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The most explosive place in Switzerland

For over 70 years, Mitholz in the Bernese Oberland has been home to a mountain bunker containing thousands of tonnes of live ammunition dating back to the Second World War. Now the bombshell: the armoury needs to be cleared and the village residents evacuated. Will Mitholz become a ghost town?

JÜRIG STEINER

The chalet-style houses bask serenely in the winter sun that illuminates a narrow valley floor flanked by steep mountains on both sides. Mitholz, a village with 200 inhabitants, is situated on a level stretch of the Kander Valley. It has one remaining restaurant, but its last local shop closed for good a long time ago.

Winding their way through Mitholz are the railway line and the road leading to the Lötschberg tunnel car train that takes passengers to Valais. This Alpine village is no stranger to natural perils such as rockslides, landslides, floods and avalanches. “We are used to natural hazards,” says Roman Lanz, mayor of the Kandergrund municipality that encompasses Mitholz. “We have never seen them as a reason to move away.”

But is Mitholz too dangerous for its residents? This question suddenly arose two years ago. And the matter was deadly serious. The reason is that located deep in the cliffs overlooking the village thousands of tonnes of live munitions – including 50-kilo aircraft bombs – remain in a partially collapsed Second World War weapons depot.

Tragedy hit Mitholz in 1947, when three violent explosions occurred in the depot one night just before Christmas, not long after the underground facility had been built. Debris rained from the sky, as munitions, mountain rocks and pressurised air blasted out of the entrances to the depot, destroying much of the village. Nine people died in one of the biggest accidents in Swiss army history.



Swiss extremes

Higher, further, faster, more beautiful? In search of the somewhat different Swiss records. This edition: A visit to the most explosive place in Switzerland.

The villagers returned to their houses just one year later, although the cause of the explosions remains unclear to this day, as journalist Hans Rudolf Schneider explains in his book “Die Schreckensnacht von Mitholz” (Horror in Mitholz). Despite this, the authorities announced in the 1940s that the damaged depot, in which around half of the original 7,000 tonnes of munitions still lie buried, no longer presented a danger to the local population.

This view changed when army commanders began toying with the idea of building a secret data centre in

the underground facility. A new report in summer 2018 said that the risk to roads, housing, rail infrastructure, and, by extension, to people was now “unacceptable”. Mitholz suddenly became Switzerland’s most explosive village.

According to the Kandergrund mayor, Roman Lanz, the village was plunged into a state of paralysis after hearing the news in June 2018. It took another one and a half years for Federal Councillor Viola Amherd to announce that the only way to nullify the danger was to clear the ammunition. She said it would be a highly



Debris in the village after the 1947 explosions – nine people died and many houses were destroyed.

Archive photo: Keystone, 1947



complex operation involving robots – the first operation of its kind anywhere in the world. However, this will increase the detonation risk to such an extent that the 170 inhabitants will have to be evacuated from their village for around ten years, starting in 2031. The whole exercise will cost one billion Swiss francs.

“Mitholz, the ghost town.” The news came like a bombshell. Lanz, who works as a manager at a car body repair business, was suddenly giving interviews to foreign television stations and attending meetings with federal councillors in his capacity as mayor. Mitholz was on everyone’s lips. “But the people I talk to here in the village still find it hard to grasp,” says Lanz. “It’s almost surreal to them.” Mitholz residents live just as near to the depot as they did before.

But now these people have an uncertain future ahead of them. Their

livelihoods are on the line. Lanz stands in front of the reinforced northern entrance to the depot, where ammunition and explosives used to be transported into the depths of the cliff by rail. Just a stone’s throw away is a farmhouse. It belongs to the Künzi family, who rear cattle on the slopes surrounding the depot. For decades, they have been farming land that is now supposed to be in the danger zone. You cannot just decamp from one place to another with cows. The Künzis will have to build a completely new life somewhere else.

Lanz is in touch with locals like the Künzis practically every day. “Few people from outside the village will appreciate what the past two years have been like for us since they announced the news.” He explains that reality has been slow to dawn on some residents, who still hope

Samuel Künzi’s farm is situated on a rocky ledge. Thousands of tonnes of old ordnance are buried in the rocks below.

Photo: Danielle Liniger

that the government will decide not to spend so much money after all and everything will remain the same.

Emotions are one thing, money is another. What about compensation? What will the value be of houses that are likely to be left to the army during the evacuation period, then possibly

The news was “hard to grasp” and “almost surreal” for many people in the village, says mayor Roman Lanz.

Photo: Danielle Liniger



returned to their former owners after standing empty for years?

And, of course, the elephant in the room: why is so much dangerous ammunition stored near a village where people live? “Connected by railway, the Mitholz munitions store was in an ideal location for implementing Switzerland’s redoubt strategy in the Second World War,” says historian and former professor at the Military Academy at ETH Zurich, Rudolf Jaun. In summer 1940, General Henri Guisan decided to move most of his troops back into the Alpine interior. This was where the main front would be after delaying actions to keep any invading force out of the Central Plateau were exhausted. Munitions were stockpiled in a number of secret armouries including Mitholz. It was from Mitholz that weapons would have been supplied to the southern front in Valais.

This never transpired. Not a single shot was fired in anger with weapons from the Mitholz cache. On the contrary, depots like Mitholz were used after the war as a convenient place to dump unused ammunition. The Mitholz store, built before the Second



The Mitholz depot has an inconspicuous entrance but has been a ticking time bomb for decades.

Photo: Danielle Liniger

World War to protect the population, ironically became a ticking time bomb.

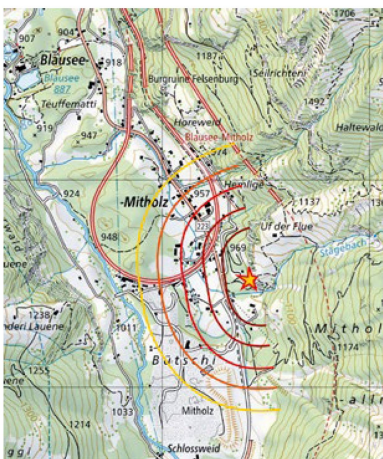
Before we criticise, we need to realise that people viewed the armed forces differently back then, says military historian Jaun. “No one had any quibbles about the army doing what it did.” People took risks as a necessity. For example, thousands of tonnes of defective or unwanted ammunition were openly discarded in Lake Thun and Lake Brienz. The munitions still lie underwater. “It was also the cheapest way to get rid of it”.

Today, the lake water is analysed regularly for signs of pollution. The army is overseeing an extensive clean-up programme. Nowadays, it stores its munitions at smaller, high-security sites. But until 2018 the army had always steered well clear of the collapsed depot in Mitholz.

Journalists from French-speaking Switzerland often ask Lanz why he and his fellow villagers have accepted their fate so stoically. They say that if the same scandal broke in

their part of the country, people would be on the street every day. “The view among most residents is that we cannot put it off any longer,” says Lanz. People are prepared to go through the anguish of evacuating Mitholz if this means that the next generation can return without the risk of an explosion ripping through the village. “We won’t be waving our pitchforks in Berne, provided they treat us correctly.”

In his mind’s eye, the mayor can see a revitalised Mitholz flourishing one day in the distant future. He can imagine the former munitions depot becoming a museum. And thanks to the constant temperatures deep underground, the site could make an ideal storage facility for maturing cheese.



The Mitholz munitions store is situated in direct proximity to houses, roads and a busy railway line.

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