

The Swiss ocean-going fleet

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THE SWISS OCEAN-GOING FLEET

Switzerland, a maritime country . . .

Although situated in the heart of Europe over 300 miles from the nearest sea, Switzerland is still one of the shipping nations. We are not referring here to her shipping on the country's many lakes, or even to her river navigation on the Rhine, which started over 60 years ago, but to her ocean-going shipping. Compared with the big maritime powers, the Swiss ocean-going fleet is naturally minute; compared to the smallness of the country however, its size appears in a different light. In April 1941, in order to overcome the increasing difficulties which the country was coming up against in its efforts to obtain necessary supplies, the Federal Council decided to purchase and fit out a certain number of ships which, together with the vessels belonging to Swiss ship-owners, were used to ensure the country's replenishment of vital supplies. In spite of many difficulties, this small fleet succeeded in bringing indispensable foodstuffs from overseas, in exchanging Swiss export products. At the end of the war, the ships belonging to the Confederation were sold to Swiss ship-owners. Numbering eight vessels at the time of its creation, today the fleet possesses 32 vessels sailing the seas all over the world; it has thus almost quadrupled in size in the last 30 years.

Not everyone can sail under the Swiss flag!

The right of countries deprived of their own seaboard to sail the seas under their own flag was recognised at the International Transport Conference in Barcelona in 1921. Swiss legislation submits navigation under the Swiss flag to the supervision of the Federal Political Department, which exercises it through the Swiss Office for Maritime Shipping in Basle, the only port for the registration of ships. Only vessels belonging to a company which can prove its capital to be purely Swiss in origin, which has its registered office in Switzerland and an effective management in the country are permitted to fly the Swiss flag. Consequently a Swiss ship-owner owning a ship jointly with a foreign ship-owner cannot sail it under the Swiss flag and has to register it in another country. The shipping company Suisse-Atlantique Co. Ltd. in Lausanne, for example, owns four ships sailing under the Liberian flag, in addition to eight vessels registered in Basle.

Ship-owners are free to do what they like with their ships and may do charter work for foreigners; in time of war however, their vessels would have to be placed at the Confederation's disposal. Furthermore, the Confederation makes its contribution to the development of the national fleet by granting ship-owners loans in the form of maritime mortgages, sometimes amounting to as much as 75%, or by guaranteeing the loans by banks for the modernisation of fleets (construction and purchase of new vessels).

The ships . . .

With 32 modern ships — their average age being about 12 years — with a total displacement of 300,000 dwt, Switzerland's ocean-going fleet comes 40th among the world's fleets. The biggest ship is the "Romandie", a 32,750-ton cargo boat, while the smallest, the "Leman", is a coastal vessel of 440 tons, reserved exclusively for the shipment of wine in the Mediterranean. In addition to another ship of the same type and two refrigerator ships, the Swiss fleet comprises 28 cargo boats, able to carry a limited number of passengers (12 at the most); half the 24 ocean-going vessels, whose tonnage varies between 3000 and 32,750 dwt, run on regular services, while the other half act as tramp ships, that is to say they do not make regular trips but take cargo, such as cereals, ores, etc., when and where it offers and to any port.

The recent growth of Switzerland's private merchant fleet means that countries all over the world with direct access to the sea have had an opportunity of seeing the Swiss flag flying in one or other of their ports, whether in Canada, with a ship loading cereals, in Japan, delivering a cargo of phosphates from North Africa, or in Europe, unloading timber from the Philippines.

. . . and their crews

The Swiss, in spite of their reputation as a mountain people, also have the sea in their blood; in fact, over half the 920 men forming the crews of the 32 ships are Swiss. 120 other Swiss seamen are employed on foreign ships or ships belonging to Swiss ship-owners but not sailing under the Swiss flag. Like the fleet itself, the development of crews of Swiss nationality has progressed satisfactorily. In fact, to start with, crews were composed almost exclusively of foreigners, for the most part Germans and Italians, even though many Swiss had already served on foreign ships before the first World War. Today Swiss sailors occupy the most varied posts: on the upper-deck, in the engine room, radio and supplies. Of the 32 ships, 12 are commanded by Swiss captains, while 15 deck officers out of a total of 70 are also Swiss nationals.

As Switzerland has no naval school of her own, young Swiss sailors wishing to become officers or captains have to attend foreign establishments and pass an examination recognised by the Shipping Office. By virtue of a decree for the encouragement of the vocational training of Swiss captains and seamen, the Confederation pays subsidies to candidates, generally amounting to one-third of the expenses involved in these comparatively expensive studies; in some cases, this financial help may even amount to two-thirds of the cost. In addition, certain ship-owners grant loans to specially qualified members of their crews wishing to perfect their training. In this way Switzerland is sure of having Swiss crews on whom it can rely under all circumstances.

Problems and prospects

Although she imports over 6 million tons of petroleum products annually, Switzerland has no tankers of her own. This deficiency is a result of the structure of the petroleum market, since the big foreign companies which supply the Swiss market are organisations handling all operations right through from the initial prospecting to the final refining. Under these circumstances, the Swiss importer, forming an integral part of the chain, has no part to play in the field of transport.

The future of Swiss shipping is to a large extent bound up with the development of both national and world trade, since Swiss ship-owners also work for foreign principals. With Switzerland's trade steadily growing and world trade expanding considerably, the Swiss merchant navy's prospects are exceedingly promising.

Laugh a little . . .

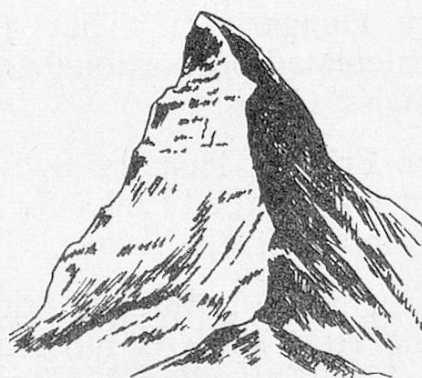
Americans and Englishmen like to tease one another. Ships which pass the Rock of Gibraltar have to communicate their arrival to the fortress. When the world's largest atom-powered warship, the "Enterprise", passed through the strait, the English radioed: "What ship?" As an answer the reply was "What rock?"

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