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“Heart of the resistance, saviour of the nation”

Henri Guisan, commander-in-chief of the Swiss army in the Second World War, died 50 years ago. His speech on the Rütli and the withdrawal of the troops into the alpine stronghold of the Gotthard were the foundations on which national resistance was built. General Guisan was adored and revered by the entire nation. Even though his life was not completely untainted, he was the father figure of the war generation. By Rolf Ribi

On 12 April 1960, an expanse of blue sky stretched over Lausanne. A bitterly cold North Wind blew across the canton of Vaud. The scene was dominated by the army green worn by thousands of soldiers who served from 1939 to 1945. Troops involved in active service lined the streets, several rows deep, together with 300,000 people from all walks of life. General Henri Guisan, the commander-in-chief of the Swiss army in the Second World War, had died five days earlier, aged 86.

The funeral procession made its way from Pully, where the deceased had lived, to Lausanne's Place de la Riponne. Here the army bid farewell to its general in a dignified ceremony. The four-kilometre-long cortege was made up of more than 3,000 dignitaries, a battalion of fusiliers, a howitzer division, a squadron of dragoons and the bearers of 400 military ensigns. The artillery carriage carrying the coffin draped in the Swiss flag was drawn by six horses. It was followed by the general's last horse with an empty saddle and lowered head. The Swiss President, Max Petitpierre, stood in the pulpit of Lausanne cathedral and gave the funeral address. The church bells were then sounded across the country.

Never before had Switzerland experienced a state funeral like this. The Swiss people went into deep mourning. They saw their military leader at a time of danger as the “heart of the resistance” and the “saviour of the nation”. He was the general adored by the entire population. In those days, his picture hung in almost every living room, in many inns and in all army barracks. Streets and squares were named after him, even during his lifetime. A memorial by the artist Charles Otto Bänninger was constructed in Ouchy on Lake Geneva.

Election as general

Germany's European neighbours were anxious about potential plans to attack them in spring 1939. In Switzerland, the border guards were enlisted on 28 August to safeguard the mobilisation of the entire army on 2 September. On 29 August, Federal Councillor Rudolf Minger, Head of the Federal Military Department, made a telephone call to Senior Lieutenant General Henri Guisan to summon him to Berne. The next day, 30 August, the Federal Assembly, convened in the middle of summer, elected him as commander-in-chief of the Swiss army with 204 out of 229 votes. Radio Beromünster broadcast the vote directly to living rooms, factories and offices.

No sooner had 64-year-old Henri Guisan been elected than he strode into the National Council chamber with his officer's hat in his hand, his sword in his belt and wearing riding boots. Everyone in the chamber and in the galleries rose to their feet. The Federal Chancellor read out the oath and the general simply responded “I swear”. The President of the assembly then said: “We entrust to you the protection of our nation, which we love so dearly and would never want to give up. May God bless your work, General.” When Henri Guisan emerged from the Federal Palace people on the Bundesplatz started singing the national anthem. The newly elected general joined in.

Guisan – the farmer and officer

Who was Henri Guisan? Born in 1874 in Mézières, canton of Vaud, the son of a country doctor from Avenches, he lost his biological mother at a young age. Little is known about the childhood of this small, slightly built and handsome lad. He did not particularly excel in the cadets, or in sport or at grammar school. At the University of

Lausanne, he struggled to apply himself to any one course of study. He set out in life without a degree and discovered his passion for farming. Guisan learned the practice of farming and Swiss German on two farms belonging to German-speaking Swiss and he marvelled at the aristocratic demeanour of the owners. He now wanted to become a farmer himself. In 1897, he bought a farm in the Broye Valley and married Mary Doelker in the same year. His children, Henry and Myriam, were born soon after. Thanks to his wife's money, the family purchased a beautiful country house at Verte-Rive on Lake Geneva where they stayed for the rest of their lives.

The young officer soon showed an inclination towards the army. Guisan blossomed in uniform. According to his military service book, he gave 20 years of service days to the army. From a simple carriage soldier, who was responsible for the horses used to transport artillery, his military career took him into the artillery and the infantry before reaching the rank of divisional commander. The impressive militia officer was then made a professional officer. In 1932, he was appointed senior lieutenant general, the highest rank of officer in times of peace.

Contemporaries and historians provide a nuanced portrayal of his personal attributes. According to Karl Schmid, a forward-thinking policymaker and officer of the general's staff, Guisan embodied the entire population's spirit of resistance, extending far beyond the army. He said: “The people made him their representative.” The general enjoyed popularity and veneration from all quarters. He had a warm and sincere manner and took the concerns of his soldiers about the fate of their families and businesses just



as seriously as those of the women about their homes and children. The historian Willi Gautschi, author of a comprehensive biography on the general, wrote: "Guisan was no intellectual and not really a strategist. He was a pragmatist with tremendous common sense." Maintaining his image was important to him – his uniform was more elegant than that of any other officer and no picture of the general could be published without the approval of his staff. Guisan loved festivals and sporting events. "One of this aristocratic general's secrets was his ability to make all his soldiers feel as though he saw them as equal citizens", writes Markus Somm, the author of a new biography on Guisan. Wherever the general went, people wanted to greet him. Anyone who ever met him would tell the story for the rest of their lives.



Secret talks with France

The German army marched into Poland at dawn on 1 September 1939. The Second World War had begun. The Federal Council ordered the general mobilisation of the army on 2 September. 430,000 soldiers and 200,000 auxiliaries signed up on the first day of mobilisation. General Guisan knew what the army was lacking most – tanks and aeroplanes. It also had significantly more horses than motor vehicles. To take advantage of the terrain, Guisan decided to position the army along a front running from Sargans through Lake Zurich and the Limmat to the Jura. It ran right through the city of Zurich.

The front only faced north, as the general saw no danger in the west of the country. Guisan had a close personal relationship with France and its army. He had visited French troops on the front in the First World War.

Picture left: Henri Guisan was elected general on 30 August 1939 by the United Federal Assembly. The National Council and Council of States rose to their feet during the swearing-in ceremony.

Picture above: General Henri Guisan, shortly after being sworn in on 30 August 1939 at the Federal Palace in Berne. From left to right: Federal Councillors Ernst Wetter and Philipp Etter, General Guisan, Federal Councillors Marcel Pilet-Golaz and Hermann Obrecht.

Before the outbreak of the Second World War, he maintained personal relationships with key army leaders. This gave him an insight into the French defence strategy in the border region. In autumn 1939, secret talks were held with French army officials at the general's command. The aim of the cooperation was to ensure that as soon as German soldiers attacked Switzerland, French units would cross the Swiss border and occupy the Basel region. An entire division of the Swiss army would be placed under French command. Neither the Federal Council nor the general's staff knew of these agreements.

The army's open west flank

The situation suddenly changed. In May and June 1940, the German army defeated France within six weeks and occupied large parts of the country. The armistice between Germany and France on 25 June 1940 left Switzerland's western border exposed to danger. "As a result of numerous misjudgements, the leadership of the Swiss army suffered a disaster of catastrophic proportions with its defence strategy", said the historian Klaus Urner. He added: "If the Germans had decided at that time to advance towards Switzerland's western frontier, which had been left exposed without French protection, they would have quickly accomplished their mission."

In July 1940, German troops discovered confidential files belonging to the French general's staff in a destroyed railway carriage in the small town of La Charité-sur-Loire,

near Dijon. These included documents on the secret negotiations between Swiss officers and the French army on how to respond to a German attack. In the view of Edgar Bonjour, author of the reference work "Geschichte der schweizerischen Neutralität" (History of Swiss Neutrality), Guisan's approach jeopardised neutrality: "Germany could have used the situation as a pretext for a military invasion." General Guisan's position was "unquestionably in jeopardy" in 1940/41, according to the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" back then.

The collapse of France sent shockwaves through Switzerland. However, hopes soon emerged that the threat of war had been temporarily avoided thanks to the German-French armistice. The general believed that the Germans were unlikely to consider military action. The Federal Council ordered the partial demobilisation of the army and sent home almost two thirds of the soldiers. General Guisan did not oppose this move. Powerful German divisions with 245,000 men stood on Switzerland's western border on 24 July, waiting for Hitler's order to march into Switzerland. Military historian Walter Schaufelberger believes it would have been a debacle for Switzerland if the German army had attacked at this time.

Speech by the Swiss President

On 25 June 1940, the Swiss President, Marcel Pilet-Golaz, made an ill-fated speech. He said: "We are greatly relieved that our



neighbour has resolved to pursue a peaceful course.” Europe would now have to establish a new balance, he said, explaining: “Citizens of Switzerland, it is your duty to follow the government as a reliable and devoted leader who will not always be able to explain and justify its decisions.” Pilet-Golaz made no mention of democracy, independence, freedom or neutrality. The radio address came over as a capitulation and as an acceptance of the “new Europe”. The general remained silent for a month after the Swiss President’s gloomy speech.

For August R. Lindt, who went on to become Swiss ambassador to the US and UN High Commissioner, the speech was a “crushing” blow. In that time devoid of leadership, a number of courageous men formed a secret officer association and demanded unconditional resistance. This was a conspiracy against the Federal Council – and also against the general. Alfred Ernst, August R. Lindt, Max Waibel and Hans Hausmann were the key figures behind the secret association of 25 officers and sub-officers. However, the plot was leaked and the general was informed. Guisan received the leaders of the conspiracy and punished them leniently with 5 to 15 days of military confinement. In his heart, he was actually proud of the brave officers and shook each of them by the hand.

Rütli – call for resistance

As no-one yet knew of the officers’ conspiracy, General Guisan made an historic decision. On 25 July 1940, the paddle steamer, the “Luzern”, took all Swiss army commanders up to the rank of major over the lake to the historic site on the Rütli Meadow. Around 420 officers – the entire army leadership – gathered around in a semi-circle with a view over the lake and the Gotthard railway. Guisan gave a short, largely improvised speech. “We have reached a watershed moment in our history. Switzerland’s very existence is at stake”, began the general. The address focused on two key issues – the will to resist and the new defence strategy.



Guisan warned against the emerging defeatism among the soldiers, the politicians and even the Swiss people. The general called for “the will to resist any external attack and internal threats, such as the country relaxing its efforts and becoming defeatist”. Guisan then mapped out the new national defence strategy – the creation of a military réduit, or fortress, around the Gotthard. A large part of the army would withdraw to this area to defend the strategically important alpine passes.

“On the Rütli, the general emerged as a national leader figure”, wrote the military historian Hans-Rudolf Kurz. Professor Edgar Bonjour sees the Rütli address as a “decisive turning-point in the history of the Second World War”. The general addressed the nation on the radio on 1 August, Swiss National Day. He said: “Are we able to resist? This question is unworthy of a Swiss citizen and most definitely of a soldier.”

Withdrawal to the mountains

In June 1940, Switzerland was surrounded by Axis powers. The fronts that the Swiss army had to defend were so long that German and Italian troops could have invaded at any point. “The shortcomings in tank and aeroplane defences would not have enabled the army to engage in battles in the Central Plateau”, wrote Hans-Rudolf Kurz. A new military strategy had to be found. Colonel Oscar Germann drafted the decisive memorandum: the army is to be stationed in the Alps to wait for Hitler’s main offensive and to counterattack. General Guisan, not a man for rash decisions, hesitated. He was concerned about the difficulty of providing supplies of munitions and food and about relinquishing such a large part of the country to the enemy.

Picture above: On the Rütli meadow – the symbol of Swiss independence – General Henri Guisan assembled his senior officers on 25 July 1940 to outline the réduit strategy.

Picture left: Swiss soldiers receiving the order to march in Geneva during the 1939 mobilisation. After news of Germany’s attack on Poland in the early hours of 1 September 1939, the Federal Council, in agreement with General Guisan, ordered the general mobilisation of the army on 2 September.

Picture right: The funeral procession for Henri Guisan, who passed away on 7 April 1960, at “Place de la Riponne” in front of the “Palais de Rumine” in Lausanne.

On 9 July 1940, the general decided in favour of the *réduit* strategy and informed the government three days later. Guisan justified his strategy after the war. The “cost of entry” had to be so high that any invader would be put off “because he would never have taken our alpine passes intact”. In summer 1941, all nine divisions of the army as well as the mountain brigades had joined the *réduit*, which stretched from the Sargans stronghold in the east to the stronghold of St. Maurice in Valais. In the centre stood the Gotthard stronghold. There were bunkers, tank traps and runways everywhere. The railway lines through Gotthard and Simplon were prepared for destruction. According to Hans-Rudolf Kurz, the withdrawal of the army into the mountains meant the almost uncontested relinquishment of around four fifths of the Swiss population, industry and state assets.

Switzerland’s security situation remained precarious until spring 1941. However, a surprise attack by Hitler on Switzerland could still not be ruled out, as the historian Klaus Urner proved. The remaining years of the war until 1945 were hard, anxious ones for the Swiss people. The landing of the Allied forces in North Africa and Germany’s occupation of Northern Italy increased the importance of the alpine passes once more. The Allies’ invasion of Normandy and the Allied landing in the south of France in 1944 ended the encirclement of Switzerland by Axis powers. The army left the *réduit* to march back to the borders.

Soldiers of Switzerland!

The German army surrendered on 8 May 1945. In his daily command, the general declared: “Soldiers of Switzerland! We should

thank God that our nation has been spared the horrors of war. Soldiers, you have served your country honourably.”

On 4 June, the general called on the Federal Assembly to introduce the end of active service on 20 August and to discharge him from office. Before a convened Parliament, the President said: “As a man of duty, General, you have proven yourself a man of goodness and great humanity. Switzerland is proud of you.” On the previous day, General Guisan had ordered that all army ensigns and standards should be brought to Berne as a final military gesture. At the end of the moving celebration on the Bundesplatz to mark the end of active service, everyone stood bareheaded and sang the national anthem.

A life slightly tainted

What is history’s verdict on the Swiss army’s senior lieutenant general in the Second World War? There are some reservations from a political perspective. The general “tolerated” democracy as a form of government, according to Markus Somm, he kept his distance from Parliament, he thought the government lacked strong leadership and he did not hold the parties in very high regard. Despite certain sympathies with an authoritarian, corporative state regime, Guisan never left the path of democracy. Guisan always held the French marshal Pétain, victor at the battle of Verdun in the First World War and a head of state in Hitler-friendly France, in high regard. In autumn 1937, when he was a lieutenant general, he invited the marshal to army manoeuvres. Even in 1941, he sent him an admiring letter on his birthday. Guisan met the fascist leader Mussolini in 1934 while visiting Italian manoeuvres. “He was very friendly towards me and Switzerland”, he said after the war. Markus Somm believes that Guisan allowed himself to be duped by the Duce.

Guisan’s attitude towards the Federal Council’s asylum policy hardly covers him in glory. “The military believed these foreigners represented a threat to public security”, wrote the magazine *L’Hebdo*. According to the Bergier Commission, more than 20,000 refugees, including many Jews, were turned away at the border. Was the general aware of this? Most certainly – the army questioned German deserters who had fled the Holocaust. The general, like other officers, mainly blamed the press for the strained relationship with Germany. As early as 1941,

Guisan was calling for tighter controls on the press. He was denied the introduction of extensive censorship by the Federal Council.

The military verdict on the general is not entirely positive either. His secret negotiations with the French army and, above all, the Germans’ discovery of the files showed that the general had taken too great a risk here, according to Hans-Rudolf Kurz. When Switzerland was surrounded by Axis powers in late summer 1940 and elite German troops stood on the western border, the Federal Council and the general ordered the demobilisation of around two thirds of the forces, probably as a gesture to Berlin. However, Hitler was thinking of conquering Switzerland at that time. In March 1943, the famous SS General Schellenberg met with the Swiss commander-in-chief at the Bären restaurant in Biglen, canton of Berne. During this private meeting, Guisan reaffirmed to Hitler’s confidant that Switzerland firmly intended to defend its borders (against the Allies as well). In return, he expected an assurance that Germany would not attack Switzerland, enabling him to demobilise large parts of the army.

Despite these reservations, biographer Willi Gautschi believes history’s verdict on Henri Guisan as a general and as a man is that he was a “father of the Swiss nation”, even during his lifetime. The people and the army were completely united by the general during a difficult time. Rising above all political and ideological boundaries, Guisan appeared as an “outstanding figure of integration for the Swiss people, an undisputed symbol of the spirit of resistance, unity and avoidance of war”.

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