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Vollmachtenregime

By [Oliver Schneider](#)

During the First World War, the Swiss federal government imposed a state of emergency, which was established to ensure the maintenance of Swiss neutrality, supply and integrity. As the war progressed, legal measures under this regime became more frequent as well as incisive, especially in economic matters and shaped Switzerland's political future well beyond 1918.

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Empowerment of the Federal Council at the Outbreak of World War I

On 3 August 1914, the Swiss parliament, the Federal Assembly, almost unanimously granted unlimited plenary powers to the Federal Council, thus enabling the country's government to take all necessary measures to uphold Switzerland's "security, integrity and neutrality" as well as its economic supply during the coming war.^[1] This kind of executive empowerment had not happened for the first time – the same had been done on numerous occasions throughout the 19th century. But the parliament's decision in the turbulent first few days of a looming global conflict, whose scale and destructiveness only few foresaw, was unprecedented in the history of modern Switzerland. Similar grants towards state authority were enacted in other countries like the [United Kingdom](#) or [Germany](#),

but from a legal perspective the Swiss state of emergency proved to be the most far-reaching.

Vested with unrestricted yet barely controlled legal and judicial powers, the Federal Council and its administrative bodies profoundly shaped the political development of Switzerland during World War I. They established a political system which historians and jurists like [Zaccaria Giacometti \(1893-1970\)](#) later called the “*Vollmachtenregime*”. The federal authorities enacted more than 1,000 emergency decrees (*Notverordnungen*) in different policy fields. Many of them altered existing laws, encroaching upon the hitherto strong autonomy of the cantons in the Swiss state as well as many economic freedoms. Others took action against [espionage](#), foreign [propaganda](#), and “excesses of the press”^[2] which were considered as harmful to the country’s international reputation.

Challenged Neutrality and Internal Division

Following its long established principles in foreign policy, Switzerland declared [neutrality](#) when the World War erupted. Accordingly, one of the key functions of the “*Vollmachtenregime*” was to safeguard Switzerland’s impartiality towards the belligerent states. A deep division opened up across the country after the war had begun, threatening Swiss neutrality. German [atrocities](#) in neutral [Belgium](#) enraged the citizens of the French- and Italian-speaking parts of Switzerland, as did the lack of condemnation from the Swiss federal government. In addition, more than a few suspected the “*Deutschschweizer*” to be overly sympathetic – if not collaborating – with the Central Powers. Vice versa, German-speaking Swiss watched their fellow citizens in the West with a certain amount of distrust, reckoning them to be blatantly “ententophile” rather than [neutral](#).

The perilous struggle for a “Swiss point of view”^[3] erupted not only in occasional skirmishes and scandals, but especially in the country’s newspapers. Several of the emergency laws the Federal Council issued in the initial stages of the war tried to censor the press to guard public neutrality. A conglomeration of the growing influence of the Swiss army in politics and public affairs, the undermining of Switzerland’s federalist system, and the breach of constitutional freedom of press carried out by military and civilian control commissions ignited opposition against the expanding “*Vollmachtenregime*”.

Resistance against the Regime amidst growing Economic Hardships

At the outset of the war, resistance against the Federal Council’s full powers were rare. Apparently, a large majority of Swiss deemed a state of emergency as vital, given that the war threatened the country in multiple ways and called for swift decisions. Initial acceptance may have been more importantly tied to the prevalent assumption of a short conflict, which would have limited the time that the “*Vollmachtenregime*” needed to be in effect.

However, as the war continued unabatedly and became very much noticeable in day-to-day life, criticism arose, especially among the French-speaking “Romands”. In early 1916 the cantonal

governments of Vaud and Geneva demanded restriction of the Federal Council's "dictatorial regime"^[4] and the army's unchecked power. In heated parliamentary debates, the Swiss government managed to secure its extraordinary powers, yet promised to keep the Federal Assembly informed about emergency measures through "neutrality reports" that would be submitted every few months to the parliament's meetings starting in February 1916.^[5]

After the entry of the [United States](#) into the conflict, Switzerland's economic situation, already under stress due to its dependency on foreign trade, deteriorated markedly. In order to deal with rising prices and supply difficulties, the Federal Council and its administrative units greatly increased the number and intensity of emergency decrees. Over the course of this process, the federal administration not only gained a significant boost in decision-making authority, but also established a lasting public-private partnership by working closely with business organizations and entrepreneurs.

Dismantling the Regime

In mid-November 1918 Switzerland was in political turmoil. While the belligerent states signed an armistice to end the devastating four-year war, tens of thousands of [Swiss labourers](#) took to the streets in protest against the lack of everyday commodities, social inequalities and political standstill. This partially violent general strike, which many perceived as a prelude to a Bolshevik [revolution](#), clearly showed the toll that the wartime years had taken on the small state. In light of this tenuous situation, the Federal Council, who had tried to contain the growing social conflict using its plenary powers, turned down calls to return to the regular democratic system even though the war was over.

Once again, Swiss parliamentarians requested the dismantling of the "*Vollmachtenregime*". However, since Switzerland's economic and political state continued to worsen in the post-war period, the Federal Council remained adamant about keeping its powers. Backed by the majority of the Federal Assembly, the Federal Council was able to avert any serious alteration of the August 1914 resolution, even though parliament had gained the right to veto new emergency laws in April 1919.

It was not until late 1921 that the state of emergency was finally abolished. Yet any decrees enacted inside its legal framework remained in effect as long as the Swiss government considered them necessary. Furthermore, it did not take long until Switzerland once again had to resort to the cutback of its constitutional order. Twenty-five years after the first "*Vollmachtenregime*", a very similar system was set up for World War II.

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Notes

1. † Beschluss der Bundesversammlung vom 3. August 1914, in: Amtliche Sammlung der Bundesgesetze und Verordnungen der schweizerischen Eidgenossenschaft 30 (1914), p. 347.
2. † Bundesratsbeschluss betreffend Ausschreitungen der Presse vom 30. September 1914, in: Baer, Fritz: Die schweizerischen Kriegs-Verordnungen, volume 1, Zurich 1916, p. 178.
3. † Spitteler, Carl: Unser Schweizer Standpunkt. Vortrag, gehalten in der neuen Helvet. Gesellschaft, Gruppe Zürich, am 14. Dezember 1914, Zurich 1915.
4. † Kölz, Alfred: Neue schweizerische Verfassungsgeschichte, Berne 2004, p. 669.
5. † 2. Neutralitätsbericht des Bundesrates vom 19. Februar 1916, in: Schweizerisches Bundesblatt volume 1, no. 8 (1916), pp. 119-141.

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