance from all the sides". But the difficulty was that differentiating between neutrality and ethos became problematic; through "six miserable lines of unconditional alignment", everybody could gain fame, honour and popularity in Germany, whereas a single line is enough to make him "lose all his prestige". Essentially, a citizen of a belligerent country "cannot consider a neutral ethos" legitimate. In addition, he argued that the Swiss people had a different notion of the value of small states. Thus, the Serbs "are not 'a gang' but a people", and the unfortunate fate of "slandered, strangled Belgium" raised special concern among the Swiss. Above all, however, it was necessary to behave with more humility. The "correct neutral [...] Swiss standpoint" when seeing this funeral cortege should be to take off one's hat. From every direction one hears "the sobbing lamentation" and this tone is "the same, among all nations".<sup>[7]</sup>

Although this speech was anchored in the circumstances of its time, it remains an impressive achievement, transcending its historical moment. In addition to its wish for unity, it contained a vision, as it elevated the country to an almost mythical level, where it was supposed to play a civilizing role as an example.<sup>[8]</sup> However, reality soon caught up with Spitteler. Although he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Lausanne in 1915 and the Nobel Prize for literature in 1920, almost nobody took notice of him after his death in 1924.

Regardless of such invocations of unity, the rift could not be overcome during the war; this was not surprising, considering the solid, frozen fronts between the belligerents. At most, one could try to "neutralize" the rift, although eruptions still occurred repeatedly – the most significant of which were linked to the fact that the military high command was strongly pro-German and the "social gap" was interpreted differently in the language regions.

The so-called "[Colonels' Affair](#)" of late 1915 and early 1916 was especially noteworthy as an example of the pro-German sentiment within the military. Two Swiss-German colonels delivered material from the general staff to the military attachés of the Central Powers. Clearly a violation of neutrality, the western Swiss population was outraged. Not surprisingly, this affair led to a crisis of confidence in the military high command, as General Wille did not consider the actions of the colonels to be a crime or even a grave misdeed. For him it was simply "gruff tactlessness", which had "no harmful consequences whatsoever, neither for our country nor for any of our neighbouring states".<sup>[9]</sup> Nevertheless, Wille's proposal to remove the colonels from the general staff proved not to be enough. After the Entente protested, the colonels were put on trial. Although they were acquitted, they were later punished by disciplinary measures and suspended from their posts.

In regard to the "social gap", the general strike of November 1918 proved to be mostly a Swiss-German phenomenon. Francophone Switzerland rejoiced at the Entente's victory and was afraid of a [revolution in Germany](#). It therefore remained rather passive. There is a certain historical irony in the fact that it was the pro-German military high command that was to blame for the decisive provocation in Zurich. The war was almost over and throughout Europe the fear of a Bolshevik takeover grew, but in western Switzerland even the German-speaking Swiss left was considered German-friendly.

Thus, the “rift” proved to be not only a linguistic and therefore a cultural east-west problem; it was thwarted by the class struggle and through the right-left dichotomy – and was further aggravated by the social and political constellation. Given the events on the [Western](#), [Eastern](#) and Southern fronts – before the war ended and a just peace treaty was reached (which failed to materialize) – multi-cultural Switzerland could only maintain a minimal *modus vivendi* by consistently adhering to a strict external neutrality (although the military high-command repeatedly acted against it), while mitigating the internal situation through the special form of “neutrality of the will” desired by Spitteler and his friends.

#### 4. Attempts at “Active” Neutrality and a Spectacular Violation of Neutrality

The militant theology professor Leonhard Ragaz was a key player in Swiss peace efforts. In his memoirs he writes that he and his wife, [Clara Ragaz-Nadig \(1874-1957\)](#), “have never ceased to work towards finding a short cut out of the war”, listing several attempts to negotiate peace, which in retrospect he considered “quite fruitless”.<sup>[10]</sup> Thus he regarded [Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg's \(1856-1921\)](#) peace proposal of 12 December 1916 (after the Central Powers' victory over [Romania](#)) to be “a web of lies”, but took advantage of the occasion to approach Prime Minister [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#) with an internationalist peace programme, reaching at least the head of the Labour Party, [Arthur Henderson \(1863-1935\)](#), and Foreign Minister [Arthur James Balfour \(1848-1930\)](#).<sup>[11]</sup> Certainly, the Entente's reply was not what he had expected, but so was its reaction to President [Woodrow Wilson's \(1856-1924\)](#) peace memorandum from 21 December 1916. Wilson's proposal, however, soon became obsolete due to the German declaration of unlimited submarine warfare on 31 January 1917.<sup>[12]</sup> Unsurprisingly, the Federal Government (*Bundesrat*) refused to accept Wilson's request to sever diplomatic relations with Germany. Simultaneously, however, it launched a relentless protest against the Central Powers' naval blockade.<sup>[13]</sup>

On 22 January 1917, Wilson had delivered his “Peace-without-Victory” speech in the U.S. Senate. Wilson had suggested establishing a supernational authority for the post-war world. Ragaz was impressed by the speech, because it reminded him of the main lines of his new life for the nations (*Völkerleben*) that he had outlined in a lecture at the end of 1914. In this lecture, he had suggested establishing a parliament of the United Nations of Europe, which would then grow into a world-parliament.<sup>[14]</sup> He would have liked to see a Swiss statement referring to Wilson's speech, but this could not be obtained due to *Bundesrat* Hoffmann's critical attitude.<sup>[15]</sup>

“Official” Switzerland made only carefully crafted statements regarding world peace. Already on 6 November 1914, referring to various petitions which suggested an association of the country with other neutral countries for the sake of mediating peace between the belligerents, the Political Department had agreed that “our country has a mission to fulfil, and may prevent endless sorrow”, but in due time and only in cooperation with other neutral states. Therefore, it wanted to explore such



possibilities “in a very careful manner”.<sup>[16]</sup> Such explorations were repeatedly carried out, but were too careful to produce results. It is indicative that a conference of representatives of neutral states, planned for late 1916 in Stockholm, should explicitly exclude all issues concerning mediation in the ongoing war.<sup>[17]</sup>

The reaction to U.S. President Wilson’s aforementioned peace memorandum, which had already been handed to the Swiss Political Department on 21 December 1916, was somewhat more audacious. *Bundesrat* Hoffmann suggested to his colleagues that they inform the belligerent powers that the Swiss government knew about the memorandum, welcomed Wilson’s approach “and shall consider itself fortunate if it could help in any possible way to the initiation of talks”.<sup>[18]</sup> A week later *Bundesrat* Motta, in a speech delivered in Geneva, adhered to this view in “a cry for peace in the name of humanity and civilisation”,<sup>[19]</sup> although at that time it came to nothing.

The Grimm-Hoffmann venture of early summer 1917 was a noteworthy deviation from Switzerland’s regular caution and a serious effort to stick to an active policy of neutrality; one wonders what the two men – social-democrat *Nationalrat* [Robert Grimm \(1881-1958\)](#) and the head of the Political Department, *Bundesrat* Arthur Hoffmann – were trying to achieve. Grimm arrived in Petrograd on 22 May 1917; he had previously been in contact with Hoffmann. His aim was to facilitate the return journey of political [refugees](#) - amongst them [Vladimir Lenin \(1870-1924\)](#) - from Switzerland via Germany to [Russia](#), but the visit was also related to his own plans to travel via Stockholm to Petrograd to investigate possibilities for a peace agreement.<sup>[20]</sup> The telegraphic correspondence between Bern and Petrograd was leaked, and on 13 June 1917 the Swiss envoy informed his superiors that a cable message, sent by Hoffmann, had been deciphered by the Russian Foreign Ministry.<sup>[21]</sup> This created a total calamity; in his letter of resignation, Hoffmann emphasised that he took this step “at his own risk” and “strived to negotiate exclusively for the promotion of peace, at the interest of his country”. The *Bundesrat* consistently had to disavow Hoffmann’s actions, as these were regarded by the Entente as non-neutral, allegedly “encouraging a separate peace agreement”.<sup>[22]</sup>

It is hard to understand why an experienced politician like Hoffmann agreed to be part of such an adventure; one may assume, however, that he hoped to achieve more than just a separate peace agreement. After the affair became public, Grimm – who as an internationalist maintained good contacts with the (non-Bolshevik) left in [Russia](#) at the time – was asked by the [provisional government](#) to leave the country immediately. After his departure, the incident led to vibrant discussions at the Congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Committees in Petrograd, to which he had originally travelled.<sup>[23]</sup>

On 2 July 1917 the Swiss envoy to Berlin – [Robert Haab \(1865-1939\)](#), who was elected to the *Bundesrat* at the end of that year – wrote to Hoffmann’s successor, [Gustave Ador \(1845-1928\)](#), that his predecessor “definitely couldn’t have been considered as pro-German”, and that Grimm, as

before the incident he had been seen “as an adversary of Germany”.<sup>[24]</sup> The interpretation of the whole affair as one emerging out of sympathy towards Germany does fall short. Without paying enough thought to it, Swiss social-democrats found themselves confronting their German sister-party; Grimm's critique of the war became increasingly sharper.<sup>[25]</sup>

Whichever interpretation is assumed, the result of this endeavour was disastrous and destroyed *Bundesrat* Hoffmann's career. Grimm, on the other hand, managed to bounce back after a temporary nadir in his career; in February 1918 he re-entered the political scene with the Olten Action Committee.<sup>[26]</sup> It also seems that his international relationships were not permanently damaged.<sup>[27]</sup> His biographer, Adolf McCarthy, refers to the affair explicitly as “a dramatic entrance to the international stage, culminating in his expulsion from the scene of the Russian revolution”.<sup>[28]</sup> Back in Bern, Grimm wrote to Hoffmann how deeply sorry he was that Hoffman had been “the victim of the most noble intentions”. Grimm's comments on Hoffmann always remained respectful and admiring.<sup>[29]</sup>

It may have been Grimm's international charisma and his contacts with the Russian left, as well as the chaos in Russia between the two [revolutions](#) when anything seemed possible, that had brought Hoffmann into this venture. In any case, it is clear that Grimm overestimated his prospects while underestimating “the dynamics of the state's balance of power and control”.<sup>[30]</sup> The same is true of Hoffmann, whose conduct in foreign policy, apart from this incident, proves that he was a politician with a realistic sense of political possibilities.<sup>[31]</sup>

On the national level, the Entente sympathisers were quick to accuse Grimm and Hoffmann of violating neutrality. Internationally, however, the affair aroused less interest, in large part because attention was focused mainly on the events in Russia. In this respect it can be argued that the attempt to practice a “truly” active neutrality policy – planned with a certain enthusiasm because of the seemingly fortunate circumstances – was nonetheless put into practice in an improvised and somewhat naive manner. It failed immediately, though with no long-lasting harm to the concept of neutrality. Under the aegis of Foreign Ministers Gustave Ador (during the second half of 1917), Felix Calonder (1918/1919), and Giuseppe Motta (1920), the successful Swiss policy toward the League of Nations proves that the opposite was true. The 1917 attempt seems to have been beyond the capacities of a small state, and the fact that the plan could not be kept secret may be seen as a sign of the insufficient professionalism of Swiss wartime diplomacy.

This venture can be seen as a minor version of the [Sixtus Affair](#), which took place in Vienna. It happened at exactly the same time as the Austro-Hungarian attempt to reach a separate peace agreement with the Western Powers in late March and late May 1917. A separate peace agreement in the east would have presented an ideal supplement and could have paved the road towards a comprehensive peace, if all sides had seriously pursued it. In this respect, the Grimm-Hoffman affair was part of the broader push to find peace agreements during the first months of 1917. It finally failed on 13 June 1917, when Hoffmann handed in his resignation. By way of contrast, French Prime



Minister [Georges Clemenceau \(1841-1929\)](#) published the first of [Sixtus, Prince of Bourbon-Parma's \(1886-1934\)](#) letters almost a year later (12 April 1918) and thereby unleashed the “affair” which caused the Austro-Hungarian foreign minister, [Ottokar Czernin \(1872-1932\)](#), to resign and the Austro-Hungarian Emperor to lose all credibility with the public. Nevertheless, there were opportunities for negotiating peace in 1917, at least as long as those negotiations were kept secret. This lack of secrecy is exactly what became so fatal in the Grimm-Hoffmann attempt; its failure does not change the fact that in early summer 1917 Russia could have been offered a peace agreement with much better conditions than those signed by the Soviet Union on 3 March 1918 at [Brest-Litovsk](#).

If one may speak, in spite of these stumbling blocks, of Switzerland's successful and “active” neutrality policy during the First World War, then it is due to its humanitarian efforts; it profited from the fact that the headquarters of the [International Committee of the Red Cross \(ICRC\)](#) were located in Geneva, even if its delegates' visits to [prisoner of war](#) camps were not above suspicion in terms of neutral conduct. Its efforts in acquiring and delivering messages and pieces of information, however, must be judged positively; a huge machinery was created at the Geneva headquarters and given the name *Agence Internationale des Prisonniers de Guerre*. Some of the glamour of the [Red Cross](#) fell on its host country, whose government considered itself to be the protecting power of this international organization. The close relations between the government in Bern and the ICRC became even closer when Gustave Ador, for many years the president of the organization, was elected to the *Bundesrat* – at the age of seventy-two – after Hoffmann's downfall. As a citizen of Geneva and a person embodying “the myth of humanitarian Switzerland”, his task was to calm the Entente powers and Francophone Switzerland – a task, in which he succeeded.<sup>[32]</sup>

Some of Switzerland's valuable humanitarian activities during the First World War had already been launched under Hoffman's direction, while he was Head of the Political Department. These activities included repatriating detained civilians from Switzerland's neighbouring countries back to their homelands,<sup>[33]</sup> returning tens of thousands of evacuees from the territories occupied by Germany, exchanging seriously injured soldiers between the belligerents,<sup>[34]</sup> as well as interning POWs who were wounded or sick (mostly with tuberculosis) and organising recovery trips to Swiss health resorts.<sup>[35]</sup> In his obituary speech for the late Hoffmann in 1927, Giuseppe Motta said that Hoffman's “everlasting merit” remained, and that he “knew how to render neutrality sacred” by “launching initiatives for the benefit of the seriously injured, the evacuees and the many other unfortunate victims of the war”.<sup>[36]</sup>

## 5. Differential Neutrality instead of Integral Neutrality at the End of the War

At the beginning of the First World War Carl Spitteler had been looking for a rallying cry for his country. At the end of the war such a definition presented itself, thanks to the founding of the League of Nations. Nevertheless, the controversy about Switzerland joining the League was, to a certain extent, a continuation of the war's fronts even after the end of the war. Those sympathetic to the

losing powers interpreted the League simply as a “League of Versailles”; in their view, the victorious powers were trying to keep the Central Powers down.

Federal Councillors Ador, Calonder and Motta and their advisors – amongst them especially [Max Huber \(1874-1960\)](#), the expert of international law from the University of Zurich – played a central role in the preparations for joining the organization, which had already begun during the war. Huber drafted the balanced text for the government-initiated referendum on the issue.<sup>[37]</sup> After the London declaration of the League of Nations Council of 13 February 1920, he also took part in phrasing the additional official communication from 17 February 1920, in which the problem of neutrality was mitigated by creating the new seminal model of differential neutrality.<sup>[38]</sup> At its core, this model distinguished between economic and military sanctions, making it clear that Switzerland would only take part in the former.

The question of neutrality was the central aspect during the referendum scheduled for 16 May 1920. The advocates of the League argued on the one hand that neutrality in a future war would either be worthless or essentially technical if applied in purely military terms; on the other hand, they also saw neutrality as a political means for an active participation in promoting peace, and idealistically as a continuation of the good old Swiss policy of openness. Their adversaries turned this argument around, emphasising the value of the long-standing policy of remaining on the side. Furthermore, those opposing joining the League understood neutrality to be all-encompassing; therefore the alternative was necessarily *either* neutrality *or* the League of Nations. Finally, they also invoked a mythical understanding of neutrality, according to which joining the League of Nations would be equivalent to the end of Switzerland.<sup>[39]</sup>

The vehement opposition of the generally internationalist social-democrats was striking. With the exception of the religious socialist Leonhard Ragaz, they saw the League of Nations simply as an imperialistic order created by the victor; they revised their stance only in the face of rising [fascism](#). On the opposite side, most of the farmers – under the leadership of their long-time secretary, [Ernst Laur \(1871-1964\)](#), who perceived the League of Nations as a safety mechanism against Bolshevism – supported joining it.

The visionary force of many remarks made by the League's supporters, even from unlikely supporters, is impressive. Thus, the yearning for peace by the farmers' leader, Ernst Laur, matched that of antimilitaristic Ragaz, with whom he otherwise had very little in common.<sup>[40]</sup> The social-democratic journal *Volksrecht* wrote sardonically against such visions on 15 January 1920 that “the frenzy of phrases about world peace, uniting all peoples and securing their happiness” recall the times of the Holy Alliance, that “world federation of reactionaries”.<sup>[41]</sup>

On the part of the government, the Grison born Calonder was the “actual” protagonist of the League of Nations, but he failed on the issue of Vorarlberg's request to join the Swiss Confederation and resigned in early 1920. Therefore, his successor at the Political Department, Motta, was in charge of

the referendum on the League of Nations. Even if his resignation was not so dramatic, Calonder shared the same fate as Hoffmann; it is interesting to note that the few “active” neutrality-politicians of the First World War era were forced to resign and fell (undeservedly) into oblivion.

It is hardly surprising that the suggestion to join the League of Nations was strongly objected to in German-speaking parts of Switzerland. With the exception of Lucerne, Obwalden, Nidwalden, Appenzell Ausserrhoden and Thurgau, all the German-speaking cantons opposed joining the League. The French and Italian-speaking cantons, in contrast, were overwhelmingly for it; the mixed ones (Freiburg, Valais) were just as clearly in favour of joining; the cantons with language minorities (Bern, Grison) also supported joining, with a smaller majority in favour of entering the League. The majority was clear, by almost one-hundred thousand votes. However, the accession to the League (and implicitly to a differential neutrality) was approved by the smallest possible majority of cantons; this fact led to low expectations for the future, which became tumultuous faster than anyone would have expected, considering the overwhelming desire for peace at the war’s end.

In 1938 it was just *Bundesrat* Motta – the erstwhile vehement proponent of the League of Nations – who led Switzerland from a differential neutrality back into integral neutrality; Switzerland was followed by a group of traditionally neutral League states (the Scandinavian countries, Belgium, [The Netherlands](#) and [Luxembourg](#)).<sup>[42]</sup> Thus, one of the architects of the Swiss League-of-Nations-politics – which was truly successful during the 1920s – became one of the undertakers not only of differential neutrality, but of the entire League of Nations.

## 6. A Closing Remark

The fact that the Swiss admission to the League of Nations was carried out immediately upon its creation seems hardly surprising in retrospect, while joining the United Nations had to wait for more than half a century after the Second World War ended; it took place in 2002, with just as small a majority of cantons as had approved the accession to the League in 1920. The wish, formulated at the time by Ragaz, that Switzerland – which provided the centre for the League’s activity, with its seat in Geneva – would pursue an active foreign policy “oriented towards a new order of relations between peoples”,<sup>[43]</sup> was bitterly dashed.

During the 1930s, as the League of Nations lost its glamour in the wake of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and the Italian attack on Abyssinia, it was less the local critics of the split within Switzerland, but rather (indirectly) the Nazi warmongers across the Rhine who managed to achieve, with their brutal aggressiveness, a sort of negative integration of the country. This integration disappeared mostly after the end of the Second World War, when the threat was over. What remained was the myth of “neutrality” and the promotion of this concept into an existential condition – although Switzerland’s attitude towards [Adolf Hitler’s \(1889-1945\)](#) Germany shows clearly that an integral or absolute neutrality is not possible. Insofar as any practice of neutrality can evolve into differential neutrality, the turn away from it in 1938 was mere lip service.

Section Editors: [Daniel Marc Segesser](#); [Roman Rossfeld](#)

Translator: [Dan Tamir](#)

## Notes

1. ↑ Abbenhuis, Maartje: *An Age of Neutrals. Great Power Politics, 1815-1914*, Cambridge 2014, p. 2.
2. ↑ Abbenhuis, *An Age of Neutrals* 2014, p. 19.
3. ↑ Kriesi, Hanspeter, et al.: *Le clivage linguistique. Problèmes de compréhension entre les communautés linguistiques en Suisse*, Bern 1996, pp. 95-97.
4. ↑ Cf. General Wille an Bundesrat Hoffmann, 20 July 1915, in: *Diplomatische Dokumente der Schweiz*, (DDS), vol. 6 (1914-1918), Bern 1981, pp. 240-243.
5. ↑ Ogley, Roderick: *The Theory and Practice of Neutrality in the Twentieth Century*, London 1970, p. 1.
6. ↑ Seippel, Paul: *Pour notre indépendance intellectuelle*, in: Seippel, Paul, et al.: *L'indépendance intellectuelle de la Suisse*, Zurich 1917, pp. 7, 17, 19.
7. ↑ Spitteler, Carl: *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 8, Zurich 1947, pp. 579-594.
8. ↑ Cf. Vallotton, François: *Ainsi parlait Carl Spitteler. Genèse et réception du "Notre point de vue Suisse" de 1914*, Lausanne 1991, pp. 84-87.
9. ↑ An Bundespräsident Decoppet, 11 January 1916, DDS vol. 6, pp. 306-308.
10. ↑ Ragaz, Leonhard: *Mein Weg*, vol. 2, Zürich 1952, pp. 53-58.
11. ↑ Cf. Leonhard Ragaz in seinen Briefen, vol. 2: 1914-1932, Zurich 1982, pp. 92-94.
12. ↑ Cf. Mattmüller, Markus: *Leonhard Ragaz und der religiöse Sozialismus – eine Biographie*, vol. 2: *Die Zeit des Ersten Weltkriegs und der Revolutionen*, Zurich 1968, pp. 303-312.
13. ↑ Cf. DDS vol. 6, pp. 495-497.
14. ↑ Ragaz, Leonhard: *Über den Sinn des Krieges. Vortrag gehalten vor der Zürcher Freistudentenschaft*, Zürich 1915, pp. 40-42.
15. ↑ Cf. Mattmüller, Ragaz 1968, vol. 2, pp. 313-318.
16. ↑ Protocol of the Bundesrat meeting of 10 November 1914, DDS vol. 6, pp. 107-109.
17. ↑ Proposal presented by Bundesrat Hoffmann on 20 November 1916, DDS vol. 6, pp. 426-428.
18. ↑ Protocol of the Bundesrat meeting of 21 December 1916, DDS vol. 6, pp. 444-446.
19. ↑ 30 December 1916. Giuseppe Motta, *Testimonia temporum 1911-1931*, Bellinzona 1931, p. 69.
20. ↑ Cf. McCarthy, Adolf: *Robert Grimm. Der schweizerische Revolutionär*, Bern-Stuttgart 1989, pp. 144-148.
21. ↑ DDS vol. 6, pp. 566-568.

22. ↑ DDS vol. 6, pp. 569 and 574.
23. ↑ Cf. DDS vol. 6, p. 570, as well as McCarthy, pp. 158-160.
24. ↑ DDS vol. 6, p. 580.
25. ↑ Cf. Mooser, Josef: Robert Grimm und die deutsche Arbeiterbewegung 1914-1933, in: Degen, Bernhard, et al.: Robert Grimm. Marxist, Kämpfer, Politiker, Zurich 2012, pp. 29-32.
26. ↑ Cf. Degen, Bernhard: Biographischer Nachtrag, in: Degen et al., Grimm 2012, p. 190.
27. ↑ Cf. Vuilleumier, Marc: Eine internationale Führungsfigur des Sozialismus, in: Degen et al., Grimm 2012, pp. 69-71 and passim.
28. ↑ McCarthy, Robert Grimm 1989, p. 15. Cf. the entire 7th chapter, pp. 151-178.
29. ↑ McCarthy, Robert Grimm 1989, p. 165.
30. ↑ Schächli, Hans: Zur politischen Aktualität von Robert Grimm, in: Degen et al., Grimm 2012, pp. 177-179.
31. ↑ Cf. Soiron, Rolf: Der Beitrag der Schweizer Aussenpolitik zum Problem der Friedensorganisation am Ende des Ersten Weltkriegs, Basel-Stuttgart 1973, pp. 32-43.
32. ↑ Walter, François: Gustave Ador 1845-1928, in: Altermatt, Urs (ed.): Die Schweizer Bundesräte. Ein biographisches Lexikon, Zurich-Munich 1991, p. 338.
33. ↑ Cf. Protocol of the Bundesrat meeting of 22 September 1914, DDS vol. 6, pp. 75-77.
34. ↑ Cf. Lüchinger, Stephan / Brunner, Theodor: Verwundetentransport im Ersten Weltkrieg, Heft 25 der Schriftenreihe für militärische Studienreisen, Wettingen 2004.
35. ↑ Cf. DDS vol. 6, pp. 195-198 and 311-313.
36. ↑ Motta, Testimonia temporum 1931, p. 218.
37. ↑ Message from the Bundesrat to the Federal Assembly (*Bundesversammlung*) regarding the question of Switzerland's accession to the League of Nations (4 August 1919), Bern 1919.
38. ↑ Supplementary message from the Bundesrat to the Federal Assembly (*Bundesversammlung*) regarding the question of Switzerland's accession to the League of Nations (17 February 1920), in: Bundesblatt no. 8, 25 February 1920, pp. 334-363.
39. ↑ Cf. Moos, Carlo: Ja zum Völkerbund - Nein zur Uno. Die Volksabstimmungen von 1920 und 1986 in der Schweiz, Zurich 2001, chapter 3, passim.
40. ↑ Cf. Laur, Ernst: Die Schweiz und der Völkerbund. Eine Wegleitung für das Schweizervolk, 1920, p. 16; Leonhard Ragaz, Sozialismus und Völkerbund: Ein Wort zur Besinnung, Zürich [1920], passim.
41. ↑ Volksrecht, 15 January 1920; cf. Moos, Ja zum Völkerbund 1920, pp. 87-89.
42. ↑ Cf. Neff, Stephen C.: The rights and duties of neutrals. A general history, Manchester 2000, p. 171.
43. ↑ Ragaz, Sozialismus und Völkerbund [1920], p. 14.

## Selected Bibliography

[Abbenhuis, Maartje: \*\*An age of neutrals. Great power politics, 1815-1914\*\*, Cambridge 2014: Cambridge University Press.](#)

- Bundesrat: **Zusatzbotschaft des Bundesrates an die Bundesversammlung betreffend die Frage des Beitritts der Schweiz zum Völkerbund (vom 17. Februar 1920)**, in: Bundesblatt 8, 1920, pp. 334-363.
- Bundesrat: **Botschaft des Bundesrates an die Bundesversammlung betreffend die Frage des Beitritts der Schweiz zum Völkerbund vom 4. August 1919**, Bern 1919.
- Büro der Kommission (ed.): **Diplomatische Dokumente der Schweiz Band 7/1 (1918–1919)**, Bern 1981: Benteli.
- Calonder, Felix Ludwig: **Schweiz und Völkerbund. Rede, gehalten auf Einladung der Neuen Helvetischen Gesellschaft am 19. Oktober 1919 in der Volksversammlung zu Winterthur**, Zurich 1920: Rascher & Co.
- Calonder, Felix Ludwig: **Rede von Bundesrat Calonder über Völkerbundsprobleme, Beilage I.3 der bundesrätlichen Botschaft vom 4. August 1919**, 1919, pp. 151-161.
- Calonder, Felix Ludwig: **Die allgemeine Lage des Landes. Rede gehalten am schweizerischen freisinning-Demokratischen Parteitag vom 24. November 1917, in Bern**, Bern 1918.
- Degen, Bernard / Schäppi, Hans / Zimmermann, Adrian (eds.): **Robert Grimm. Marxist, Kämpfer, Politiker**, Zurich 2012: Chronos-Verlag.
- Kreis, Georg: **Insel der unsicheren Geborgenheit. Die Schweiz in den Kriegsjahren 1914-1918**, Zurich 2014: NZZ.
- Kriesi, Hanspeter: **Le clivage linguistique. Problèmes de compréhension entre les communautés linguistiques en Suisse**, Bern 1996: Bundesamt für Statistik.
- Laur, Ernst: **Die Schweiz und der Völkerbund. Eine Wegleitung für das Schweizervolk**, 1920, Schweizerisches Aktionskomitee für den Völkerbund.
- Lüchinger, Stephan / Brunner, Theodor: **Verwundetentransport im Ersten Weltkrieg**, Schriftenreihe der Gesellschaft für militärhistorische Studienreisen, Wettingen 2004: GMS.
- Mattmüller, Markus: **Leonhard Ragaz und der religiöse Sozialismus. Eine Biographie**, volume 2, Zurich 1968: Evangelischer Verlag.
- McCarthy, Adolf: **Robert Grimm. Der schweizerische Revolutionär**, Bern 1989: Francke.
- Moos, Carlo: **Ja zum Völkerbund - Nein zur UNO. Die Volksabstimmungen von 1920 und 1986 in der Schweiz**, Zurich; Lausanne 2001: Chronos.
- Moser, Peter: **Mehr als eine Übergangszeit. Die Neuordnung der Ernährungsfrage während des Ersten Weltkrieges**, in: Rossfeld, Roman / Buomberger, Thomas / Kury, Patrick (eds.): 14/18. Die Schweiz und der Grosse Krieg, Baden 2014: hier + jetzt, pp. 172–199.
- Motta, Giuseppe: **Testimonia temporum, 1911-1931. Discorsi e scritti scelti / Discours et écrits choisis / Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften**, Bellinzona 1931.
- Neff, Stephen C.: **The rights and duties of neutrals. A general history**, Manchester; New York 2000: Manchester University Press; Juris Pub.
- Ogley, Roderick: **The theory and practice of neutrality in the twentieth century**, London 1970: Routledge & K. Paul.



Ragaz, Leonhard: **Über den Sinn des Krieges. Vortrag gehalten vor der Zürcher Freistudentenschaft**, Zurich 1915: O. Füssli.

Ragaz, Leonhard: **Mein Weg**, volume 2, Zurich 1952: Diana Verlag.

Ragaz, Leonhard, League of Nations (ed.): **Sozialismus und Völkerbund. Ein Wort zur Besinnung**, Zurich 1920: Conzett & Co.

Ragaz, Leonhard, Ragaz, Christine / Mattmüller, Markus; Kreis, Georg et al. (eds.): **Leonhard Ragaz in seinen Briefen Bd. II**, Zurich 1982: Theologischer Verlag.

Rosfeld, Roman / Buomberger, Thomas / Kury, Patrick (eds.): **14/18. Die Schweiz und der Grosse Krieg**, Baden 2014: hier + jetzt.

Seippel, Paul: **L'Indépendance intellectuelle de la Suisse**, Zurich 1917: O. Füssli.

Soiron, Rolf: **Der Beitrag der Schweizer Aussenpolitik zum Problem der Friedensorganisation am Ende des Ersten Weltkriegs**: Basler Beiträge zur Geschichtswissenschaft, Basel; Stuttgart 1973: Helbing & Lichtenhahn.

Spitteler, Carl: **Unser Schweizer Standpunkt**: Gesammelte Werke. Land und Volk, volume 8, Zurich 1947: Artemis-Verlag, pp. 579-594.

Walter, François: **Gustave Ador 1845-1928**, in: Altermatt, Urs (ed.): Die Schweizer Bundesräte. Ein biographisches Lexikon, Zurich; Munich 1991: Artemis & Winkler, pp. 333-338.

## Citation

Moos, Carlo: Domestic Politics and Neutrality (Switzerland) (Version 2.0), 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 2017-01-24. **DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10519/2.0**. Translated by: Tamir, Dan

## License

This text is licensed under: [CC by-NC-ND 3.0 Germany](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/de/) - Attribution, Non-commercial, No Derivative Works.