

Exile and Migration (Switzerland)

By [Anja Huber](#)

Summary

This article analyses Swiss migration policy and Switzerland's role as a country of asylum from 1914 to 1918. Subsequent sections discuss the change in migration patterns; how political emigrants and refugees were dealt with; the role of exile communities; the establishment of new border controls and a Federal Immigration Authority; and eventually the discourse on "Überfremdung". This article argues that the war gave rise to new migratory patterns and a defensive outlook against foreigners in Switzerland. Furthermore, the state of war enabled the Swiss government to centralise migration control at the federal level.

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Introduction

The First World War represents an important turning point in the [migration](#) history of the 19th and 20th centuries between a period of "proletarian mass migration" on the one hand and an age of [refugees](#) and stateless people on the other. Migration in the 19th century was primarily determined by economic factors. As of 1914, political developments and national framework conditions became more important for the now closely monitored movement of people. [Switzerland](#) was in the midst of these events and affected by both emigration as well as immigration to a significant extent during the period between 1914 and 1918. However, the consequences of the war on migration to and from Switzerland have so far only been marginally examined. For example, Gérald and Silvia Arlettaz worked on the topic of foreigners in Switzerland for three decades. In their research, the First World War often

played an important, but never the central role.¹ In addition, since the mid-1990s Regula Argast, Georg Kreis, [Patrick Kury](#) and Brigitte Studer have dealt with foreigners in Switzerland, the related discourse on “*Überfremdung*”² and the Swiss norms of naturalisation.³ In 1997, Uriel Gast presented a ground-breaking study on the change in Swiss immigration policy in the wake of the creation of a Federal Immigration Authority in 1917.⁴ Finally, [the author’s](#) monograph on Switzerland as a point of departure and destination for migrants during the First World War, was published in May 2018.⁵

New Migratory Patterns

The years before the First World War in Switzerland were characterised by intensive economic growth and a high demand for foreign workers.⁶ Immigration to the country was concentrated mainly on the largest industrialised cities such as Zurich, Geneva, Basel and St Gall, as well as on the border regions.⁷ Between 1850 and 1910, more than 98 percent of the immigrants in Switzerland came from Europe.⁸ The most important fields of employment for these people were the construction industry, the textile industry, trade, tourism and housekeeping.⁹ In 1913, an estimated 609,000 foreigners were living in Switzerland.¹⁰ The emigration of Swiss to non-European states also reached its peak in 1912.¹¹

During the First World War, transnational labour migration was severely curtailed by the closing of national borders, the restriction of transport facilities and by acts of war. The Swiss authorities also introduced stricter border controls during the war in order to prevent the immigration of “unwanted” foreigners.¹² However, certain sections of the [Swiss economy](#) relied on foreign workers and throughout the war their lobbyists tried to facilitate the immigration of required foreign workers (especially Italians). The emigration of Swiss to Europe and overseas also continued at a modest level in the first three years of the war because many European and overseas countries were dependent on foreign workers as well.¹³ However, Swiss with German-sounding names were not necessarily welcome in [Great Britain](#), [Australia](#), [New Zealand](#) or [Canada](#), where they faced repression (dismissal, arrest, internment or expulsion). In Switzerland, the First World War resulted in the emigration of about 100,000 migrant workers, mainly from [Italy](#), the [German Empire](#) and [France](#). In exchange, more than 26,000 deserters and draft dodgers as well as several thousand political emigrants sought refuge in Switzerland. In addition, 67,726 sick and wounded [prisoners of war](#) from neighbouring warring countries were interned in the [neutral](#) country as an act of humanity.¹⁴ According to the 1920 census, 402,000 foreigners resided in

Switzerland. Thus, a net outward migration of one-third over the years 1913–1920 can be assumed.¹⁵ During the war, 20,000–25,000 Swiss returned home from abroad. The majority of the returnees were conscripted Swiss men and as of 1918 repatriated Swiss from [Russia](#).¹⁶

Political Emigrants and Civilian Refugees

As early as the 19th century, Switzerland, together with [Belgium](#), France and Great Britain, was one of the most important asylum countries for political refugees.¹⁷ In the period from 1914 to 1918, thousands of politically persecuted persons migrated to the neutral country. In scholarly literature, one can find the unconfirmed number of 30,000 political migrants in Switzerland during the war.¹⁸ Most of these, however, probably belonged to the category of the 26,000 deserters and draft-dodgers, because political attitudes were often the reason for not joining or deserting the army. However, the Swiss Federal Council did not formally recognise foreign deserters as political refugees, but usually only granted them a provisional permit of residence.

Furthermore, an undefined number of civilian refugees, including families with children and elderly people, from Belgium, [Serbia](#), [Romania](#), Italy and [Armenia](#) found refuge in Switzerland during the First World War. In total, 4,350 [Belgian refugees](#) arrived in the country.¹⁹ Apart from concrete relief actions, the Swiss cantonal and federal authorities tried to keep undocumented and poor refugees as far away as possible from their country. Once admitted into Switzerland, these people usually required public assistance and deportation was difficult. In contrast to civilian refugees, who often travelled in family groups and only had minimal means at their disposal, political emigrants mostly travelled alone. In addition, they were often reasonably wealthy or had contacts and resources at their disposal.²⁰ For this reason, they were tolerated in Switzerland, regardless of their nationality and political views. Foreigners who stayed in Switzerland during the First World War and who could be counted as “refugees” were therefore above all deserters and draft-dodgers as well as political emigrants.

Exile Communities

The German and Austro-Hungarian declarations of war took many people living in exile or abroad by surprise. To escape internment, many of them – including [Vladimir Lenin \(1870-1924\)](#) – fled to Switzerland.²¹ Others, like [Romain Rolland \(1866-1944\)](#), were already there and did not return to their home countries. In the spring of 1915, the latter helped his French pacifist friend [Henri Guilbeaux \(1885-1938\)](#) also to come to Switzerland.²² Likewise,

the Association of German Republicans with its members Hans Schlieben, [Hermann Fernau \(1883-1935\)](#), [Friedrich Wilhelm Foerster \(1869-1966\)](#) and [Richard Grelling \(1853-1929\)](#), also found refuge in this country. From exile in Switzerland, Eastern European groups furthermore demanded the right to national self-determination or statehood. Between 1916 and 1918 four “conferences of nationalities” were held in Lausanne and Bern.²³ In 1915, the Swiss Social Democrat [Robert Grimm \(1881-1958\)](#) organised what was probably the most famous peace conference during the First World War – the [Zimmerwald conference](#). Prominent socialists from twelve different countries attended the conference, including well-known Swiss-based exiles such as Lenin and [Karl Radek \(1885-1939\)](#). One year later, the Kiental conference followed.²⁴

The cities of Geneva and Zurich were the main places for foreign intellectuals who chose Switzerland as a haven to escape [censorship](#) and/or persecution in their home countries and continue their struggle.²⁵ For example, Austro-Hungarian pacifist [Alfred Hermann Fried \(1864-1921\)](#) printed his journal “*Friedenswarte*” in Zurich.²⁶ During the war, Zurich was also a meeting point for different artists from all over the world. Intellectuals such as the German writers [Leonhard Frank \(1882-1961\)](#) and [Annette Kolb \(1870-1967\)](#), the German-Jewish poet [Else Lasker-Schüler \(1869-1945\)](#) and the Austro-Hungarian writers [Andreas Latzko \(1876-1943\)](#), [Franz Werfel \(1890-1945\)](#) and [Stefan Zweig \(1881-1942\)](#) met in the cafés of the city.²⁷ In Zurich, the artistic protest movement “*Dada*” was born. [Hans Arp \(1886-1966\)](#), [Tristan Tzara \(1896-1963\)](#) and [Hans Richter \(1888-1976\)](#) were Dadaists from the beginning.²⁸ From 1916, Lenin lived in the city, from where he spread his revolutionary theory.²⁹

The Monte Verità in the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino became another centre of anti-militarism, where the writers [Hermann Hesse \(1877-1962\)](#), [Erich Mühsam \(1878-1934\)](#), [Johannes Nohl \(1882-1963\)](#) and many others met.³⁰ At the turn of the year 1916/17, a broad [pacifist](#) and anti-militarist movement emerged in Switzerland, mobilising mainly students and intellectuals. In the [magazines and newspapers](#), Swiss scholars and politicians stood together with political emigrants.³¹ In principle, however, the political refugees did not keep in close contact with the local Swiss population and, above all, moved within their own networks. During or after the end of the First World War, most of these emigrants returned to their home countries.³²

New Border Controls and a Federal Immigration

Authority

Under the federal constitution of 1848, authority in Switzerland was shared between the Confederation (central state), the cantons and half-cantons (federal states) and the smaller local municipalities, with each canton having its own constitution and laws. At the beginning of the war there were therefore no consistent guidelines concerning border control in Switzerland and every canton had its own system. From 1915, Switzerland was surrounded by belligerent states whose governments had introduced strict border and passport controls. The Swiss Federal Government and the cantonal governments therefore feared the influx of a large number of destitute foreigners, who could have been a “burden” on the state and the cantons. Therefore, the federal authorities introduced stricter border controls in autumn 1915.³³ However, since the cantons handled them in different ways and although the federal authorities strongly promoted the centralisation of foreign control (border control and control of residence), the system was not always equally effective. Within the framework of the wartime emergency law and in the aftermath of the [October revolution](#) in Russia, the Federal Council finally managed to establish the “*Eidgenössische Fremdenpolizei*” on 21 November 1917, the Federal Immigration Authority which supervised control of the country’s borders and the residential status of foreigners.³⁴

In this context, the requirement to hold a valid identity document (passport obligation) when crossing the Swiss border, which had already been fixed in 1915, was given a legal basis. As a result of the new decree, foreigners furthermore had to provide an excerpt from their criminal record, evidence of a “good” purpose for their stay in Switzerland and confirmation that sufficient resources were at their disposal.³⁵ These provisions made labour migration to Switzerland even more difficult. In May 1918, the Federal Department of Justice and Police also ordered the general limitation of all residence and settlement permits.³⁶ The cantons were no longer allowed to issue permanent residence and settlement permits to foreigners with temporary travel visas. Instead, they issued so-called “control cards”, which the foreigners concerned had to present every time they came into contact with the immigration authorities, the local authorities and at police controls.³⁷ The Federal Immigration Authority finally decided on extensions of residence permits and applications for permanent residence.³⁸ Thus, overall immigration control was now in the hands of a federal authority. The sovereignty of the cantons concerning migration and asylum policy was therefore severely restricted – a process that continued even after the war.³⁹

Until the founding of the Federal Immigration Authority in November 1917, the “political police” of the Federal Prosecutor’s Office was the only pan-Swiss organisation controlling the

political activity of foreigners. The small office focused primarily on monitoring left-wing radicals.⁴⁰ At the outbreak of the war, the Swiss military police supported it. However, there was relatively little capacity to monitor the political activity of the various foreign groups, and the posts were generally poorly informed. For the most part, political emigrants in Switzerland were left undisturbed by Swiss authorities, provided that they did not require public assistance and behaved “unobtrusively”. Towards the end of the war, and especially in the interwar period, the mistrust of political refugees rose steadily. As part of the expansion of the Federal Immigration Authority, their activities were therefore monitored more closely.

“Überfremdung”

In autumn 1917, the economic situation in Switzerland became more and more difficult, especially in relation to the supply of [food](#) and [raw materials](#).⁴¹ As early as mid-1917, reports about food shortages, protests against inflation and food smuggling appeared daily in Swiss newspapers.⁴² [Social tensions](#) increased as a result of the lack of social welfare institutions to support the needy population. These culminated in the [general strike of November 1918](#).⁴³ Foreigners in Switzerland were generally suspected of food smuggling by the Swiss population. In addition, they were perceived as competitors in terms of food supply and employment. After the revolutions in Russia, the bourgeois parties fuelled fears of a revolutionary upheaval in Switzerland.⁴⁴ Protectionist views, xenophobia and a [nationalist](#) discourse began to dominate the public space in Switzerland and the way in which the Swiss perceived themselves.

Representative of this [xenophobic movement](#) was a loose conglomeration of members of the rising New Right, which was comprised of conservative intellectuals, scientists, political exponents and members of newly formed cultural protectionist associations and societies.⁴⁵ One of the main exponents of this movement was the “Neue Helvetische Gesellschaft” (NHG), founded in 1914. At the third annual meeting in September 1917, the members of the society invited the Federal Council to take measures against excessive “immigration” and food smuggling. In addition, the NHG demanded that “undesirable” strangers should be expelled.⁴⁶ Besides political refugees, the main focus of this xenophobic movement was on foreign deserters and draft-dodgers. They were accused of political agitation, anarchist and socialist attacks as well as smuggling, [espionage](#) and usury. Military refugees were also suspected by the bourgeois parties of being anti-state elements because of their trade union participation. The members of the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions and the working-class movement, in contrast, often showed solidarity with the destitute deserters and draft-

dodgers.⁴⁷

In response to these developments, the Federal Council increased the residence requirement for the naturalisation of foreigners from two to four years. This measure would primarily prevent the naturalisation of newly arrived deserters and draft-dodgers in Switzerland.⁴⁸ The solution of the “immigration debate” discussed before the First World War through facilitated naturalisation or the introduction of a restricted “*ius soli*” (birthright citizenship) was no longer an option. From 1917 on, the majority of politicians and the public no longer considered the granting of citizenship as a condition for the assimilation of strangers, but the assimilation of national values as indispensable for naturalisation.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The war gave rise to new migratory patterns in Switzerland. Traditional forms of labour migration came to a standstill, being replaced by wartime migration. After the outbreak of war, more than 100,000 migrant workers left Switzerland to return to their home countries. In exchange, a total of 26,000 deserters and draft dodgers as well as several thousand political emigrants sought refuge in Switzerland during the war. During the period 1914 to 1918, Switzerland remained true to its function as a refuge for political emigrants with financial means or good networks. However, the country did not extend the granting of asylum to the vulnerable, destitute “masses of refugees”. The [Swiss government](#) tried to define the country’s [humanitarian role](#) as a “transit point” rather than a permanent “haven”. Furthermore, within the framework of the wartime emergency law, the Federal Council managed to establish a Federal Immigration Authority in 1917, the “*Eidgenössische Fremdenpolizei*”, which supervised control of the country’s borders and the residential status of foreigners. This resulted in an increased centralisation of power in the hands of the state. The war also strengthened the defensive outlook against foreigners in Switzerland and finally brought the liberal policy of integration to an end.

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Notes

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2. „Überfremdung“ is a specific Swiss term. It was used for the first time around 1900 in publications in the field of political science. In the course of the First World War, „Überfremdung“ became an ambiguous metaphor for a negatively assessed social change. ↑
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11. Bericht des Bundesrates an die Bundesversammlung über seine Geschäftsführung im Jahre 1912, pp. 95–96. Available at <https://www.amtsdruckschriften.bar.admin.ch>. ↑
12. See Kreisschreiben des Bundesrates an sämtliche Kantonsregierungen betreffend schärfere Grenzkontrolle, 25 September 1915, in: Schweizerisches Bundesblatt 3/3 (1915). ↑
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14. See for example Bürgisser, Thomas: Menschlichkeit aus Staatsräson. Die Internierung ausländischer Kriegsgefangener in der Schweiz im Ersten Weltkrieg, in: Rossfeld, Roman / Buomberger, Thomas / Kury, Patrick (eds.): 14/18. Die Schweiz und der Grosse Krieg, Baden 2014, pp. 266–289; Gysin, Roland: Die Internierung fremder Militärpersonen im 1. Weltkrieg. Vom Nutzen der Humanität und den Mühen der Asylpolitik, in: Guex, Sébastien / Studer, Brigitte / Degen, Bernhard et al. (eds.): Krisen und Stabilisierung. Die Schweiz in der Zwischenkriegszeit, Zurich 1998, pp. 33–46; Schild, Georges: Die Internierung von ausländischen Militäreinheiten in der Schweiz 1859, 1871, 1916–19. Eine geschichtlich-postalische Studie, Bern 2009. ↑
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27. Charrier, Émigration allemande 2015, pp. 85–86. ↑

28. Vuilleumier, Flüchtlinge und Immigranten 1989, pp. 69–70; Piper, Ernst: Nacht über Europa. Kulturgeschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs, Berlin 2014, pp. 373–376. [↑](#)
29. Tanner, Jakob: Geschichte der Schweiz im 20. Jahrhundert, Munich 2015, p. 133. [↑](#)
30. Clavien, Schweizer Intellektuelle, p. 119; Piper, Nacht über Europa 2014, p. 377. [↑](#)
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32. Piper, Nacht über Europa 2014, p. 394. [↑](#)
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