

Swiss-American Peacemaking: the Alabama Affair and the League of Nations

The impact of the American Civil War continued to be felt in Switzerland long after the last signature was subscribed to the congratulatory addresses of 1865; fifty years later, in fact, a famous wartime incident helped persuade an American President to establish the League of Nations on Swiss soil.

A world organization to promote peace was the last thing on the minds of Confederate agents when they commissioned a Liverpool shipyard to build an armed vessel in 1862, ostensibly for service in the Chinese navy. Ship 290, as she was called, slipped out of Liverpool on July 28, 1862, and, christened the *Alabama* on the high seas, set a course that ended in the Geneva Town Hall ten years later.¹ Commanded by Raphael Semmes, the *Alabama* scoured the seas for Union shipping. She captured more than sixty merchantmen, burning many on the spot. The Union government considered Semmes and his crew to be pirates and the British, who had apparently connived at their mission, to be little better. The American minister in London, Charles Francis Adams, threatened the British with war, if they allowed the Confederates to take possession of additional commerce destroyers and, from 1863 onwards, Adams pressed the British Foreign Minister, Lord Russell, to submit the depredations of the *Alabama* and other confederate corsairs to international arbitration. Desiring to appease the American government which had emerged from the Civil War with a powerful army and, the British feared, an appetite for Canada,



The Apple of Discord at the Geneva Tribunal

Cartoon by Thomas Nast, *Harper's Weekly*, 5 October 1872.

Prints and Photograph Division.

The famous American cartoonist, Thomas Nast, uses a William Tell theme to depict the Alabama Arbitration in Geneva in 1872. Imitating Tell, John Bull (Great Britain) shoots an apple, labelled Alabama claims, off the head of Uncle Sam; the feathers of the British arrow, lower right, are marked 15,500,000 in gold, the indemnity levied against Britain by the arbitration panel, whose five members sit watching the proceedings, with Geneva and Lake Lemman in the background.

Queen Victoria's government in May 1871 signed the Treaty of Washington which bound the United States and Britain to submit American claims for damages inflicted by the *Alabama* to a tribunal, composed of arbitrators from five nations, which would meet in Geneva in 1872.

The Americans selected Charles Francis Adams to represent them. The British appointed Lord Chief Justice Alexander Cockburn. Brazil picked its ambassador to France, Baron d'Itajuba. Italy named a distinguished jurist, Count Sclopis. The fifth member, representing Switzerland, was none other than Jacob Staempfli, who in 1865 had been a leading spirit in promoting Frank Buchser's trip to America to paint the portraits for the mural in the Swiss Federal Palace at Bern.² Staempfli's passionate support for the North during the Civil War was well known to the British delegates at Geneva whose leader, Cockburn, denounced him as a "fanatical republican who detests monarchical governments and ministers to a high degree; he is as ignorant as an ass and as stubborn as a mule."³ The British correctly feared that Staempfli's pro-Union sympathies would dispose him to support the American position during the Geneva negotiations.

After protracted wrangling during the summer of 1872, the Geneva tribunal awarded the United States \$15,500,000 for damages inflicted by the *Alabama* and other Confederate raiders over which the British were judged to have exercised insufficient control. Hotheads in both the United States and Britain denounced the settlement as a betrayal of national honor, but the great body of public opinion in both countries approved it and Britain promptly paid the indemnity assessed it by the tribunal.

Geneva charmed the crowds of journalists who covered the proceedings. "Switzerland," reported the correspondent from *Harper's Weekly*, 26 October 1872, "has indeed been a most hospitable host, and the members of the Court of Arbitration had no cause to complain of dullness during their three months' sojourn at Geneva. Party succeeded party, fete followed fete; and while we used to read in one telegram that the court, quite exhausted by its hard labors, had adjourned to such a date, we learned in another of a pleasant picnic in the environs, or the programme for a forthcoming fishing excursion. In short, both government and people spared no pains to make the stay of their distinguished guests as pleasant and comfortable as possible."

The events at Geneva also made a strong impression on statesmen and jurists who were seeking to persuade governments to resolve their differences peacefully. The successful arbitration of an inflammatory issue by a great power and one fast reaching that status raised hopes that a device had been found to cure nations of



Geneva, astride the River Rhone . . . , June 1919

Photograph, *The National Geographic Magazine*, June 1919.

General Collections

This unusual view of Geneva, looking eastward from the Rhone River, reveals a "flotilla of laundry boats . . . with linen hung out to dry on the docks." Illustrating an article about Geneva as the home of the League of Nations, the picture appears to reveal a premonition of the article's author that "dirty linen"—hence problems—might plague the new organization.

their warring madness. Geneva and by extension Switzerland were henceforth considered oases of hope by men of good will. A report published late in 1872 promoted Geneva as an ideal site for a conference on international law, since it was "recommended not only by its admirable situation . . . but even more by the recent souvenir of the . . . Anglo-American arbitration."⁴ The irenic reputation of Switzerland had become so familiar by 1894 that an American writer mentioned the country as "ever a fitting centre for international peace congresses, arbitration courts, and postal unions."⁵

When Woodrow Wilson arrived in Europe at the end of the First World War, citizens of Switzerland as well as every other European country inundated him with good wishes and supplications. Swiss children sent the American President Christmas cards. Switzerland's Armenian community (in common with Greeks, Macedonians, Poles, and other Swiss ethnic groups) implored Wilson to liberate their homeland as part of his crusade to "free humanity and to achieve the work of world regeneration."⁶ Revealing the divided affections of Switzerland during the war, French-Swiss organizations, dedicated to "good and durable relations with France and the allied nations,"⁷ made Wilson an honorary member of their clubs even as German-Swiss groups sent him petitions, imploring him to lift the "Hunger-Blockade" of Germany.⁸

The Swiss government had its own agenda in dealing with Wilson: preservation of Swiss neutrality and establishment of the prospective League of Nations at Geneva. Working through Professor William Rappard of the University of Geneva and through other emissaries, Swiss officials were successful on both counts. As presiding officer of the Crillon Commission, which devised the structure of the League, Wilson commanded decisive influence on the question of where the organization's headquarters would be. He seems to have favored Geneva from the beginning. As a prolific writer on American history, Wilson was, of course, familiar with the Alabama negotiations of 1872. He had also, apparently, received communications from Geneva in which "the memory of the Alabama arbitration was invoked by the city fathers."⁹ Nevertheless, in publicly justifying his preference for Geneva rather than Brussels, Wilson mentioned only the Red Cross, founded by Swiss citizens in Geneva in 1864 and joined by the United States in 1882, as proving the Swiss aptitude for organizing and accommodating multinational ventures in peacemaking and philanthropy. Addressing the Crillon Commission at the crucial moment, 10 April 1919, in its discussions about the site of the League, Wilson declared:

We wish to rid the world of the sufferings of war. We should not obtain this result if we chose a town [Brussels] where the memory of this war would prevent impartial

discussion. The peace of the world could not be secured by perpetuating international hatreds. Geneva was already the seat of the International Red Cross, which had placed itself at the service of both groups of belligerents, and which, so far as possible, had remained unaffected by the antipathies provoked by the war. Moreover, Switzerland was a people vowed to absolute neutrality by its constitution and its blend of races and languages. It was marked out to be the meeting-place of other peoples desiring to undertake a work of peace and cooperation. The choice of Geneva did not mean that we did not recognize the eminent merits of Belgium and of Brussels. . . . The capitals of other neutral nations might have been proposed, but none had behaved so impartially as Switzerland. Switzerland had always acted with dignity; she had suffered from the war and she had gained the respect of both groups of belligerents.¹⁰

Wilson's argument prevailed and Geneva was selected to host the League of Nations. Thanking the American President for using his "powerful influence" on Geneva's behalf, Gustave Ador, President of the Swiss Confederation, assured Wilson that the "Swiss nation, which has already received so many tokens of sympathy from you, will remember that the designation of Geneva is a new proof of a kindness and friendship which are infinitely precious to it."¹¹

Apparently believing that Americans needed to know more about the League's home, the *National Geographic* ran an article in June 1919 in which it announced that Geneva would "be known henceforth as the Millennial city. If the League succeeds, the Swiss municipality will become the city set on a hill, the center of man's moral universe." "Geneva," the *Geographic* continued, "now becomes the fountain-head of what may be either the most noble triumph or the most colossal failure in the history of human endeavor."¹² The magazine evidently suspected that the latter result was possible, for its picture of the city was full of premonition. The picture showed Geneva, looking eastward from the Rhone River; anchored in the river in the foreground of the picture was a "flotilla of laundry boats . . . with linen hung out to dry on the decks."¹³

Did the *Geographic* foresee that the League of Nations would be the site of dirty linen—a victim of the refusal of the United States to join and, later, of its own failure to muster the will to confront fascism? These tragedies were not the fault of the Swiss or of Geneva, but the hollowness of the hopes that the millennium would arrive on the shores of Lake Lemman were exposed within a few years of the League's founding. By the late 1930s the organization

was as dead as the *Alabama*, resting on the floor of the Atlantic off Cherbourg, France, where it had been sunk by the U.S.S. *Kearsage* in 1864.

NOTES

1. The information on the Alabama affair in this chapter is taken from Ladislas Mysyrowicz, *The Alabama Arbitration, Geneva, 1872* (Geneva, 1988).
2. Müller, *Der amerikanische Sezessionskrieg, op. cit.*, 83.
3. Mysyrowicz, *op. cit.*, 38.
4. *Ibid.*, 49.
5. James W. Sullivan, "Direct Legislation in Switzerland," *Direct Legislation Record*, 1 (New York, 1894), 66.
6. La Colonie Arménienne to Wilson, 12 December 1918, Wilson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
7. Cercle Franco-Suisse to Wilson, 15 January 1919, Wilson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
8. Katholisches Friedeninstitut für Völkerversöhnung, *Aufruf . . . für Aufhebung des Aushungerungs-Blockus*, 1919. *Ibid.*
9. Mysyowicz, *op. cit.*, 48.
10. Arthur S. Link, et al., eds., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 57 (Princeton, 1987), 225.
11. Ador to Wilson, 13 April 1919, Wilson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
12. Ralph A. Graves, "The Millennial City: The Romance of Geneva, Capital of the League of Nations," *The National Geographic Magazine*, 35 (June, 1919), 457.
13. *Ibid.*, 458.