

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 8 (1942-1943)
Heft: 2

Artikel: Switzerland and the World War
Autor: Isler, F.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-943049>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 17.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

HELVETIA



Monthly Publication of the

SWISS BENEVOLENT SOCIETY
in New Zealand

Group New Zealand of the N.H.G.

WELLINGTON.
NOVEMBER 1942.

No. 2, 8th Year.

SWITZERLAND AND THE WORLD WAR.

(A reproduction of an article by F. Isler from "The Swiss Observer")

• • • • •

On the 1st of August every good Swiss and true at Home and abroad will celebrate the birthday of Swiss Independence. Methuselah is reputed to have lived for 969 years. Mother Helvetia had already outlived Methuselah when she became established 651 years ago. She is still "going strong" and her twenty-two children are full of energy and vitality. Some mother - some children - some family!

True, there is not much to celebrate in these difficult times but there is a mighty lot for which to be thankful. By a miracle Switzerland's neutrality has been preserved. Neutrality in a world of war is, however, a distracting and disappointing pursuit. The dilemmas of neutrality are manifold, either political or economical, but in grappling with same let us not forget to count our blessings.

Switzerland's position in the centre of Europe is unique. To be neutral has been a Swiss tradition and her special position and claims in this connection have repeatedly been recognised by the Great Powers, first in the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648; later by the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and more recently at the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 when all the principal Powers gave definite assurances that the Neutrality of Switzerland should be upheld and respected. Again, before Switzerland by plebiscite decided to join the League of Nations, the chief problem was to ascertain whether her neutral tradition could be made compatible with membership of the Geneva institution, and the Federal Council obtained satisfactory assurances from the Allies on this point.

National safety and independence is the first care of every good Swiss. Switzerland never proclaimed abstract principles of freedom, but stood on the foundation of their ancient rights.

Without wishing to blow our own trumpet unduly let us quote some passages from the work of that great English historian Lord Bryce, entitled "Modern Democracies". This is what he says: "The Swiss are alike imbued with the spirit of liberty, not only in the sense of civil, religious, and political liberty, but in the sense also of individual independence. The peasant and workman stands on his own feet and goes his own way. He may be led, but he will not be driven. He also learnt the first two lessons freedom ought to teach, respect for the rights of others and the correlative of Duties with Rights. The course of Swiss History has formed in the people an unusually strong patriotism and sense of national unity, creating traditions of civic duty which have retained exceptional strength. Those traditions, fostered by long practice of local self-government, have become part of the national mind.

The sense of citizenship finds expression in the willing acceptance of universal military training as a national obligation."

Although Switzerland's traditional policy of strict but armed neutrality is generally understood you can always find people who are of opinion that there should be no neutrals in this war and that Switzerland as one of the oldest Standard bearers of freedom, liberty and democratic institutions should participate in the struggle for the preservation of these ideals and fundamental principles.

Our reply is that the Swiss had to fight many battles before their independence was firmly established. Having secured their national and political aims the corner stone of Swiss foreign policy was to mind their own business and to fight only if attacked. Rightly or wrongly Switzerland is going to stick to this traditional policy. We wish to keep out of the war and save our country from devastation, but we will not suffer dishonour, enslavement or pillage. If we are attacked, it is not to be doubted that we will defend ourselves with all our strength.

Unlike many other states, large and small, Switzerland has never neglected her national defence. She has built powerful fortifications to guard her frontiers and created a well-equipped and efficient army of over half a million. Surely quite a notable achievement for a little country of only just over four million inhabitants. Military duty is willingly and freely rendered. Every Swiss is proud to serve. In fact, the Swiss Army IS the Swiss Nation.

On the other hand, the Swiss have no illusions about the difficulties of fighting a successful defensive war under modern conditions. At one time, the Swiss alps, like the British Navy, was a sure shield of defence. Today the air arm has revolutionised warfare and created new tactical problems.

Surely, this is one more reason why a small country like Switzerland should adhere to her traditional policy of strict neutrality. The people who glibly talk about Switzerland participating in this war should remember the country's geographical position, hemmed in and surrounded by great continental powers, without access to the seas and therefore left to struggle for herself. Switzerland would be more open to aerial bombardment than Malta, with very little prospect of help reaching her from anywhere. In the circumstances for any Swiss Government to adopt a policy other than one of strict neutrality would be tantamount to committing national Hara-Kiri.

It has been said that if all the little neutrals had stood together they could have saved themselves instead of being overpowered one by one. But surely the trouble started further back. If all the big democracies had armed themselves and been ready for War this conflict would have been nipped in the bud. Mr. Anthony Eden realised this when he recently said at Edinburgh "that never again shall we so neglect our armaments that we frighten our friends and delight our enemies".

Unfortunately, since the collapse of France Switzerland is rapidly losing the measure of economic independence which she enjoyed when she was able to trade with each side of the belligerents. Through no fault of her own, Switzerland exports to Great Britain and her allies are now practically nil, the bulk of the trade being done with the totalitarian countries by which she is surrounded.

Switzerland, to live, must work. To work, she wants coal and materials. This she can get from the Axis, who, however, in return, demand machinery and whatever else they can obtain. Needless to say, Switzerland is getting the short end of the deal and her position is not to be envied. In saying this I am not complaining but merely giving some facts to those of our critics who tell us to do this, that or the other, without seeming either to know or appreciate all the difficulties.

Meanwhile, Switzerland is doing some useful work by looking after the interests of many nations, having been requested by them, to act as a protective power for the nationals of the belligerents in a number of countries.

Equally, or even more important is the work done by the organisation of the International Red Cross at Geneva. The world owes a great debt of gratitude to the Swiss founder of the Red Cross. He was a well-to-do banker when he started his mission but spent so much time and money on the pursuit of his aims that he went bankrupt before his idea was internationally adopted at the Geneva Convention in 1863. Never before or since has a bankrupt made good, paid higher and more lasting dividends than Henry Dunant.

In addition to looking after the interests of the Prisoners of War all over the world, the Swiss are now also actively engaged in rescuing half-starved and wretched children from France, Holland, Belgium, Yugoslavia and other countries. Up-to-date approximately 40,000 children have been collected. The more of these unfortunate and innocent little souls can be gathered together and handed over to the loving and tender care of Mother Helvetia the happier we shall be. One more reason for hoping that nothing will happen to disturb these poor children in their new-found haven of refuge.

Then again, Geneva harbours the seat of the League of Nations. There are some people who say that the so-called Palace of Peace ought to be bombed before the delegates can use it again to hatch further mischief. Happily, there are not a great many people of this type, the majority realising that when the war is finished there will be a lot of work to be done by a resurrected League of Nations, working on a more solid and wider foundation; to reconstruct world order and to establish universal Peace.

In these labours and deliberations Switzerland may be invited to take an active part, not only, to use the words of Mr. Brissot, to assist the Councils "with the cold neutrality of an impartial judge" but with sympathetic and warmhearted understanding for the difficulties and problems of suffering humanity. Even little countries have sometimes great ideas and ideals. As Lloyd George said on one occasion: - "God has sometimes chosen little nations as the vessel by which he carried his choicest wines to the lips of humanity to rejoice their hearts, to exalt their vision and to strengthen their faith".

To conclude, let us recall the words of Carl Spitteler, one of the Swiss authors, when addressing the New Helvetic Society in Zurich during the Great War:

"We are privileged, by a freak of fortune, to watch from the stalls the grim tragedy that is being enacted in Europe. Sorrow is Lord of the stage, and behind the scenes lurks Death. Turn where you will, the mourning of those that weep must reach your ears, and the language of this hopeless grief is the same in all nations, for sorrow knows no distinction of speech. Let us therefore behold this infinite measure of international sorrow with silent and reverent hearts, uncovering ourselves alike before all who mourn. So shall we attain the proper neutral, the proper Swiss standpoint."

SUNDAY NEWS FROM SWITZERLAND.

The principle of preventive imprisonment has been introduced in the canton Fribourg as a war measure. People of suspicious character who may become a danger or a nuisance to the community can be arrested on an order from a local magistrate who must show justification for his action though there is no actual trial; the victim has the right of appeal to the Conseil d'Etat. The internment may be for one to five years.

According to a report telegraphed by the D. T. correspondence, General Guisan has issued a warning not to forget the dangers that "may arise overnight". He thinks that a sense of false security might be engendered by the geographical remoteness of the present fighting fronts.

"To-day", he states, "training is of cardinal importance." Swiss citizens must expect this year to continue to be called up for strenuous military training.

General Guisan reveals that he is paying special attention to the task of preparing the army against surprise attack.

Special importance is attached to night manoeuvres. Citizens joining the colours for their term of service might be confronted within a few hours with problems which would arise if war broke out here.