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*Memorandum of the Swiss Government for the Peace Conference*¹

VORARLBERG. THE VORARLBERG QUESTION

[Paris, 3 May 1919]

Vorarlberg, a small province of the former province of the former Austrian Empire, measures 2600 square kilometres. It is bordered on the southern and western side by Switzerland, eastward by Tyrol and on the northern side by Bavaria. The tiny principality of Liechtenstein lies in the South-western corner, between Vorarlberg and Switzerland.

The whole province forms a complex of valleys separated on its northern, eastern and southern side from the rest of the world by chains of mountains; all the rivers flow westwards into the Rhine, in the direction of Switzerland. The north-western corner is formed by the lake of Constance, from which the mountains rise, their height increasing as they near the eastern corner. The geographical position of Vorarlberg obliges the country to look westwards for an outlet – towards Switzerland – unless it tries to reach, across the lake of Constance, the swabian plains of South-Germany.

Vorarlberg counts 140 000 inhabitants, almost all of them roman catholics; they are of a very catholic and very democratic turn of mind; their majority belong to the Christian-socialist party. There are no important cities in Vorarlberg: the largest town is Dornbirn (13 000 inhabitants), the center of the weaving and spinning industry. The Dornbirn people generally work for the Swiss embroidery industry. The town of Feldkirch is well known, because of an important jesuit college, where many roman catholics of Austria and Switzerland have been educated.

The great importance of Vorarlberg lies in its railways (147 kilometres). It is not necessary to mention the secondary lines. The principal ones are:

St. Margrethen–Bregenz–Lindau	24 km.
Bregenz–Dornbirn–Feldkirch	38 km.
Buchs–Feldkirch–Bludenz–Arlberg	85 km.

¹ *Memorandum*: UK-NA FO 608/27/6. Written by Charles L. E. Lardy (1875–1939), dodis.ch/P5288, Head of the Section for Foreign Affairs of the Political Department and transmitted by the Swiss Delegate at the Peace Conference, William E. Rappard (1883–1958), dodis.ch/P58, during the conferences in Paris on 3 May 1919. This text was sent to the British Foreign Office by Arestas Akers-Douglas (1876–1947), dodis.ch/P61951, and filed with a short summary as well as a handwritten note: «According to this the great majority of the Vorarlbergers desire union with Switzerland. The Swiss Govt., however, do not welcome the idea, but they would prefer it to a union with Germany», cf. the facsimile dodis.ch/55222. A copy of this text also went to the American delegation and to the Swiss envoy in Paris, Alphonse Dunant, dodis.ch/P7708 cf. CH-BAR#E2001B#1000/1503#175* (B.14.211.P.21.2). For an earlier version of the text dated 26 april 1919, cf. draft dodis.ch/55222.



The first line unites the Swiss railways to the Bavarian net (from Zurich to Munich around the lake of Constance).

The second line is only of local importance as long as the Swiss railways remain what they are.

But the line Buchs–Feldkirch–Arlberg is of the utmost importance not only for Switzerland, but for the world, as it is part of the great line which unites East and West of Europe. The Arlberg route is the most direct line between Paris and Constantinople. It borrows the Swiss territory from Basle to Buchs and continues across Vorarlberg, Tyrol and Carinthia, until it reaches the Yougo-Slave territories and Belgrade. It is the natural means of communication between the Western and Eastern civilization and will increase in importance, now that the Yougo-Slave and Turkish countries will be always more exploited. One of the chief desires of Switzerland and, it may be presumed, of all Europe, is that this vital part of the great traffic route between East and West should remain in the hands of a small and, if possible, neutral power.

As a rule, the province of Vorarlberg is agricultural and not rich. The industries are and have always been connected very intimately with the embroidery industry of the Swiss canton of St. Gall. St. Gall is generally considered the center of both sides of the Upper Rhine valley. The relations have always been very intimate between the Swiss canton of St. Gall and the Austrian province of Vorarlberg, which explains the great interest of St. Gall in the future of Vorarlberg. The Rhine is of course not a barrier between both countries and the inhabitants of Vorarlberg, having long been cut out from any regular intercourse with Austrian and German provinces by the natural barrier of the mountains have sought and found their industrial and intellectual center across the Rhine, in Swiss St. Gall. There will always exist, politically and morally, actions and reactions between Vorarlberg – otherwise an isolated group of valleys – and the St. Gall region, because the Rhine valley is a natural formation, in the middle of which the river does not create a barrier.

It is therefore quite natural that the authorities of Vorarlberg, as soon as the war was over, asked Switzerland to help them to get some food. With the kind cooperation of the Entente Governments, it was possible to provide the necessary supplies.

At the same time, the ties which held the different provinces of the Austrian Empire together were severed and the Vorarlberg populations began to examine the problem of their future. A private committee was organized, which put unofficially the question to the people. The Swiss Government took absolutely no part whatever in that affair, neither directly not indirectly. They were informed of it only by the papers and no influence was brought to bear from anybody on the Swiss side. Through the press Switzerland learnt in March that 70 percent of the population of Vorarlberg has voted in favour of the aggregation of the land to the Swiss Confederation. Dr. Ender,² the Head of the Vorarlberg Government, then asked the Federal Council of Switzerland to grant him and four of his colleagues an interview: that was the first and only occasion in which the Swiss Government

² Otto Ender (1875–1960), dodis.ch/P38315, Governor of Vorarlberg from 1918 to 1930 and from 1931 to 1934.

were approached. The answer from Bern was that it was not possible, at present, to grant the desired interview.³

From the information received, the situation in Vorarlberg may be resumed as follows:

The very great majority of the inhabitants desire their union with Switzerland. Against the union there exists two small groups of interests: on the one side, the quite small group of pangermanists, headed by Dr. Ritter,⁴ who desire the annexation not only of Vorarlberg, but, as it seems, also of the German speaking parts of Switzerland, to Germany, and on the other hand, some of the manufacturers, who fear the competition of St. Gall for their industry. A real antipathy exists in Vorarlberg against the Tyrolese. In the protocol of the Sittings of national Assembly, Dr. Ender expresses very strongly that feeling and explains it by the democratic turn of the mind of the Vorarlbergese, who object to the monarchical and retrograde spirit of the Tyrolese. There appears to be no doubt that the will of the Vorarlberg population is to sever all ties which unite them to the Tyrolese and the Austrians. They do not appear to feel any attraction towards Bavaria. If they cannot become Swiss, they will in all probability turn to German Württemberg. A «Swabian Chapter»⁵ has already been formed to influence the population in that direction. This chapter, which has secured the services of Dr. Ritter, acts together with the Pangermanists. Seeing that the Swiss Federal Council had not given any encouragement to the Vorarlberg Government, they have exerted all their efforts to increase the propaganda in favour of Württemberg.

In Switzerland, neither the Government, nor Parliament, nor the Press have discussed Vorarlberg matters until the result of the unofficial votation of the population was known. Since then the question has been agitated in the Press; it has not been brought before Parliament. The situation in Switzerland may be described as follows: with the exception of St. Gall where there is a very strong feeling in favour of the union, the question is generally examined in the most objective way. The opinion of the majority is that it is not desirable that this province should be annexed by Germany. The reasons for such an opinion are to be found on the one hand in the fact that both sides of the Rhine valley must perforce act and react upon one another, so that an influence of Germany, coming from Vorarlberg, would be inevitable; and on the other hand in the necessity that the railway traffic between East and West should remain in the hands of a small and, if possible, neutral power. Furthermore, it would be for the Swiss people a source of great uneasiness to see their eastern frontier in the hands of the same power which controls their northern border. Since the early sixteenth century Switzerland has had four neighbours. The acquisition of Vorarlberg by Germany would reduce the number of its neighbours to three and the Swiss people cannot be expected to contemplate without the greatest doubts such a grave and dangerous change in their international situation. A stripe of German territory between Switzerland and its eastern neighbour can create the most trying situation.

³ Cf. doc. 23, dodis.ch/55221.

⁴ Albert Ritter (1872–1931), dodis.ch/P58991, Austrian journalist and writer, opponent of the entry of Vorarlberg into the Swiss Confederation.

⁵ Cf. doc. 24, dodis.ch/55336.

The Swiss public opinion has always been very partial to the principle of the right of the people to dispose freely of themselves; the majority of the Swiss people would therefore very unwillingly deny to the Vorarlberg population the right to express their opinion and get their own way. Apart from these considerations, the Swiss people have no desire to annex Vorarlberg. They would have preferred the question not to be put. Only the extreme importance of securing a free traffic towards the east and of avoiding an increase of influence of an encircling neighbour could cause them to eventually accept the proposal of Vorarlberg. Many people of Switzerland are opposed to any increase of territory, under any pretence whatever. Moreover, the incorporation of Vorarlberg would give Switzerland a longer and more difficult frontier to guard. The Swiss people, already impoverished by the war, have no desire to increase their financial difficulties by acquiring indebted provinces!

Useless to add that there is not one single individual in Switzerland who would think of admitting the possibility of contemplating the cession or exchange of any Swiss village.