

## SOCIO-POLITICAL CONVULSIONS IN EUROPE AND THEIR IMPACT ON SWISS POLITICAL GOVERNANCE

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### Abstract

*It is almost impossible for any state to remain indifferent to the events happening in the world. Arguably, the last 200 years have been the most eventful in world history. Socio-political earthquakes like the French revolution and subsequent diplomatic realignments have had monumental repercussions. Curiously enough, the state of Switzerland despite being almost at the center of all that tumult kept itself relatively stable. This paper is a qualitative study that analyzes how the Swiss mode of political management warded off crises in its immediate neighbourhood.*

**Keywords:** Switzerland, events, influence, political governance

### Introduction

A state's geographic locality largely determines the trajectory of its national development. Some states do have a tendency to pursue a non-interventionist policy but they too, at times, find themselves in the thick of diplomatic power struggles.

The last three centuries have been the most tumultuous in Europe. The World underwent many changes effectuated by wars, treaties, partitions, unions, industrial revolution, and economic recessions. These changes posed various challenges to the states, threatened their survival, questioned their internal integrity, tested their relations with the outer world, and checked the strength, cohesion and harmony between different constituents of the state.

Switzerland is a home to eight million people of different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups surrounded by the great European powers. The Swiss ethnic, linguistic and religious groups derive their origins from these powerful neighboring countries. It exists in the heart of Europe. From the date of its origin, it has seen many vicissitudes. It has fought wars, made

alliances, signed different treaties, and done much it could do to preserve its survival and independence.

Switzerland has often found itself in the middle of political, social and economic commotion. Being a small and ethno-linguistically diverse country, those huge political, social and economic ripples must have been a nerve-wracking task for the administrative establishment.

Switzerland has always shown a good political acumen while reacting to the internal and external political developments. It has appropriately responded to the internal crises with unflinching determination without diluting its traditions of democracy. Likewise, it has maintained strict neutrality amidst international bickering.

### **The French Revolution**

In the course of history, there are very few events that come close to the French revolution in their impact and everlasting effects. The revolutionary reverberations felt far and wide. It affected almost all walks of life. For some, the world was never the same again.

Like other European countries, the waves were also felt in Switzerland. The Swiss people warmly welcomed it as it introduced positive changes. The overall impact on the Swiss society has been assessed by Martin in these lines:

It proclaimed the equality of citizens before the law, equality of languages, freedom of thought and faith; it created a Swiss citizenship, basis of our modern nationality, and the separation of powers, of which the old regime had no conception; it suppressed internal tariffs and other economic restraints; it unified weights and measures, reformed civil and penal law, authorized mixed marriages (between Catholics and Protestants), suppressed torture and improved justice; it developed education and public works.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Crane Brinton, *A Decade of Revolution, 1789-1799*, vol. 11 (New York : Harper & Row, 1963), 235.

The French army took over Switzerland in the 1790's, and turned it into an ally. The name was changed to the "Helvetic Republic." The Swiss nation did not welcome the move. The citizens felt aggrieved and took it as an offense against their local and traditional freedoms. When the French introduced a centralized system of government, which closely followed the French System, it was opposed by the cantons that had been completely autonomous under previous regimes. The resentment was greater in Catholic areas of central Switzerland. This led to an armed uprising in the central parts of the country. Alois Von Reding led an army of ten thousand men against the French. However, the French Army soon squashed his movement. Nevertheless,, the revolutionary ideals slowly degenerated. The Swiss people had less respect for the French because the Napoleonic army had challenged their democratic traditions, imposed centralization, introduced taxes and hostile to local values.<sup>2</sup>

It is fascinating that the French revolution and the consequent invasion of Switzerland by the French engendered alienation in all ethnic groups. They rallied against the foreign invaders. They appeared as one nation and not as French, German, Italian or Romansch.

The French revolution left some deep marks on the Swiss society. Before the French revolution, German enjoyed the status of an official language. The Italian, French and Romansch speaking cantons were not fully independent; they were originally subject to German speaking cantons. The French Revolution brought equity among German, Italian, French and Romansch speaking cantons.<sup>3</sup>

The French revolution brought an end to the ancient confederation of Switzerland and ushered it in a new era. It laid foundations for a new nation-state. Germany, Italy, and Poland rejected the French ideals of nation-state. Yet, the Swiss reaction was different from its neighboring countries. In the beginning, it accepted, welcomed and learned many lessons from it, but soon rose up against it. It brought an end to the five-century old confederation. When after few years Swiss autonomy re-emerged, it grew into a more viable and strong democratic country. Through the Act of Mediation in 1803, Napoleon introduced the new

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<sup>2</sup> Georg Thurer and Rudolph Peter Heller, *Free and Swiss: The Story of Switzerland* (London: Wolff, 1970), 80-90.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

constitution, removed all the social privileges and introduced equality among all the individuals and factions of the society. Italian was included as third national language of the state. To manifest a sense of impartiality, national coins were minted in Latin language so as not to offend the feelings of any linguistic group. It was a centralized parliamentary system that was against the wishes of the people. Therefore, with the decline of Napoleonic power in 1815, Switzerland once again transformed itself into the same old confederation where every canton used to enjoy complete self-sovereignty.<sup>4</sup>

### **The First World War (1914-1918)**

Human beings are fiercely territorial. History is replete with instances when wars were employed to do politics by other means. Before the twentieth century, wars were fought between the countries and/or between the two regions often with expansionist motives; they were used to be holy wars and fought in the name of religion to please gods. It was for the first time in history when industrial might was mobilized by imperial behemoths to fight a war on gigantic scale. It seemed almost difficult for any nation to remain passive since the interests of almost all nations were at stake one way or another. Thus, it was inevitable that all countries, particularly in Europe, must participate in the war in some form.

Switzerland succeeded in keeping its traditions of neutrality and did not get involved in the conflict. Unlike many countries, it did not treat its citizens as cannon fodder. Nevertheless, being hemmed in by the belligerent states of Europe, the war had decisive and lasting impact on the Swiss nation. Although no armed war took place within the boundaries of Switzerland, it dragged the Swiss nation into the misery and, consequently, led to more social polarization and disintegration. And this continued to affect and reshape the politics, culture and business of Switzerland for many decades to come.<sup>5</sup>

The First World War intensified the existing conflicts and animosities between the German and French speaking Swiss cantons that were emotionally inclined towards two opposing sides. The hearts of the French

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<sup>4</sup> Otto Dann and John Dinwiddy (eds.), *Nationalism in the Age of the French Revolution* (London: A&C Black, 1988), 190–98.

<sup>5</sup> William Mackey and Jacob Ornstein (eds.), *Sociolinguistic Studies in Language Contact: Methods and Cases*, Vol. 6 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 11-22.

speaking population were beating with the Allied-Powers and were not happy with federal government for not protesting against the German violation of neutrality of Belgium, whereas, the German speaking population was openly supporting Germany. Due to their majority in population and dominance in economy, the German speaking part of Switzerland had been enjoying immense influence and power in the country. Thus, it became a political problem since they were strongly tilted towards the Germans. The French and Italian speaking citizens were looking up to France or Italy. This emotional inclinations posed a great challenge to the integrity of the country. The appointment of the Swiss-German Commander-in-Chief heightened the uneasiness among the French and Italian speaking Swiss citizens. This confrontation between the linguistic regions remained till the victory of the Allied forces.<sup>6</sup>

The increasing rifts and widening gaps between the cultures were immensely exploited and propagated by the anti-state actors, on both internal and external levels. The great dramatist Aeschylus noted that 'truth was the first casualty of war'. Switzerland became the battlefield of media. The whole media went on influencing public opinion of the country. This created distrust at length, and social capital in Switzerland decreased at alarming rate. This situation was aptly realized by some of the leaders of the state. For instance, William Tell appeared on the poster in an attempt to raise the sense of integrity and unity among the citizens. Proper seminars and symposia were conducted with special reference to "In the Fire of Propaganda: Switzerland and the First World War".<sup>7</sup>

Rival ethno-linguistic factions were well aware of the widening gaps between different factions of the Swiss society. They used it to wage a propaganda war in Switzerland that had never been seen before. When in 1915, Italy entered the war; the Italian speaking people of Switzerland changed their opinion towards Germany.

In Switzerland, the propaganda of war was not only limited to print media but it had also spread to other means of communication. Hence, the war reached the theaters, cinemas, cabaret stages and museums. The content

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<sup>6</sup> Tazio Carlevaro and Carol L. Schmid, "Conflict and Consensus in Switzerland", *Language Problems and Language Planning* 8, no. 2 (1984): 235-238.

<sup>7</sup> Georg Thurer, and Rudolph Peter Heller, *Free and Swiss: The Story of Switzerland* (London: Wolff, 1970), 141-149.

of propaganda was very different depending upon where you were. By 1917, almost all cinemas of the country were owned by the belligerent parties. Finally, the Swiss government issued a 45-minute documentary about their army moving up and down the borders of the country for protection and inculcation of patriotism among the citizens, and the film proved successful.<sup>8</sup>

Though Switzerland succeeded in keeping its neutral position, the conflict not only provoked tensions between German speaking Swiss and their French and Italian speaking compatriots, it also put the working class under huge burden. As part of the army, they were sent to the borders, but they were not compensated financially for their wage losses. Yet, the country benefited financially from the war, as for the first time the state's balance-of-payment deficit was reversed. However, this was not enough to stabilize the social fabric. This situation led the country into social tensions, which resulted in a nationwide strike in November, 1918.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, Switzerland throughout the war years remained neutral as a state, but the hearts of the citizens were beating with one or the other party. It was destined to bear the brunt of war. Socio-political and religious harmony among various groups was badly damaged by the international war propaganda. In the following years, the state had to repair the damage that had been done.

### **The Second World War (1939-1945)**

The Second World War was one of the major transformative events in the twentieth century that caused devastation on a massive scale. The war left the world sundered into two ideological camps. The introduction of nuclear arsenal radically transformed the security architecture, which had hitherto relied on conventional weaponry. As a non-participant, the Swiss skillfully avoided these tempestuous waters.

It was the general perception in Switzerland that the Nazi system of the government was incompatible with the Swiss democratic arrangement.

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<sup>8</sup> William Martin, "Switzerland from Roman Times to the Present, translated by Jocasta Innes, Originally published as *Histoire de la Suisse* (London: Elek, 1971), 264-272.

<sup>9</sup> Georg Thurer, and Rudolph Peter Heller.

However, there were some admirers of Hitler in Switzerland too. They were in minority and hardly gained anything politically.<sup>10</sup>

Before, during, and after the war, there were scholars and literate people who were thinking along the lines of Hitler, but they as individuals were not influential. German speaking Swiss, who despite their linguistic and ancestral affiliations with Germany, denounced the atrocities of Nazi regime. The common will to live together and common history of the people of Switzerland transcended all the linguistic affiliations. During the war, in the presence of strong propaganda machinery used by the Nazis, the people of Switzerland held on to their strong sense of community. Yet, this did not mean the abandonment of their cultural distinctions. They retained pride in their linguistic, religious and ethnic idiosyncrasies. They had firm faith in guarding these distinctions against any assimilation. They had strong sense of community in spite of complete realization that they didn't meet the criteria of the nation based on common language, literature and art. Still, they kept their loyalty and devotion to their country intact.<sup>11</sup>

It is fascinating to notice that at this junction both the leadership and citizens of Switzerland demonstrated exemplary wisdom and upheld their national cause. The leaders showed great unity. Instead of pursuing petty political benefits and selfish ends, they closed ranks in the time of crises. At the same time, the whole nation, particularly the common people, strictly followed the course set by their political leaders. Thus, they showed that a small state hemmed in by powerful culturally-homogeneous powers could hold its nerves.

What saved this multi-ethnic country from being torn apart and devoured by the external forces and internal conflicts was its liberal and democratic nationalism. The whole Europe was addicted to ethnic chauvinism. The bureaucratic authoritarianism had taken control of most states of Europe. Consequently, in the twentieth century, it pushed the whole continent into an abyss of irreparable devastation. Yet, the Swiss nation wisely avoided all the mistakes committed by their neighbors.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://history-switzerland.geschichte-schweiz.ch/switzerland-second-world-war-ii.html>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

During the Second World War, Switzerland had dual and contradictory attitudes towards the belligerent nations. This caused confusion among the historians to make a clear point of view about war-time Switzerland. The decision to remain neutral and continue commercial ties with the Nazi government earned negativity from the outside world for the Swiss nation. By virtue of the direct democracy, federalism, specialized foreign trade and maxim of neutrality, Switzerland succeeded in surviving as a neutral country. It abstained from the bloody war, but it could not resist stopping itself from the entanglement of the economic war. The decision to continue economic ties with Hitler was the result of the Swiss foreign policy. One needs to comprehend that the decision to isolate Switzerland from the rest of the world during the interwar period is embedded in the historical development of the country. From the time Switzerland became a confederation in 1291, the three forestry cantons of Uri, Schyz and Unterwalden had signed treaties. Thus, on the one hand, the position of neutrality was a continuation of that covenant, but on the other, neutrality provided them a cementing force among the different factions of the society in the absence of a common language, religion and ethnicity.<sup>12</sup>

The consciousness of being a neutral state, inculcated by a long history in the minds of the citizens, didn't let detractors to raise their voices and create havoc in the country. This state of mind helped the state to manage those who were aligning themselves with belligerent countries along ethnic, linguistic and religious lines. Thus, one can safely hold that the neutral position of the state during the war provided the country with internal cohesion.

### **European Union (EU)**

The end of Second World War brought unprecedented happiness and success to the whole continent. The countries with decades' long rivalry and hostile attitudes to each other lived with peaceful and supranational cooperation. They established European Steel and Coal Community (ECSC) to address their economic problems and set the wheel of progress in motion. The organization of six countries earned success and prosperity which attracted many other countries, and it expanded with the passage of time. The creation of this organization was a hallmark in the history of the European continent. The Community has now evolved into a Union of

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<sup>12</sup> Jean Freymond, "Neutrality and Security Policy as Components of the Swiss Model", *Government and Opposition* 23, no. 1 (1988): 51-68.



twenty-eight countries. It has touched new horizons of mutual cooperation and success.

It is well known that the Swiss have never been attracted to this organization. And, whenever it came to the public decision, the citizens have always denied any possibility of joining it. Most of the analysts of the Swiss affairs are of the opinion that the Swiss will join all these organizations in future. Indifference of the Swiss towards these developments has intrigued many researchers and thinkers to find out the truth behind it. They have found it difficult to comprehend how a heterogeneous country with a highly literate, multi-ethnic and linguistically diverse population and economic independence has not adjusted itself with the developing political environment of the continent.

Switzerland's formal relations with the EU have been insignificant. There have never been strong ties between the EU and Switzerland except the Free Trade Treaty signed in 1972 at the time of the liquidation of European Free Trade Area (EFTA). Despite the fact that the EU is the main trade partner of Switzerland and more than 60% of its exports go to the Union and more than 80 % of its imports come from the Union, the Swiss as a government and even citizens have never shown their interest in joining the EU. They signed different mutual and bilateral agreements but it yielded no supranational agreement between them. In 1998, by the approval of parliament and after public endorsement through referendum in 2000, seven treaties comprising a package deal that included cooperation in overland transport, free movement of persons, civil aviation, public procurement, research programs, agricultural products and technical barrier to trade were signed by the partners.<sup>13</sup>

Politically, the result of all these treaties is inconsequential. The federal government assures the cantonal governments and citizens about the country's political independence and sovereignty through official statements and parliamentary sessions. During the time of signature on seven treaties in 2000, the government kept regularly emphasizing that:

The bilateral agreements do not imply any integration of Switzerland in the institutions of EU, they are separate

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<sup>13</sup> Jürg Martin Gabriel, *Switzerland and the European Union*, vol. 33(Zurich: ETH, 2000), 2-9.

accords based on specific interests concluded in the normal bilateral way and don't purport in any mean that Switzerland will be "joining the club"... . They are neither a step towards membership nor they are indeed away from it.<sup>14</sup>

The official and government position about the EU has remained confusing and ambivalent in a sense that on many occasions, particularly at the time of negotiations for European Economic Area (EEA) in 1993, the government of Switzerland made a promise that membership of the EU was the strategic goal of the government. The government of Switzerland retreated from the EEA once it was rejected by the people in a referendum. Then the government had to give different explanations for that and called it a failure on the part of the parliament to discuss it properly and explain to the people.

The question whether to join EU or not was not so simple. Clear rifts appeared between the French and German Swiss, rural and urban, young and old, and literate and illiterate. Generally speaking, the old, rural and less educated German speaking Swiss were opposing the idea of joining the EU, whereas, the urban, young and literate French speaking Swiss tended to join the EU. This division of opinion was not confined to general public only. Four major political parties were well informed of this cleavage in public opinion. So, they tried to use it for their own ends. Two major parties had opposite views; the Social Democrats were in favor of the EU, while the People's Party were opposing the idea and doing their best to form public opinion. The rest of the parties were indecisive. The Christian Democrats and Liberals were confused and somewhere in the middle. They tried to remain impartial to the rising situation.<sup>15</sup>

The People's Party benefited most from this situation and succeeded in gathering anti-European voters. They exploited national sentiments of the common people. Traditionally, being a conservative party, it had Protestants and German speaking voters, and now conquered new quarters of voters by making aggressive appeal to anti-Union and

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<sup>14</sup> Wolf Linder, *Swiss Democracy: Possible Solutions to Conflict in Multicultural Societies* (Berlin: Springer, 2010), 179- 189.

<sup>15</sup> Jürg Martin Gabriel, *Swiss Neutrality and the American Century: Two Conflicting Worldviews* (Zurich: Forschungsstelle für Internationale Beziehungen, 1998), 33-64.

nationalist emotions. Thus, an ethnically, linguistically and religiously polarized country experienced political polarization on the issue of EU. The political parties took different stands on the question of the EU. This situation still prevails in the country and it has happening with respect to the EU membership. This situation has created confusion in the minds of the public for fifty years.<sup>16</sup>

After De Gaulle's (the French president from 1958 to 1969) departure from the presidency of France, the British succeeded in its long struggle to join the club, which left Switzerland stranded in EFTA. It then negotiated bilateral economic treaties with the EU and succeeded in signing two treaties. Government and citizenry were happy for achieving maximum economic benefits without compromising their political sovereignty.

The answer to the Swiss confusion about their participation and their 'yes-and-no' attitude towards the EU lies in the political uniqueness of the country. Simply, it revolves around the idea of 'Sonderfall'- the tradition of neutrality. The political culture of Switzerland is different from the rest of the European countries, which makes joining or not joining the EU a sensitive matter. The Swiss political system has two contradictory sides: one introverted and the other extroverted. The former side promotes exclusiveness and political isolation, while the later seeks universalism and cosmopolitanism by promoting and enhancing cooperation. Interestingly, the former trait is dominant and sets the guideline for the rest of the political discourse.<sup>17</sup>

When the question of the EU arises, many fear that Brussels will encroach upon their political rights. There is an element of fear that joining the EU may trigger modification in the existing political system of the country, which will lead to panic and anarchy in the society. For most of the Swiss, existing political system is much viable for all the factions of the society and any sort of interference in it will prove disastrous.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Raymond Probst, *"Good Offices" in the Light of Swiss International Practice and Experience* (Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1989), 2-9.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen J Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Maryland: JHU Press, 1996), 53.

<sup>18</sup> *Switzerland and War*, (Occasional papers in Swiss Studies), Translated by Joy Charnley and Maleolm Pender, vol. 2 ( Berlin, Bruxellesu.a, 1999), 113-128.

The Swiss feel proud to house many international organizations and Committees. It is deeply rooted in the consciousness of the general public that it is their neutral position that has made all this possible. They have great regard for these institutions and fear that joining any block may affect this arrangement. Geneva's reputation as a good office earns prestige for the whole nation and the Swiss have been often asked to act as intermediaries for resolving issues between the conflicting states. This position, dear to most Swiss, will deteriorate if the country joins the EU.<sup>19</sup>

### **Cold War**

The end of the Second World War divided the world into two hostile camps of Communists and Capitalists led by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the United States of America (USA) respectively. The nature of war changed from use of deadly weapons to political and economic strategies to squeeze rival countries. All the countries which were part of the war sided either with the USSR or USA except the few states that remained neutral or became part of the non-aligned movement. Switzerland, instead of drifting in the direction of their neighboring European countries, further strengthened the policy of neutrality.

The first two decades of Cold War in Switzerland were replete with odds and psychological polarities. Adaptation to the new environment of the world was challenging for the state and this process proved tedious. However, this period offered considerable opportunities. It created prospect of a beautiful tomorrow. Looking back at the past provided them with the feelings of once again having escaped from a continent that was sinking into debris; looking forward to the future provided a life of increasing comfort and decreasing limitations. Yet, a fixation on national issues and a strong connection during the Cold War created a lasting attitude in Switzerland, which even today forms a significant part of discussion about the international and European roles of this small country.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Dietrich Schindler, "Neutrality and Morality: Developments in Switzerland and in the International Community", *American University International Law Review* 14, no. 1 (1998): 155-170.

<sup>20</sup> Mikael Nilsson and Marco Wyss, "The Armed Neutrality Paradox: Sweden and Switzerland in US Cold War Armaments Policy", *Journal of Contemporary History* 51, no. 2 (2016): 335-363.

In Second World War, Switzerland faced an eccentric situation, a type of isolation that it had never experienced throughout its history. But the Cold War turned the situation in favor of Switzerland. The first sign of good times for Switzerland was the Armistice Agreement of 1953; that brought Korean War to an end. In the same year, the United Nations set up neutral commissions, i.e. Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission and Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission, and Switzerland was asked to participate in it. This ended the awkward position and raised the morale of the nation that it was an important and respectable country in the eyes of the world. Basically, the end of the Second World War also ended the privileged status of the neutral countries. All the neutral countries were forced to realign themselves according to new circumstances; Switzerland was also forced to find new ways in the emerging conditions. Its cherished neutrality got modified; it was reduced to military and armed conflicts only. Non-participation in armed hostilities and military alliances became the latest manifestation of neutrality.<sup>21</sup>

These changes enabled Switzerland to act more harmoniously with the international community. This also created new challenges for the government as the state's solidarity with the international community created a gulf between the government and the people. Many proposals like joining the UNO in 1986 and the membership of the European Economic Area (EEA) in 1992 were turned down by a good majority of votes.<sup>22</sup>

Another important development in the last decades of the Cold War was the establishment of Jura as a separate canton. Following popular votes at communal, district and cantonal levels, and after a struggle of thirty years by the separatists in the French-Speaking canton of Bern, Jura finally got separated in 1979 without changing Swiss national boundaries. The separatists, French-Speaking Protestants, felt disadvantaged and struggled

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Christin and Alexander H. Trechsel, "Joining the EU? Explaining Public Opinion in Switzerland", *European Union Politics* 3, no. 4 (2002): 415-443.

<sup>22</sup> Urs Loeffel, *Swiss Neutrality and Collective Security: The League of Nations and the United Nations* (Monterey: Naval Postgraduate School, 1997), 85-95.

for more political rights. Although it was feared that the move would motivate other separatist groups, but the concerns soon died down.<sup>23</sup>

During the times of Cold War, the Swiss policies of neutrality appeared ambiguous and confused, they, nevertheless, earned respect and regard in the comity of nations.

### **Conclusion**

The last 200 years of Swiss history have been of caution and a peculiar form of national conservatism. Despite being an ethno-linguistically diverse country, Switzerland has successfully negotiated internal and external challenges. It has resisted multilateral alliances and supranational ventures. At the same time, it has never shied away from meaningful engagement with the outside world. It has opened itself to the community of nations by projecting its territory as an appropriate spot for bilateral or multilateral negotiations. It is not a hermit principality. However, its political structure fiercely abhors any compromise whatsoever on national sovereignty. All in all, Switzerland remains a fascinating study in neutrality and politico-administrative management.

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<sup>23</sup> Tanja Ellingsen, "Colorful Community or Ethnic Witches' Brew? Multiethnicity and Domestic Conflict During and After the Cold War", *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 44, no. 2 (2000): 228-249.