

Switzerland's forgotten role in WW1

Little is known or remembered of neutral Switzerland's role in the Great War, but in May 1916 the first contingent of British POWs, many wounded, arrived from Germany to be interred in the mountain village of Chateau d'Oex, about 50km (30 mile) east of Montreux.

The Red Cross facilitated an agreement made by the warring parties to transfer POWs from Germany and France to Switzerland where they could be treated and convalesce. Between 1916 and 1918, Switzerland accepted 68,000 British, French and German soldiers.

One of the first British soldiers to arrive was Captain Cyril Edward Joliffe MC of the Cheshire Regiment, a regular officer who was wounded in 1914. He was in a British contingent of 27 officers and 304 men.

Greeting the soldiers as they entered Switzerland and lining the rail tracks were thousands of Swiss inhabitants. At Montreux station they were met with a band. People cheered and threw flowers.

To meet the soldiers at Chateau d'Oex was the British Ambassador to Switzerland, Sir Evelyn Grant Duff. He recorded in his diary,

It is difficult to write calmly about it for the simple reason that I have never before in my life seen such a welcome accorded to anyone, although for 28 years I have been present at every kind of function in half the capitals of Europe. At Lausanne some 10,000 people, at 5am, were present at the station. Our men were simply astounded. Many of them were crying like children, a few fainted from emotion. As one private said to me:

"God bless you, sir, it's like dropping right into 'eaven from 'ell."

Apart from Chateau d'Oex, soldiers of all nationalities were sent to Zermatt, Murren, Verbier and many other well-known resorts. Good regular food, mountain air and peaceful surroundings all contributed to improving the health of the wounded soldiers.

The Swiss government also encouraged families to visit. Constance 'Connie' Kirkup was part of a party of women who travelled with the Red Cross to visit their Husbands and fiancés. Connie travelled to visit her fiancé, Captain Angus Leybourne of the Durham Light Infantry, interred at the Hotel Grand Chalet, Rossiniere. She arrived in the Alps to find her fiancé recovering well from his wounds and taking part in a bobsleigh race. She wrote,

My heart stood still, but oh it was great...and the English team won!

For Switzerland, her reasons for welcoming the soldiers were probably as much political as they were compassionate. The country had been suffering economically since the war had started. It had virtually lost all of its tourist income and there were food shortages. However, the soldiers' respective governments took responsibility for paying for their care. When alpine resorts heard of their government's plan to accept wounded soldiers they competed to act as host. Chateau d'Oex was first to receive soldiers because its application arrived first. The Swiss Government believed that by accepting the soldiers it would portray their neutrality in a positive light. Humanitarian action became a core of Swiss foreign policy. For the hotels that filled their rooms with soldiers it made the difference between survival and bankruptcy.

In the village church in Chateau d'Oex is a plaque to the British soldiers who stayed there. It reads,
'In memory of the British soldiers who were interned in Switzerland from 1916 to 1918'



Internees arriving at Chateau d'Oex were given flowers and other gifts



Captain Joliffe (top L) went on to have three children, but he never fully recovered from his wounds

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