

Literature (Switzerland)

By [Nicole Billeter](#)

During the First World War, many authors from neighbouring countries who spoke out against the war and its enormous costs found exile in Switzerland. Given that Switzerland was torn between its German and French linguistic and cultural regions, these writers-in-exile were often regarded with suspicion and even spied upon by the Swiss authorities.

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Introduction

During the First World War, Switzerland became a focal point of many intellectuals who could no longer publish in their home countries due to increased levels of [censorship](#), yet they did not want to be silent in the face of what they regarded as mass slaughter in Europe. These authors in exile were desperate for Europeans to understand that the war would be the downfall of Europe and European civilization and destroy an entire generation of young men. In Switzerland – mainly in Geneva, Berne, and Zurich – they found like-minded intellectuals who opposed the war. Furthermore, Swiss papers,

magazines, and publishing houses were willing to publish their articles and books. For example, [Romain Rolland \(1866-1944\)](#) – one of the most famous French writers at the time – published in the renowned *Journal de Genève*. His articles, in particular his 1914 “Au-dessus de la mêlée”^[1] (“Above the Battle”) became famous around the world. Some books were ultimately smuggled into the authors’ home countries, for example Leonhard Frank’s *Der Mensch ist gut*^[2] (*Man is Good*). Other authors were published by the censors themselves, as was the case with Rolland’s “Au-dessus de la mêlée”, which was published in a book condemning his work but in fact had the opposite effect by printing practically every word of it. Still, the readership of these books was predominantly Swiss nationals. Furthermore, the small edition sizes of books and journals suggests that these works were not well known during the war.

Exile Literature

Author Perspectives on WW1

The exiled authors did not accept the official claim that the war was a patriotic enterprise as government officials on both sides claimed it to be. They perceived themselves as the true patriots since they did not want to bear witness to their respective countries being destroyed. They saw the enormous human, social, and economic costs of the conflict and believed that neither the possible gain of territory nor reparations could bring back the millions of lives lost in a [senseless war](#).

Even though the exiled writers held quite similar views in general, they could not form a united group or even publish, for example, a manifesto signed by all. While they agreed that the war was senseless, they held different opinions on how to end the war and what the future should look like. What remained was an informal group of individuals taking an anti-war stance in their writings.

Some of these individuals achieved a short-lived fame based on their anti-war publications, while others built careers as writers and became famous; many are now forgotten. Romain Rolland was already a successful writer in [France](#) when he moved to French-speaking Switzerland. His wartime publications were banned in his home country and he suffered a great deal from the written assaults against his points of view. After a few articles, he opted for silence, which he maintained for several months. The French publicist [Henri Guilbeaux \(1884-1938\)](#), now mostly forgotten, also lived in the French region of Switzerland. During the war, he dedicated his time and money to his magazine *Demain (Tomorrow, 1916-1918)*. He was a committed Leninist and took part in the famous gatherings of the International Left in Switzerland (in [Zimmerwald](#) and in Kienthal). He was not only sentenced to death for treason in France but he was also under surveillance by the Swiss authorities. He spent some time in prison because it was feared he would start a revolt. In 1919, Guilbeaux was expelled from Switzerland.

Some exiles found a place to live and work in Switzerland’s capital Berne. One of the more famous was the Alsatian writer [René Schickele \(1883-1940\)](#). He became the editor of the prestigious *Die Weissen Blätter*^[3] (*The White Pages, 1913-1921*), an important journal for literary expressionism in

[Germany](#). He also came into contact with [Harry Graf Kessler \(1868-1937\)](#) who worked as cultural attaché of the German Foreign Office in Berne. Most of the other exiles suspected that Schickele was a spy because of this contact and therefore avoided him.

Zurich was one of the main gathering points for exiled German-speaking writers. Censorship made it impossible for the Austrian Nobel Peace Prize Winner [Alfred Hermann Fried \(1864-1921\)](#) to stay in Vienna, prompting Fried to move his pacifist journal *Friedens-Warte* (*Look-out for Peace*, since 1899) into exile in Zurich. The city also housed the [Dada](#) “Cabaret Voltaire” in the Spiegelgasse 1 and [Vladimir Il’ich Lenin \(1870-1924\)](#) lived only a few houses down the tiny lane. [Ludwig Rubiner \(1881-1920\)](#) and his leftist wife [Frida Rubiner-Ichak \(1879-1952\)](#), [Leonhard Frank \(1882-1961\)](#), [Andreas Latzko \(1876-1943\)](#), [Albert Ehrenstein \(1886-1950\)](#) and [Stefan Zweig \(1881-1942\)](#) also lived in Zurich, to name just a few. Some created impressive works in Zurich that launched their careers as writers. Thus, Leonhard Frank’s reputation as a gifted writer was established after *Man is Good* was published in 1917. The stories in the collection were all based on the one truth that Frank felt was obvious: that the human costs of the war were too high, regardless of the potential gains. Rubiner was a pre-war writer for the modern journal *Die Aktion* (*The Action*, 1911-1932) which demanded intellectuals not to hide behind buzzwords and phrases, but play an active role in society and politics. This remained Rubiner’s credo both as a writer of drama and as the editor of the journal in exile *Das Zeit-Echo*^[4] (*Reverberation of the Present*, 1914-1917). His wife Frida Rubiner was an ardent follower of Lenin’s politics and for this reason the couple came under the scrutiny of Zurich’s authorities. They were suspected of being involved in the organisation of the so-called November Unrest of 1917, during which countless people demonstrated to end the war. The demonstration was mainly organised by two Swiss pacifists, Max Daetwyler and Max Rotter. At the time, [pacifism](#) was generally regarded as effeminate and therefore not suitable for so-called “real men.”^[5]

One of the very few authors who actually fought in the war was [Andreas Latzko](#) from [Austria-Hungary](#). As an officer, he was wounded in combat. To regain his health, he was moved to an alpine resort in Switzerland. After his recovery, he moved to Zurich. Due to his book, *Menschen im Krieg*^[6] (*Men in War*, 1917), he was demoted and later dismissed from the army. *Menschen im Krieg* was a collection of novellas that graphically described the war in the trenches: to hear the bombing, to feel shrapnel, to get wounded, and to [lose comrades to death](#) or insanity. In stark contrast to most of the pro-war writers who romanticised the “heroes’ deaths on the field of glory,” Latzko’s protagonists’ deaths were messy, brutal, grotesque, bloody, and endlessly painful. Latzko believed that if people read about the real brutalities of war, nobody would continue to support the war effort. He appealed especially to women who he thought to be more empathetic and who would not want their loved ones to be exposed to these [atrocities](#).

One of the most famous exile group was the one now known as the “Dadaists.” Many place the date and location of Dada’s birth to February 1916 in the “Cabaret Voltaire.” It is of course difficult to assign a definite date of formation to an artists’ movement, since there are always precursors and influences. Most of the Dadaists were artists or authors before they became part of this particular

group. [Hugo Ball \(1886-1927\)](#) and [Emmy Hennings \(1885-1948\)](#) were the founding couple of the “Cabaret Voltaire.” Before the war, Ball had published a tragicomedy, written articles in *Die Aktion*, and worked in theaters. Hennings had published poems, but mainly she had worked as a *diseuse* (singer/recital artist) in various cabarets. Not long after the launching of the “Cabaret Voltaire,” which was originally founded to earn income and not to start a new [art](#) movement, Ball and Hennings retired from the Dada circle. Ball then wrote political articles for the exiles’ journal *Die Freie Zeitung* (*The Free Newspaper*, 1917-1920), Emmy Hennings became religious, and finally they both moved to a secluded part of the Ticino, the Italian speaking part of Switzerland. Other authors such as [Richard Huelsenbeck \(1892-1974\)](#), [Tristan Tzara \(1896-1963\)](#), and [Marcel Janco \(1895-1984\)](#) remained with Dada.

Relationship with Switzerland

Some Swiss nationals were crucial in helping to publish the works of exile writers. Paul Seippel, for example, was an ardent defender of Romain Rolland’s publications. As chief editor of the *Journal de Genève*, he provided Rolland with a platform to publicise his attempts of conciliation between the Allies and Central powers. Another renowned Swiss newspaper was the bourgeois *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (*NZZ*), which printed the novellas of the authors mentioned above. Another paper for exiles’ works was *La feuille* (*The Sheet*, 1917-1920), which was edited in Geneva. Articles by Romain Rolland and most of Andreas Latzko’s novellas were published in this paper. It also had an astute daily comment on the front page by the exiled Belgian graphic artist [Frans Masereel \(1889-1972\)](#). His xylographs not only commented on the present political and social situations but also analysed the mechanisms behind pro-war phrases, capitalists’ and militarists’ motives for war, and the churches’ failure as he saw it. As already mentioned, Henri Guilbeaux’s staunchly leftist *Demain*, which was based in Geneva, also published anti-war articles. Rubiner’s *Zeit-Echo* and Schickele’s *Die Weissen Blätter* also gave writers the opportunity to circulate articles. Max Rascher’s publishing house, the Max Rascher Verlag, was founded in Zurich explicitly to publish pacifist books.

Many of the exiles only spent a short time in Switzerland or travelled back and forth from their home country. The latter was easier for women writers who did not risk conscription. A few female authors spent some time in Switzerland or published papers in exile. In addition to Emmy Hennings, there was [Claire Studer \(1891-1977\)](#), a German author who was mostly interested in the effects the war had on women. Incidentally, her collection of novellas was called *Die Frauen erwachen*^[7] (*The Women Arise*, 1918). The German-French writer [Annette Kolb \(1870-1967\)](#) and the German poet [Else Lasker-Schüler \(1869-1945\)](#) also spent some time in Switzerland during the war. Kolb published many articles in René Schickele’s *Weisse Blätter*. The articles drafted a plea to reconcile Germany and France and were titled “Briefe an einen Toten” (“Letters to a Dead One,” 1915). Kolb and Schickele had similar German and French backgrounds. Schickele was Alsatian and Kolb’s parents were of German and French nationalities. Both Kolb and Schickele felt torn between these two nations and were deeply distressed by the enmity between them.

During the First World War, it was relatively easy to cross Swiss borders. Laws were quite liberal with regard to the entry of foreigners; even deserters were admitted. Visas were required only after November 1917. However, once they crossed the border, immigrants had to fend for themselves, since there was no state welfare whatsoever. Many were spied upon by Swiss officials due to their leftist views, which were regarded as potentially suspicious. With the exception of Guilbeaux, none came into serious trouble with the Swiss authorities.

Extensive Powers of Authority and Censorship

At the beginning of the war, the Swiss Federal Council was endowed with extensive powers of authority. The members of the Federal Council used this power to prevent military information from being publicised (decree of 10 August 1914). Political information was not censored. However, every newspaper had to deliver two copies of its print works to the *Presskontrollbureau* (Office for Control of the Press) if they published military or political information. This conflicted with the freedom of the [press](#) that had been guaranteed by law since 1874 (§ 55). Another decree was issued by the Federal Council (30 September 1914), which stated that specific print organs could be reprimanded or even banned if they published articles which endangered the “good relations of Switzerland with foreign countries” or compromised Switzerland’s [neutrality](#).

During the second year of the war, Switzerland’s authorities tightened their control of the press with two new decrees. The first (2 July 1915) prohibited the slander of foreign nations, their peoples, governments, and representatives. A few weeks later, another decree determined the ability of the press to publish political information. In its wake, the control of the press became so extensive as to be almost absolute. For the publishing industry, this meant treading carefully so as not to upset the censors and lose readers. Some exiled authors complained that the people in charge were less and less inclined to let words too clear in their meaning be published. Romain Rolland’s articles were banned from the *Journal de Genève*. Rolland suggests in his diaries that this was due to pressure by the censors. Most Swiss censorship was aimed at preserving neutrality and good relations with neighbouring countries. Switzerland’s censors did also hold a certain grip on internal politics. The Federal Council was very aware of the dangers of inner instability; and during World War One, Switzerland’s domestic peace was far from secure.

National Coherence

During the First World War, Switzerland struggled to maintain domestic [social cohesion](#). At the beginning of the war its inhabitants were very sympathetic to one alliance or the other: the French-speaking Swiss supported the cause of France and its allies; German-speakers rooted for Germany and its allies. Tensions were high from the beginning of the war. In October 1914, the Federal Council released its “Aufruf an das Schweizervolk” (“Appeal to the Swiss People”) in which it cautioned against bias and division. Most intellectuals who spoke out for coherence argued that Switzerland, with its different cultural components, had always wanted to form one united nation. Switzerland, in

this view, was a nation of will and consensus. The Swiss author [Carl Spitteler \(1845-1924\)](#) saw division as a danger to the future of the state. His famous speech of December 1914 titled “Unser Schweizer Standpunkt” (“Our Swiss Position”) pointed out that the war had caused a rift between the French and German-speaking regions. He pleaded for Swiss national coherence.

Some smaller Swiss newspapers and journals stoked fear and distrust between the French and German-speaking parts of the country. The bigger newspapers like the *Journal de Genève*, the *Revue* of Lausanne, *Der Bund* of Bern, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, and Basel’s two major newspapers remained careful. They either voiced no opinion at all or opened their pages to both sides for their readers to decide.

In general, Swiss authors were attached to the idea of the long tradition of a democratic Switzerland and felt the mix of different languages and cultures was precious and needed to be protected. This applied to right wing conservative authors such as [Gonzague de Reynold \(1880-1970\)](#). He and others founded the *Nouvelle Société Helvétique* (New Helvetic Society) in February 1914 in order to uphold Switzerland’s heritage and reinforce patriotism. Others like [Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz \(1878-1947\)](#) took a narrower viewpoint: he wrote as “Vaud” (the Swiss canton) and did not support the idea of a particular Swiss culture as he believed that a special “Swiss French” culture existed. Leftist authors were in general more critical of the state and its representatives; they wanted to keep Switzerland a nation, but felt it needed to be more integrating – especially for the proletariat. During the war, the army with its firm structures mirrored society with bourgeois officers in power and workmen soldiers as subordinates. [Paul Ilg \(1875-1957\)](#) explored this relationship in his pacifist novel, *Der starke Mann* (*The Strong Man*, 1917). This book about a Swiss officer who shoots an unarmed laborer and is not punished brought Ilg much negative critique. He was seen as unpatriotic as he dared to criticise the Swiss army. Other books about the life in the army during the war were tamer, such as [Robert Faesi’s \(1883-1972\)](#) *Füsilier Wipf* (*Infantry Soldier Wipf*, 1917).

As among the general population, the differences between left and right wing Swiss authors were clearly defined. They hardly came into contact with exiled authors. Nevertheless, some Swiss nationals, parties, and newspapers suggested that the exiled authors with strong pacifist and/or leftist positions meddled in Switzerland’s politics and were responsible for social unrest, even for a feared communist revolution. The authors themselves were not interested in Swiss politics; they mostly found Swiss “angst” to be small-minded. After the war, all returned home to help restore and keep the peace.

Conclusion

A number of European writers found exile in Switzerland. They opposed the war and hoped to persuade the European public that war was murder and that it destroyed the pan-European culture. They believed in the power of the word to initiate change. Yet their voices did not reach the larger public and were left, for the most part, unheard. Many of them struggled with their pacifist and conciliatory tasks and were deeply disappointed by the derisive comments made by their “patriotic”

colleagues who sustained the cultural war effort in their respective countries. Some Swiss journals and/or newspapers were open for their contributions as Switzerland declared itself neutral. However, the longer the war lasted, the more careful the newspapers became and some discontinued publishing the works of anti-war exiles. The Swiss government introduced censorship since it felt it should tread carefully and not upset its neighbours. This meant that the newspapers no longer published extreme points of view vis-à-vis the war. Switzerland itself struggled to maintain domestic peace, as there were many in the French and German-speaking parts of the country who sympathized with France or Germany respectively. The distrust between the two parts of the country was severe and internal cohesion strained.

Nicole Billeter, Independent scholar

Section Editor: [Roman Rossfeld](#)

Notes

1. ↑ Rolland, Romain. Au-dessus de la Mêlée, in: Journal de Genève/261 (1914) p.4
2. ↑ Frank, Leonhard: Der Mensch ist gut. Europäische Bücher, Zurich 1918.
3. ↑ Schickele was the journal's editor during the war, which was based in Switzerland after September 1915.
4. ↑ Rubiner was the journal's editor from April to September 1917.
5. ↑ This view was expressed by most contemporaries and was also reflected in the treatment of soldiers with "shell shock" who had no visible physical injuries. See for example: Shephard, Ben: War of Nerves. Soldiers and Psychiatrists 1914-1944, London 2000. Micale, Mark S. / Lerner Paul (eds.): Traumatic pasts. History, Psychiatry and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870-1930, Cambridge 2001.
6. ↑ Latzko, Andreas: Menschen im Krieg. Zurich 1917.
7. ↑ Goll-Studer, Claire: Die Frauen erwachen. Frauenfeld 1918.

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Citation

Billeter, Nicole: Literature (Switzerland) , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2017-04-04. **DOI:** [10.15463/ie1418.11066](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11066).

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