

Switzerland: Prosperous but Worried

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SWITZERLAND: PROSPEROUS BUT WORRIED.

(We are reproducing by courtesy of the Editor this very interesting article which appeared in the February number of the "Contemporary Review".)

Who could have thought that at a time when Great Britain — under Mr. Churchill's leadership — is constrained for economic reasons to reduce her rearmament efforts, while the other West European democracies belonging to N.A.T.O. have to be constantly prodded, urged and helped by America to get on with their defence programme, little Switzerland, of all nations, should be the only country this side of the iron curtain which is fully ready for any emergency?

When General Marshall told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee nearly two years ago that the United States was planning to have 400,000 men in Europe by the end of 1952, this figure struck some of the experts as excessively large and hard to reach. Yet permanently neutral Switzerland, with a population thirty-three times smaller than that of the U.S.A., can put into the field considerably more than 400,000 men at any time, and at the shortest of notice. What is more, these Swiss soldiers are properly trained, well equipped, and fully instructed as to where they are to go and what they are to do. There were periods during the last war when Switzerland had as many as 8000,000 men under arms, ready to repel any attack. Thanks to compulsory military service and subsequent regular refresher courses for all healthy males between twenty and sixty years of age, Switzerland has a defence force of remarkable strength. But its purpose is purely protective.

Switzerland's neutrality does not signify disarmament or defeatism. On the contrary, it is an armed neutrality, and the nation — which has a great military tradition which goes back for centuries — is willing at all times to defend the inviolability of its territory. From early childhood every citizen is trained in the faith that national independence is worth fighting for and dying for. Between periods of service he keeps his uniform, gun, and ammunition at home, and, if he happens to be a cavalry-man, even his horse, in which he and the State have a joint interest. Thus the State and the citizens are partners in national defence — not master and servant.

During the second World War they blasted into the rocks of Central Switzerland their famous "National Redoubt," and were ready to conduct a prolonged defensive fight from this formidable citadel. They mined the mountain passes, tunnels, roads and bridges, with the intention of blowing them up to prevent potential invaders from passing. Thus it can be said that they mobilised nature itself to the defence of their country and that the whole nation was armed to the last cow.

Present-day rearmament requirements naturally raise a host of new problems. A six-years' programme costing 1,464 million francs has been adopted, or, in round figures, 1,500 millions in six annual instalments of 250 millions each — in addition to the normal military budgets. There has been a considerable amount of disagreement on the best ways of financing these huge national defence expenses, but

not on their need or their volume. The Socialists put forward a scheme for a capital levy. But this was rejected by the nation, when 422,255 citizens voted against it and 328,341 expressed themselves in favour of the plan. This was in May, 1952. In July the Federal Government submitted to the popular vote a detailed scheme for raising the necessary funds by means of certain additional taxes. But this was likewise rejected by 352,205 votes against 256,035. The majority of the nation seems to feel that, at any rate for the time being, the State has enough money in its coffers to carry out the rearmament programme without imposing any additional taxation. But no doubt the Federal Government will have to submit some new legislative proposals in the course of 1953.

While they refuse to be rushed into any important decisions, and invariably take a very long time to brood over any piece of legislation directly affecting them, the people of Switzerland do recognise the value of making wise provision for the future. Characteristically enough, the Swiss Government began preparing for the Second World War as early as 1934, or five years before the actual outbreak of hostilities. In April, 1938 — several months before Munich — a law was passed increasing the Government's powers for emergency stock-piling and various other wartime necessities. While Chamberlain was babbling about "peace in our time," the cautious Swiss were preparing for the double eventuality of a blockade and also that of having to defend themselves.

The law of 1938 was still in force when ten years later they again decided to start on a wartime

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emergency programme. In the person of Mr. Otto Zipfel they have in Switzerland a very able economic expert whose official title is "Delegate for the Creation of Employment." But since Switzerland has been enjoying full employment for many years now, the standing joke about this excellent public servant has always been that he is "the only unemployed in the country." Ever since 1948, however, he has been extremely busy behind the scenes setting up the necessary shadow organisation for a possible war economy, and in taking various preliminary steps to be ready in case of emergency. He has now the additional title of "Delegate for War Economy," and with a small staff of half a dozen assistants, working in an office of only four or five rooms, he is conducting his important operations, which include the stockpiling of foodstuffs and the gradual building up of extra stocks of raw materials for industry. A huge programme for the construction of silos and storage space of all kinds has been set in motion, including substantial installations for oil storage, which are being built into the mountains themselves. The tonnage of Switzerland's small merchant marine has been increased by purchase or charter. Various measures for the re-orientation of industrial production and commerce to a wartime economy have been carefully worked out, being under constant review and revision in accordance with changing circumstances. Meanwhile, however, industry and commerce are encouraged to pursue their normal peace-time activities.

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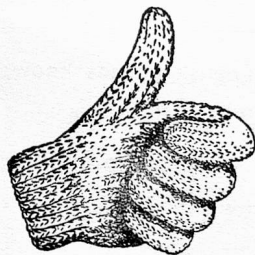


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At this point it becomes essential to recall a few fundamental facts which Switzerland's apparent prosperity and stability tend to obscure. A small landlocked country with a population of 4.7 million, she has no raw materials, no overseas possessions, and about one-quarter of her territory is completely barren, while the remaining three-quarters of the mountainous regions offer only limited scope for agriculture or other productive exploitation. But the Swiss have known how to turn these physical disadvantages of their country into assets. Switzerland's scenic beauty has been made the very foundation of a world-wide tourist industry. This is no longer as remunerative as in the golden era preceding the First World War, but it still makes a vital direct and indirect contribution to national revenue as well as to the balance of payments. The central position of their little territory has enabled them to make it the crossroads between Eastern and Western, or Central and Southern Europe — especially between Germany and Italy — despite the geographical obstacles to traffic. In recent years Switzerland has also become a vital link in international civil aviation. The big modern airfields of Zurich and Geneva are handling a constantly growing volume of passenger and goods traffic. "Swissair," in which the Confederation, the Cantons, and a number of private shareholders are jointly interested, now operates in nineteen countries. In addition to that, eighteen countries are linked with Switzerland through aviation companies of their own. The importance of "Swissair" is particularly great to the Swiss, since it is the only means of transportation owned and operated by themselves which directly connects their country — an inland island, as it were — with the rest of the world. After some financial setbacks, mainly caused by the devaluation of European currencies in 1949, "Swissair" rapidly regained its self-confidence and is now growing from strength to strength.

Transit trade (by train, road, barge, steamer, and now also by air) and tourism, in their turn, have led to the creation of a wide range of other commercial, financial and industrial activities, while the powerful mountain streams and waterfalls have been harnessed to produce a constantly growing and almost inexhaustible supply of electric power. This "white coal" is invaluable not only for industry, but also for the Federal railways, all the main lines of which are now electrified. Despite the importance of agriculture, food production can only satisfy one-third of the nation's minimum annual requirements. In order to feed herself and keep her industries going, Switzerland is therefore to a very large degree dependant on international trade — both as a source of supplies and an outlet for the goods she manufactures.

Thus, quite apart from the danger of war, the Swiss have plenty of problems and worries, some of which are genuine and some of which are vastly exaggerated. They are not happy people by nature, and so much of their time and energy is absorbed by exceedingly hard work that they have largely forgotten how to enjoy life. Immensely diligent, efficient and frugal, they let their minds dwell on troubles of every conceivable variety, rather than derive satisfaction from any achievements — which are numerous indeed. Having spent the last three years in worrying about the decline of business conditions and an approaching

crisis, they have discovered time after time that these have been excellent years after all; 1951 was actually a record year when their exports and imports achieved unprecedented figures in both value and volume. The first three-quarters of 1952 seem to indicate that, without necessarily being equal to 1951, it will be an exceptionally good year too.

Sensitive as she is to market conditions abroad, Switzerland is particularly concerned about international economic trends in good and bad times alike. Much more than mere monetary consideration is involved. Because the quality of goods produced by her industry, or the nature of her tourist trade is of the highest order, and because the Swiss nation is accustomed to high wages and considerable profits, the prices charged for everything are high too. So, when cheaper goods appear anywhere, or other countries make a bid for attracting foreign tourists, the Swiss get worried. For they know that if they are to maintain their competitive position, they must find a way of lowering costs and prices, and no country likes to lower its standard of living. But there is also danger to Switzerland when times are too good, or when boom conditions threaten a re-emergence of the famous price-wage spiral. Wage and price control is as distasteful in times of plenty as the lowering of the standard of living in times of recession. But when either of these measures becomes a national necessity, there is little room left for argument.

To the extent to which they can regulate or adjust their economic life by decisions or efforts or sacrifices of their own, the Swiss have no cause to doubt that they are able to overcome any obstacle. Their whole history proves that. But what makes them so worried now is the knowledge that, despite continuing prosperity, their economic future is precariously dependent on a whole series of outside factors which are completely beyond their control. As to the political dangers, their willingness at all times to defend their small country turns them into a factor to be reckoned with even by the boldest of strategists and would be conquerors. Napoleon's famous dictum about Switzerland that 'no wise man would attempt to conquer it' is true enough. But the trouble is that nowadays there are so few wise men. In fact, the Swiss are firmly convinced that outside their own country there are not any at all, and maybe they are not far wrong.

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