

# Under the Spell of the League of Nations: Different Notions of Neutrality in the Swiss Military Elite at the End of the First World War

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*„May other states, who have never known the true promise of eternal neutrality and who are in a better position, such as the Scandinavian countries and Holland, African and Asian states, look for their salvation in the League of Nations. They will be risking much less than we are.”<sup>1</sup>*

During the First World War, Swiss neutrality as a state policy paradigm was repeatedly challenged. In matters of commerce, the uneven and delicate trade relations with the warring states put a strain on Switzerland's impartiality. With regards to foreign affairs, imprudent acts by parts of the Swiss government, for example the one-sided peace negotiation attempts of Federal Councillor Arthur Hoffmann in 1917, impaired the credibility of Swiss neutrality.<sup>2</sup> In the military realm, the close relations of the Swiss Army's leadership with foreign armed forces unsettled the fragile sense of neutrality of the small state. Hence, the most significant crisis for Switzerland's policy of neutrality was the so-called "Oberstenaffäre" (Colonels' Affair) from 1916 which revealed that high-ranking Swiss officers of the General Staff had favoured the Central Powers when passing on intelligence.<sup>3</sup> The exposure and scandalisation of this incident had a lasting impact on Swiss domestic politics and facilitated political attacks and pressure on Switzerland by other states.

The aforementioned crisis situations clearly show that in Switzerland, views on and the understanding of neutrality were considerably drifting apart during the war years. The joining of the League of Nations in 1920, which was endorsed by a rather small majority of the Swiss voting public, symbolised focal point of those different notions of neutrality. The admission had been preceded by a controversial national debate. The French- and Italian-speaking parts of Switzerland were clearly in favour of joining the League of Nations, whereas a majority of the German-speaking public were against it. The political and military elites were deeply divided on the question.

In view of the above, this paper will firstly give a brief overview the manner in which members of the Swiss military took part in governmental and public debates on the joining of the League of Nations. Secondly, the various positions on the issue within Switzerland's military elite will be considered. Therefore, this paper will analyse the various lines of discourse within which members of the Swiss military voiced their opinion for or against the joining of the League of Nations. Already at the start of this case study it became clear that the theme of "neutrality" dominated the debate to a large

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<sup>1</sup> Theophil Sprecher, 'Völkerbund, Neutralität und Wehrwesen der Schweiz', in: Gelpke, Rudolf; Heusler, Andreas; Meyer von Knonau, Gerold; Müller Kasper (Eds.), *Fünf Stimmen über den Versailler Völkerbund*, Basel 1920, p. 40-52, here: p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> See Sacha Zala, 'Krisen, Konfrontation, Konsens (1914-1949)', in: Kreis, Georg (Ed.), *Die Geschichte der Schweiz*, Basel 2014, p. 495f. "All in all, Switzerland, whose neutrality had been confirmed by the neighbouring states in 1914, was less endangered by military developments than by political and economic acts."

<sup>3</sup> See Thomas Maissen, *Geschichte der Schweiz*, Baden 2010, p. 241.

degree, however it was not the only theme. In fact, the specialist military discourse on the League of Nations in Switzerland was also influenced by the predominant interpretation of war as well as notions of “national willingness for military action” or of “international state order”. These lines of discourse not only complemented, but mutually influenced each other. This paper will focus on the analysis of these discussions. In conclusion, this paper will outline the possibilities and limitations of a comparative approach when it comes to the issue of the influence of intellectual concepts of leading military actors on paths of development of neutral states.

### **The participation of Swiss military officers in the debate on the League of Nations**

On 28 April 1919, two months before the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, the General Assembly of the Paris Peace Conference which was comprised primarily of the victor states of the First World War, decided to establish the League of Nations.<sup>4</sup> The goal of the signatories was the “acceptance of obligations not to resort to war by the prescription of open, just and honourable relations between nations”.<sup>5</sup> Switzerland was invited to join the League of Nations along with twelve other states who had also been neutral during the First World War. Swiss Federal Councillor and Foreign Minister, Gustave Ador, had previously travelled to the Paris Peace Conference twice. He had not only achieved the recognition of Swiss neutrality in Article 435 of the Treaty of Versailles, but also that the League of Nations was to be based in Geneva.<sup>6</sup> It was then up to the Swiss electorate to make a decision on the joining of the League of Nations. Ador, a keen supporter of the Entente, campaigned nationally as well as internationally for the accession of Switzerland to the League of Nations. Those in favour of joining the League of Nations belonged primarily to liberal circles, saw themselves as part of a civil world and welcomed the apparently new age of international cooperation.<sup>7</sup> The joining of the League of Nations moreover enjoyed broad support in the non-German speaking parts of Switzerland. Opposition forces mainly included circles of the bourgeois-right of the German-speaking parts of the country, particularly those who had supported the Central Powers. Interestingly, the political left, particularly the social democrats, were also opposed to Switzerland becoming a member of the League of Nations.<sup>8</sup>

Concerning the Swiss Military, there were in particular three officers who voiced their opinion in 1919 and the spring of 1920: the outgoing Chief of Staff Theophil von Sprecher who was to resign on 30 June 1919, General Ulrich Wille who had already resigned, as well as the designated new Chief of Staff Emil Sonderegger. All three were against the accession of Switzerland to the League of Nations. Particularly the arguments of Sprecher and Sonderegger have been explained and evaluated in their respective biographies.<sup>9</sup> Sprecher is commonly accepted as the leader of the military opponents to the League of Nations. Accordingly, great importance will be attached to his writings in this paper. On 30 June 1919, the question of joining the League was discussed at the highest military level at a meeting of the Committee of State Defence in Berne. The committee could not agree on the matter. The minister of defence from

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<sup>4</sup> See Horst Möller, *Europa zwischen den Weltkriegen*, München 1998, p. 38 and appendix.

<sup>5</sup> The Versailles Treaty, Part I, available online: <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/parti.asp> [accessed: 12/10/2015]

<sup>6</sup> Maissen, *Geschichte der Schweiz*, p. 246.

<sup>7</sup> For the current state of research on Switzerland's accession to the League of Nations see: Tobias Kaestli, *Selbstbezogenheit und Offenheit – die Schweiz in der Welt des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Zürich 2005; Carlo Moos, *Ja zum Völkerbund – Nein zur UNO. Die Volksabstimmungen von 1920 und 1986 in der Schweiz*, Lausanne 2001.

<sup>8</sup> See Maissen, *Geschichte der Schweiz*, p. 247.

<sup>9</sup> See Daniel Sprecher, *Generalstabschef Theophil Sprecher von Bernegg. Seine militärisch-politische Leistung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Neutralität*, Zurich 2000; René Zeller, *Emil Sonderegger. Vom Generalstabschef zum Frontenführer*, Zurich 1999.

French-speaking Switzerland, Camille Décoppet, as well as a Francophile Lieutenant-General [Oberstkorpskommandant] from the same part of the country were in favour of joining the League of Nations. Sprecher and two Lieutenant-Generals from the German-speaking part of Switzerland were against it. Due to this impasse, supporters as well as opponents each produced their own report on the issue and presented their viewpoint to the Swiss Federal Council.<sup>10</sup> The division along language lines amongst the military leadership was therefore the mirror image of the situation in Switzerland: the population of the French-speaking parts were in favour of joining the League of Nations, whereas German speakers tended to be against it.<sup>11</sup> A main argument of the opponents was the concern for Swiss neutrality. Accordingly, the exception clause which had been granted to Switzerland as a result of the so-called London Declaration of 13 February 1920, was instrumental in the eventual joining of the League of Nations. At this conference, the member states of the League of Nations established that neutrality was in fact against the principles of the League of Nations, that "Switzerland, however, was in a "unique situation" and therefore only had to participate in economic and financial [and not military] sanctions enacted by the League of Nations".<sup>12</sup> Without much enthusiasm, the Swiss electorate eventually endorsed the joining of the League of Nations on 16 May 1920 with 56% of the people voting in favour.<sup>13</sup> In historiography, this decision has been described as a "remnant of a favourable economic situation", which had led to a short-term enthusiasm for the League of Nations in the time just before the popular vote was held.<sup>14</sup> With the entry into the League of Nations as well as the exception clause of the London Declaration, a new phase of foreign policy, which has been described with the term "differential neutrality", began for Switzerland.<sup>15</sup>

### **The arguments of the League of Nations' opponents in the run-up to the popular vote of 16 Mai 1920**

The ultimate weapon of those who opposed the joining of the League of Nations was undoubtedly the constant and relentless reference to Switzerland's neutrality, recognised under international law, which allegedly could not be reconciled with a League of Nations membership. Already on 12 April 1919, the acting chief of staff Theophil Sprecher argued in a secret and primarily military-focused report to the Federal Council against the joining of the League of Nations on account of Switzerland's policy of neutrality.<sup>16</sup> In this report, Sprecher spoke selectively and partly in combination of "absolute", "unconditional" or "complete" neutrality of Switzerland. He concluded: „This understanding [of Swiss neutrality] does not only exclude any explicit restriction of neutral behaviour in favour of or against one or the other combatant, but it excludes just as much the so-called benevolent neutrality, which is nothing other than a hidden attempt to take sides, without

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<sup>10</sup> See Daniel Müller, *Volksbund gegen Völkerbund. Generalstabschef Theophil Sprecher von Bernegg und die Landesverteidigungskommission in ihrer Beurteilung des schweizerischen Völkerbundesbeitritts, 1918-1920*, Bern 1994.

<sup>11</sup> On these divisions see Antoine Fleury, 'La position des milieux militaires suisses face à la question de l'entrée de la Suisse dans la Société des Nations', in : *Actes du symposium du CHPM 69*, Pully 1984, pp. 69-82.

<sup>12</sup> Zala, *Krisen, Konfrontation, Konsens*, p. 306.

<sup>13</sup> Maissen, *Geschichte der Schweiz*, p. 247.

<sup>14</sup> Moos, *Ja zum Völkerbund*, p. 157.

<sup>15</sup> Georg Kreis, 'Neutralität und Neutralitäten', in: *ibid.* (Ed.), *Die Geschichte der Schweiz*, Basel 2014, pp. 306-309, here: p. 308.

<sup>16</sup> See Theophil von Sprecher: 'Der Völkerbund und die Schweiz. Militärische Betrachtung', in: *Diplomatische Dokumente der Schweiz* [thereafter: DDS], Bd. 7a, No. 325. Sprecher wrote this report in preparation for a military delegation who travelled to the Paris Peace Conference and was to explain the military aspects of Switzerland's position to the victors of the First World War.

daring to admit it.”<sup>17</sup> With this understanding of Swiss neutrality, Sprecher in his report resolutely argued against any kind of Swiss participation in military measures taken by the League of Nations. Moreover, he disapproved of allowing foreign troops which were carrying out a League of Nations decision to march through Switzerland. He was also against allowing such troops conducting any military operations on Swiss territory. Sprecher did not endorse Swiss participation in economic measures and trade sanctions enacted by the League of Nations either. For the course of the debate, Sprecher insisted on this “absolute” interpretation of neutrality. In his 1920 essay, he called it “eternal, unconditional Swiss neutrality”<sup>18</sup> and considered it in this absoluteness as “beneficial” for Switzerland.<sup>19</sup> His absolute take on—almost even sacralisation of—Swiss neutrality was by all means typical for the neutrality discourse at the time. Andreas Suter has pointed out how in late nineteenth-century Switzerland, the prevalent interpretation of neutrality increasingly had an ideological component.<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, the aim was to re-date the origins of one’s own neutrality, which allegedly did not begin with the Congress of Vienna (1815), but already during the High Middle Ages, or rather, after the “honourable retreat” of the Swiss from the battlefield of Marignano (1515).<sup>21</sup> A prominent advocate of this concept was for example the historian Paul Schweizer, who in 1895 published the first “History of Swiss Neutrality” and thereby put his stamp on the discourse of Swiss neutrality at the *fin de siècle* (and well into the twentieth century).<sup>22</sup> Sprecher to some degree accepted Schweizer’s interpretation of a Swiss neutrality which had developed since Marignano. However, in his writings he explicitly referred to the fact that “eternal” neutrality was a modern term and its basic principle had only been established in the peace treaty of 1815 and had actually been codified by foreign powers.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, the report of those members of the Committee of State Defence who were against the joining of the League of Nations, who had substantially been co-authored by Sprecher, asserts that the “unfortunate outcome of the transalpine campaigns of the sixteenth century” marked the starting point of Swiss neutrality.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, in addition to this backdated romanticised concept of neutrality, Swiss proponents increasingly claimed that it was their country which epitomised neutrality. In his essay, Sprecher pointedly argued that other states who called themselves just as neutral, “such as the Scandinavian and Holland, African and Asian”, have “never experienced eternal neutrality” and therefore could not call themselves “neutral” as comprehensively as Switzerland could.<sup>25</sup> This exclusive right to a unique neutrality by discounting other countries’ claim to neutrality was widespread in Switzerland at the time. Paul Schweizer had in similar words claimed “true neutrality” for Switzerland and resolutely disagreed with the idea that it was possible to put Swiss neutrality on

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<sup>17</sup> DDS, Vol. 7a, No. 325, p. 624.

<sup>18</sup> Sprecher, ‘Völkerbund, Neutralität und Wehrwesen der Schweiz’, p. 41.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>20</sup> See. Andreas Suter, ‘Neutralität’, in Hettling, Manfred et al. (Eds.), *Eine kleine Geschichte der Schweiz*, Frankfurt a.M. 1998.

<sup>21</sup> See Kreis, ‘Neutralität und Neutralitäten’, p. 308.

<sup>22</sup> See Paul Schweizer, *Geschichte der Schweizerischen Neutralität*, Frauenfeld 1895.

<sup>23</sup> See Sprecher, ‘Völkerbund, Neutralität und Wehrwesen der Schweiz’, p. 42: „The explanation of the powers of 1815, by which they recognise the future international legal position of Switzerland, literally states: ‘The Powers who signed the declaration of the 20th March acknowledge, in the most formal manner, by the present act, that the neutrality and inviolability of Switzerland, and her independence of all foreign influence, enter into the true interests of the policy of the whole of Europe.’”

<sup>24</sup> DDS, Vol. 7b, No. 24, p. 67.

<sup>25</sup> See quote at the beginning of this paper.

the same level as that of other states, particularly states such as the Congo.<sup>26</sup> Thus, Swiss neutrality did not owe its existence to foreign powers, but was “Switzerland’s own creation which had been developed over the course of many centuries”.<sup>27</sup> Sprecher likely would not have accepted this last sentence since he was fully aware of the meaning of the recognition of neutrality by the European Great Powers in 1815. Apart from this, it is exactly his interpretation of history which illustrates his “absolute” understanding of Swiss neutrality. According to him, the principle of neutrality had saved Switzerland from “giving in to temptation and plunge into adventures which would not only have led to the end of neutrality, but also to the dissolution of the Swiss Confederation”.<sup>28</sup> The adherence to the principle of neutrality was for Sprecher some kind of *conditio sine qua non* for the existence of the Swiss state per se. On this issue, Sprecher agreed with General Ulrich Wille, who in May 1920 declared that neutrality in its own right was not a sufficient guarantor for independence and sovereignty. In fact, Switzerland needed neutrality “in order to preserve itself as a wonderful but proud entity, as a state, in which three very different peoples joyfully live in freedom and peace along each other, each retaining its own characteristics, while the three great nations, to which they belong by extraction, have been waging war for the sake of supremacy for centuries.”<sup>29</sup> Wille therefore attributed a state-inherent key function to Swiss neutrality, which would be in danger should the nation decide to join the League of Nations. Agreeing with Senator Robert Schöpfer from Solothurn, he warned that accession to the League of Nations would mean nothing other than the *Finis Helvetiae*: “Our confederacy would therewith give up its right to existence. This cannot be repeated enough to the people [...]”.<sup>30</sup> Wille as well as Sprecher thus refused any notions of a partial neutrality. Particularly the “new-fangled doctrine” of a so-called “differential neutrality” was fiercely criticised by Sprecher. This concept of neutrality, he argued, automatically included a “disguised partisanship”, particularly because, as the World War had shown, economic sanctions were an effective means of warfare. Accordingly, “differential neutrality” would, *in realiter*, not be respected by any state in conflict or at war with the League of Nations. Rather, any state who had economic or trade sanctions imposed upon them by the League of Nations and its member state Switzerland would interpret this as an obvious instance of Switzerland taking sides, and would therefore refuse to recognise Swiss neutrality and consider the country a belligerent.<sup>31</sup>

Those senior officers and members of the Committee of State Defence who in June 1919 had rejected the accession to the League of Nations in a report addressed to the Federal Council also insisted on the retention of “absolute neutrality”.<sup>32</sup> They were confident that in the future, “only an absolute neutrality would make them entitled to and promise respect and recognition by the belligerent states”.<sup>33</sup> The senior officers of the Swiss army, who together with Chief of Staff Sprecher had signed this report, represented the circle of officers associated with General Wille as well as a

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<sup>26</sup> See Kreis, ‘Neutralität und Neutralitäten’, p. 308.

<sup>27</sup> Schweizer, ‘Geschichte der Schweizerischen Neutralität’, p. 86, quoted in: Kreis, ‘Neutralität und Neutralitäten’, p. 308.

<sup>28</sup> Sprecher, ‘Völkerbund, Neutralität und Wehrwesen der Schweiz’, p. 41.

<sup>29</sup> Ulrich Wille, ‘Zur Abstimmung über den Beitritt zum Versailler Völkerbund’, in: Neue Zürcher Zeitung [thereafter: NZZ], 04.05.1920, Zweites Abendblatt, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> See Sprecher, ‘Völkerbund, Neutralität, und Wehrwesen der Schweiz’, p. 43.

<sup>32</sup> Fleury, ‘La position des milieux militaires suisses’, p. 71.

<sup>33</sup> DDS, Vol. 7b, No. 24, p. 68.

majority of the army corps and division commanders.<sup>34</sup> This is particularly important because their report was presented to the Swiss Parliament as the one which had only been supported by a minority of the Committee, whereas the second report in favour of joining the League of Nations was described as the one backed by the majority of the Committee members. This only succeeded due to two factors. Firstly, the signatures of the division commanders opposing the joining of the League of Nations were not counted. Secondly, Federal Councillor Decoppet, the minister of defence, signed the pro-League of Nations report and, after realising that this meant that the pro and contra report each had three votes, decided that due to his higher-ranking function, his vote carried more weight and therefore, the report recommending the joining of the League of Nations had won the majority of the Committee's votes.<sup>35</sup> A sentence coined by Sprecher on the subject neatly sums up the likely opinion of the majority of the contemporary senior officer corps on Swiss neutrality: "It is undeniable that our current concept of neutrality, which is based on the declarations of 1815, allows only for an unrestricted military and economic impartiality towards all belligerents."<sup>36</sup>

So far, it has not been established in detail what impact war had on the attitudes and perceptions of the Swiss officer corps of the world war years.<sup>37</sup> Rudolf Jaun at least has been able to show that the relatively small yet increasingly predominant group around General Wille did not regard war as an end in itself, but was heavily influenced by the classical German philosophy of history of the nineteenth century and by the spirit of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegels who interpreted war as a justified court of arbitration of nations.<sup>38</sup> Quoting Hegel they argued: "Consequently, if no agreement can be reached between particular wills, conflicts between states can be settled only by war."<sup>39</sup> Interesting in the context of this paper is the fact that Hegel himself had spoken out against the idea of a league of nations as well as Kant's concept of "perpetual peace".<sup>40</sup> „Perpetual peace by means of a league of nations, which is responsible for arbitration in any conflict requires the unanimity of the nations, but this unanimity again would have to be based on a sovereign will and therefore retain a certain haphazardness. The only decisive factor will necessarily be war."<sup>41</sup> It is questionable whether a majority of the so-called Wille school thought this concept through. Nonetheless it has, consciously or subconsciously, impacted upon their interpretation of war. To them, war had some kind of right to exist due to its historical development. This was an argument which over the course of the Swiss debate on the League of Nations could not be exploited as a reason against joining the League of Nations due to the only recently experienced horrors of the First World War.

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<sup>34</sup> These were, apart from Sprecher, the commanding officer of the 2nd Army Corps, Paul Schiessle, the commanding officer of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Corps, Hermann Steinbuch, the interim chief of staff and commanding officer of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division, Otto Bridler as well as Sprecher's designated successor and commanding officer of the 4<sup>th</sup> Division, Emil Songeregger. See DDS, Vol. 7b, No. 24, p. 66f.

<sup>35</sup> Fleury, 'La position des milieux militaires suisses', p. 71.

<sup>36</sup> Sprecher, 'Völkerbund, Neutralität, und Wehrwesen der Schweiz', p. 43.

<sup>37</sup> For the German case, see: Niklaus Meier, *Warum Krieg? Die Sinndeutung des Krieges in der deutschen Militärelite 1871-1945*, Paderborn 2012.

<sup>38</sup> See Rudolf Jaun, *Preussen vor Augen. Das schweizerische Offizierskorps im militärischen und gesellschaftlichen Wandel des Fin de siècle*, Zurich 1999.

<sup>39</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse*, Frankfurt a.M. 1986 (=Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Werke 7), § 334, p. 500.

<sup>40</sup> Meier, *Warum Krieg?*, p. 85.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85f.

It was easier for Chief of Staff von Sprecher who in his statements primarily interpreted war as an unavoidable phenomenon in human history. Shortly before his death, Sprecher wrote in his last elaborate essay in the *Allgemeine Schweizer Militärzeitung*: “However, even in the future development of the world things will not work according to a [peaceful] recipe, but the paths of nations and states will without fail cross frequently, as it has happened recently, and no group of powerful states and no league of nations will be able to solve all quarrels which concern vital interests of states in a peaceful way [...]”<sup>42</sup> Sprecher did not attribute any practical usefulness to war as he did not think any kind of league of nation would be able to avoid wars in the long run. War, he argued, was part of human nature and part of the relationship between different peoples and, revealing Sprecher’s deep religiosity, he thought a safe, peaceful and just world was only possible in afterlife under God’s order.<sup>43</sup> These considerations are fully in line with Sprecher’s rejection of the League of Nations on grounds of his interpretation of neutrality and fuelled Sprechers rejection of the League of Nations further. Additionally, his interpretation displayed a marked bellicosity whenever he referred to the instrument of sanction which was also to be followed by neutral states in cases of the League of Nations being in conflict with non-member states: economic sanctions. Sprecher felt contempt for this instrument which was to be used in non-military conflicts, and which is very popular today as it does not entail much danger, and he regarded it as dishonourable and gutless: “It is disreputable enough that we participate in a war of ostracism and starvation for our own material interests, but we should carefully stand aside when the issue at hand is to carry out the so-called executions of justice of the League of Nations by force of arms. I would rather commend the consequence of our colleagues in the *Welschland* [French-speaking part of Switzerland], who honestly state that they consider differential neutrality a pitiful half measure, and only the joining of the League of Nations without any reservation would fulfil them.”<sup>44</sup> Here, Sprecher holds the use of arms in higher esteem than economic sanctions, which he contemptuously terms as “*Hungerkrieg*” [war of starvation].<sup>45</sup> Thereby, he uses a term widely used in Germany and Austria at the time to condemn the policy of blockade of the Entente during and after the war to starve the Central Powers.<sup>46</sup> Sprecher presents himself as an officer of the old school who, on the basis of Moltke’s criticism of materialism, condemns the economic and therefore non-military way of war and instead stresses the martial world of soldierly virtues. He particularly rejects the notion of “differential neutrality” which was suggested by the League of Nations in the context of the Declaration of London on 23 February 1920, “according to which we are supposed to be authorised to block one warring faction economically in order to favour the other one, as well as persecute their citizens to ruin them financially”. The report against joining the League of Nations of the other members of the Committee of State Defence simply called the “*Hungerblockade*” a “measure of torture”.<sup>47</sup> To sum up, all these considerations show that the question of how war was interpreted

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<sup>42</sup> Theophil Sprecher, ‘Fragen der Schweizerischen Landesverteidigung nach den Erfahrungen in der Zeit des Weltkrieges’, in: *Allgemeine Schweizerische Militärzeitung* [thereafter: *ASMZ*], Vol. 6, 1927, pp. 225-254, here: p. 227.

<sup>43</sup> See Sprecher, ‘Fragen der Schweizerischen Landesverteidigung’, p. 228.

<sup>44</sup> See Sprecher, *Völkerbund, Neutralität, und Wehrwesen der Schweiz*, S. 51f.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>46</sup> In fact, the Entente continued with the economic blockade against the Central Powers even during the Paris Peace Conference in order to force their governments to sign the peace treaty as soon as possible. On the aspect of hunger in the war see: Gustavo Corni: *Hunger*, in: *Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg*, Hirschfeld Gerhard, Krumeich Gerd, Renz Irina (Ed.), Paderborn / Zürich 2003, pp. 565-567.

<sup>47</sup> See DDS, Vol. 7b, No. 24, p. 70.

—collectively as well as individually—impacted upon the attitude of the Swiss military elite towards the League of Nations to a large degree.

In his article in the Swiss newspaper *NZZ* of 4 May 1920, Ulrich Wille called the League of Nations the “Versailles League of Nations”.<sup>48</sup> Wille consequently used this emotionally charged denomination of the term League of Nations. His aim was to depict the League of Nations not as a supranational organisation with the aim of reconciliation, but as an association of the victors of the First World War which was directed against the Central Powers and particularly against the German Empire. According to Wille, the aim of the League of Nations was to guarantee the ascendancy of the Entente, suppress Germany, and perhaps even the enforcement of the “continuation of the coalition war to annihilate Germany”.<sup>49</sup> Wille thought it was understandable that the victors of the First World War temporarily sought to fully attain their war aims. Like Sprecher, however, Wille was convinced that the order of the League of Nations created by the victors would not make the world a more peaceful place in the long run, but to the opposite create new conflicts and wars. Therefore, “calm and an orderly situation could only begin once the new order of the European states, which had been enforced by the Entente, was rectified according to acts of justice and the interest of the European nations.”<sup>50</sup> However, as long as “inhumane peace agreements” which had been dictated to the losers persisted, there was more reasons for war in Europe than beforehand.<sup>51</sup> The officers who were members of the Committee of State Defence and rejected the League of Nations were singing the same tune. They not only doubted the moral legitimacy of the League of Nations, but they also thought the notion that the league would be able to ban aggression from Europe was a pipe dream.<sup>52</sup> In short, there was no trust in the long-term survival of the order suggested by the League of Nations amongst a significant proportion of the Swiss military elite. This because they thought its foundation, the Paris Peace Treaty, was unjust and biased. Interestingly, it was only Sprecher and Wille who were personally criticized for their rejection of the League of Nations. Some officials as well as some who remained anonymous accused them of being against the League of Nations primarily because of their Germanophilia. In Swiss historiography, this arguments has in some cases been picked up. In particular Sprecher’s biographer, Daniel Sprecher, has tried to differentiate between the Swiss-centred arguments against the League of Nations voiced by Sprecher, and the German-friendly rejection of General Wille who did not base his arguments on reasons related to Switzerland. In our opinion, this distinction is somewhat artificial. The patterns of argumentation of the two officers are simply too similar.

### **The argumentation of the supporters of the League of Nations in the run-up to the vote of 16 May 1920**

On the side of those members of the military who were in favour of joining the League of Nations, there were no spokespersons like Theophil Sprecher or Ulrich Wille who were known throughout Switzerland. Accordingly, there was no military-led discourse in favour of the League of Nations in the German-speaking public sphere. In French-speaking Switzerland, there was broad support for

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<sup>48</sup> Wille, ‘Zur Abstimmung über den Beitritt zum Versailler Völkerbund’, p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> Letter from Wille to Sprecher on 22 April 1919, Sprecher-Archive Maienfeld; quoted in: Sprecher, *Generalstabschef Theophil Sprecher von Bernegg*, p. 507.

<sup>50</sup> Wille, ‘Zur Abstimmung über den Beitritt zum Versailler Völkerbund’, p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> Theophil Sprecher, ‘Von bösen Geistern in der Armee’, in: *Schweizer Soldat*, 1926, No. 5, p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> See DDS, Vol. 7b, No. 24, p. 72f.



the joining of the League of Nations within the population, but hardly any military officers were involved in the discussions. A major exception to this was Colonel Fernand Feyler, editor-in-chief of the *Revue Militaire Suisse* from 1896 until 1923. In his newspaper as well as in a book written by him, he pleaded for the unconditional accession of Switzerland to the League of Nations.<sup>53</sup> Ultimately, his contribution to the discussion were part of the political discourse on the League of Nations in French-speaking Switzerland though. Therefore, according to the current state of research, we cannot really speak of an independent discourse of Swiss military officers who were in support of the League of Nations. Therefore, in the following, Feyler's point of view as well as those of the Committee of State Defence will briefly be summed up and contrasted with the lines of discourse of their opponents.

In the session of the Committee of State Defence of 30 June 1919, the joining of the League of Nations was, apart from Federal Councillor Decoppet, only backed by Lieutenant-General Peter Isler, chief of armament of the infantry, and Louis-Henry Bornand, commanding officer of the 1<sup>st</sup> Army Corps. Both of these officers, however, did not comment on the debate on the League of Nations outside of the Committee's meetings, not even in the context of the popular vote. Anotoine Fleury has analysed the contents of the report of 28 July 1919 which was in favour of the League. He illustrates how the advocates of the League came to the conclusion that the impact of a League of Nations membership on neutrality would not be of vital importance for Switzerland's security.<sup>54</sup> They thought that the dangers entailed by the slight adaption of the concept of neutrality in order to comply with economic sanctions of the League of Nations were negligible. None of the sanctioned states would be significantly harmed thereby. However, should such a state use economic sanctions as a pretext to "refuse the recognition of Swiss neutrality and make an assault upon our territorial integrity, he does so, because he has an interest in it."<sup>55</sup> A state would just as well find a pretext elsewhere, and therefore, concerns in this regard were exaggerated. Additionally, Decoppet, Bornard and Isler stated that the basic principle of Swiss neutrality had never been defined in detail. Moreover, this principle was continuously evolving.<sup>56</sup> Accordingly, Switzerland had to embed the question of the joining of the League of Nations in the current situation and with regard to current foreign affairs, and not consider it in the context of the pre-war situation. Otherwise, there was a danger that the principle of neutrality would become an empty Dogma which was applied without being questioned and did not take prevailing circumstances into account. The officers moreover asserted that henceforth, an adapted interpretation of neutrality corresponding with the circumstances of the postwar years, a so-called "differential neutrality", should be considered.<sup>57</sup> Switzerland's own tradition as well as its history would prohibit it to reject international efforts to prevent wars without "extremely valid reasons". "It is her duty to do all in her power to contribute to the solution of significant problems which the League of Nations seeks to resolve, even if we have to pay a small price for it."<sup>58</sup> A notable advocate of the argument that Switzerland could not reject the peace project League of Nations was the already mentioned Fernand Feyler. According to him, Switzerland was to be part of the project to establish a new, peaceful international order.<sup>59</sup> Just like

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<sup>53</sup> See Fernand Feyler, *La Ligue des Nations et la neutralité de la Suisse*, Lausanne 1919.

<sup>54</sup> See Fleury, 'La position des milieux militaires suisses', p. 71.

<sup>55</sup> DDS, Vol. 7b, No. 24, p. 65.

<sup>56</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>57</sup> See. DDS, Vol. 7b, No. 24, p. 62.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>59</sup> See Fleury, 'La position des milieux militaires suisses', p. 75-79.

the members of the Committee of State defence who were in favour of the League, Feyler urged that there should be no blind allegiance to foreign policy principles of the past. It was no good, he asserted, to cling onto a rigid understanding of neutrality. The old understanding made sense from 1815 to 1914. However, in postwar Europe, a new era of an accommodating diplomacy and international law was to be established, which also had to be supported by Switzerland.<sup>60</sup> The lines of reasoning of the supporters of the League of Nations thus combined two points: on the one hand, they demanded a new interpretation of Switzerland's external neutrality. They argued against the dogmatized understanding of neutrality, which opponents of the League used as an argument against accession. Instead, neutrality should be understood "differentially" and be adapted to the new postwar order. On the other hand, the supporters did not understand the League of Nations as a coalition of the victors of the Great War but as an instrument for a supranational security policy, which would promote the higher goal of peacekeeping and understanding between nations. These two points demonstrate the core differences between the two sides.

### **Case study and perspectives for further research**

The political systems of central and northern European neutral states in the late nineteenth and early twentieth stood out for their comparatively high degree of democratisation. Accordingly, democratic control of the armed forces was comparatively high, policy making was the matter of politicians and direct interventions by the military apparatus to influence Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish or Swiss politics remained—if at all—a big exception. Nonetheless, the leaders of these small states' armies tried to articulate their views on military and defence policy as circumstances allowed and make themselves heard.<sup>61</sup> The subject examined in this paper serves as a case study to demonstrate how military, general staff and higher officers in neutral states indirectly participated and tried to play a part in the political decision-making process. The goal of this analysis was not so much to look at defence or military policies but to consider aspects of political thought of Swiss military leaders in the context of the Swiss debate on the joining of the League of Nations in 1919 and 1920. Thereby it was of particular importance to depict the concepts and notions of neutrality of the military leadership or rather, its protagonists. In the process, it became apparent that neutrality as a state political paradigm was not the sole reason which contributed to the elaboration of the standpoint of the Swiss military elite. Numerous other lines of discussion shaped the debates and a number of smaller discourses had an influence on points of view. The example outlined above which shows that Swiss military leaders often interpreted war as something positive exemplifies that notions of neutrality or *neutral identities* respectively should not be understood as hermetically sealed thought concepts. This is particularly true for the "neutral DNA" of states like Italy and Spain which were only democratised temporarily and even then, not democratised thoroughly. What was the concept of neutrality of the Spanish military elite during the First World War? What notions of war, military and international politics predominated in the Spanish officers corps, which on the one hand commanded the army of a state which was neutral in wartime, but at the same time intensified its military presence in Morocco, started a colonial war straight after the end of the World War (Rif War, which ended catastrophically), and which regularly got involved in

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> On the attempts of the Dutch military leadership to influence Dutch defence policy during the interwar years, see for example: Herman Amersfoort, 'Give us Back our Field Army! The Dutch Army Leadership and the Operational Planning During the Interwar Years', in: *ibid* and Klinkert Wim (Eds.) *Small Powers in the Age of Total War, 1900-1940*, Leiden / Boston 2011, pp. 251-280.

domestic politics?<sup>62</sup> To what degree did the most certainly existing concepts of war of the Dutch military influence their efforts to convince the political leadership of the necessity of the introduction of a modern operational army in the interwar years? Which arguments and on the basis of which political standpoints were used by the military leadership of the small neutral state of Norway to convince their government of the need for a modernisation of the army?<sup>63</sup> Ultimately, the aim of this paper was to consider the political question of civil-military relations of neutral states in the epoch of the world wars from the viewpoint of the military partner. For this purpose, it is necessary to either engage with the political reasoning of militaries or the political history of military aspects in order to investigate the histories of neutralities more effectively. This has not received enough scholarly attention yet.

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<sup>62</sup> See Walther L. Bernecker, *Spanische Geschichte. Vom 15. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*, Munich 2003, pp. 78-82.

<sup>63</sup> For the Norwegian case see for example Tom Kristiansen, *Neutrality Guard or Preparations of War? The Norwegian Armed Forces and the Coming of the Second World War*, in: Amersfoort, Klinkert (Eds.), *Small Powers*, pp. 281-306.