

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 13 (1948)
Heft: 9

Artikel: Swiss National Defence - today and tomorrow : a series of twelve talks given by the Swiss Short Wave Service - Berne
Autor: Dürrenmatt, Peter
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-942555>

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: 04.01.2026

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

SWISS NATIONAL DEFENCE - TODAY AND TOMORROW.

By: Peter Dürrenmatt.

A series of twelve talks given by the Swiss Short Wave Service -
Berne.

1. The principles of Swiss National Defence
and the keenness shown in matters pertaining to it.

When, after the first World War the hopes of the Peoples were carried on the crest of the wave and it was believed that this was the last war, there were a number of quite honest lovers of peace who accused the Swiss of being the last militarists. They based this serious accusation on the fact that every Swiss kept his rifle at home and that every Saturday afternoon, throughout the entire country one could hear the sharp report of rifles being fired - and this merely because of the prevailing love of shooting. Can one call a nation which is so keen about shooting, anything else but militaristic? So they asked - but they were wrong. Swiss keenness with regard to arms, which is undeniable, has absolutely nothing to do with militarism because it is connected closely with the very existence of the Swiss Confederation and with the Swiss conception of freedom. Switzerland lies in the very centre of Europe and is surrounded on all sides by Great Powers. She constitutes an important geographical connecting bridge, in view of the fact that it is on her territory that are to be found both the great Continental passages from North to South in the shape of the Gotthard and the Simplon Pass-Roads. Only once in the 650 years-old history of the country were the Swiss unable to maintain their sovereignty over this passage from North to South, namely at the time of the Napoleonic wars. This failure brought to them both misery and war. It also taught them a lesson, namely, that they should, in future, be so strong as regards their military position, that it would be impossible for any Great Power to get the idea that it could, by an unexpected attack on Switzerland obtain possession of these passes and thereby hold a European key-position. It was the fact that they occupied a position in the centre of the troubled European Continent which forces the Swiss to become so capable in the defence of their country. This fact also led them to an important political conviction; for about 450 years, the Swiss Confederation has renounced war as a means in her foreign policy. During all that time, she has never once made any attempt to expand her territory by the use of violence and she has declared herself neutral in every war engaged in by others. As guardian of the important Alpine passes, she considers that her neutrality is something which can be of service to the cause of Peace. At the same time, she has declared throughout the ages, that she intends to protect this neutrality herself. The Great Powers may recognise it, but it is Switzerland herself who sees to it that it is maintained. This however, necessitates a well-trained Army. The Swiss Army is not suitable for an offensive war. It is an Army for tenacious defence purposes.

The aim of this defence, however, is not limited merely to the safeguarding of our neutrality and of the Alpine passes. It is, at the same time, an expression of the Swiss will to be free. Switzerland has renounced from any policy of power or expansion. But the Swiss people firmly intend to be masters in their own home and to organise their country themselves in accordance with their own free decisions. Switzerland is determined to remain independent. Throughout the history of the European nations, she has always cleaved to the side of freedom in the struggles which have arisen time and again, against the spirit of power and of despotism. The Swiss Army is an objective, visible expression of this will for freedom. It demands great sacrifices from this small nation of mountain folk. But it is just because of the sacrifice demanded that it becomes such a serious business. Freedom is not worth anything as long as it is only on paper. A people must be ready and willing to stake everything in order to maintain it. When, during

the Second World War, Switzerland was, for a time, completely surrounded by Hitler's and Mussolini's armies the entire Alpine massif was transformed into a fortress and it was the thought of the valiant army ready for its defence that kept confidence high throughout those anxious years. The recollection of this has done much to strengthen the defensive spirit of the Swiss soldier. The army will remain in being, as a necessary counterpart to our determination to be free, so long as there is no real guarantee in this world for the peace and right of existence of the small nations.

11. REGARDING THE CHARACTERISTICS AND STRUCTURE OF THE
SWISS MILITIA.

.

History, the limited resources of a country without any raw materials and its geographical position, have all contributed towards the formation of a very special Army system in Switzerland. An Army had to be created, which was capable of carrying out its task and was, at the same time, not too expensive. It was thus that the Swiss Militia came into being, in particular form of general compulsory military service. Every Swiss citizen capable of bearing arms, as soon as he has attained his twentieth years, receives a thorough military training, lasting, on an average, four months. After that, he is bound each year to attend so-called refresher courses, which, at present, last for three weeks. When he reaches a certain age, he need only attend such refresher courses at stated intervals, and at a still later period he is only bound to present himself for inspection, that is to say, he is called up once a year in order that he may submit his armament and equipment for inspection and show that it is maintained in good condition.

In addition to this programme, there are also the so-called "military duties performed when not on military service." Every year, the Subaltern, the Non-Commissioned Officer, and the soldier must carry out a rifle-practice programme in one of the Rifle Associations, and prove that they have lost nothing of their skill in shooting. A large number of officers, N.C.O's and soldiers carry out voluntary military activities, in addition to their obligatory duties, within the military associations, of which there are a great many in this country. The Swiss form of militia is based on the idea that a minimum amount of military training provided by the State, should be supplemented by the voluntary readiness of its citizens to prepare themselves for an effective carrying out of their military duties.

The fact that the Swiss soldier is himself in charge of his own arsenal, may also be considered as a duty performed outside his military service. This particularity of the Swiss Army system is quite unique. The Swiss soldier keeps in his own home his personal equipment, his uniforms and his arms. In time of special danger he is issued with ammunition also. In this way, he is ready to march off at any time and the mobilisation of the Army can be carried out in a few hours. Motor-cyclists and cyclists muster with their vehicles, cavalry men with their horses. This system has developed as a result of a long tradition, which has proved its worth; it has been found that the percentage of militiamen who had to be punished for neglect of their equipment or arms, was extremely small. On the other hand, this system of the complete arming of a people requires, quite naturally, that the political conditions in the country be quiet and stable and that there should be complete confidence in the Government. For a country like Switzerland, which is encompassed on all sides by Great Powers, a rapid mobilisation in time of war can be a decisive factor. The Militia is a guarantee for it. The number of regular officers and men is extremely small. Some of the regular officers are known as the Instructors; their task consists in ensuring appropriate military formation of all ranks in Recruit Schools and during refresher courses. The officers in the higher commands, such as Commanders of Divisions or Army Corps, are also regular officers, whereas it is not necessary for the Commander of a Brigade or a Regiment to be a professional soldier. As regards other tanks, a number of regular soldiers and Non-Commissioned Officers also do permanent military service, chiefly as a corps for the defence of fortresses.

The Militia system has made it possible for a Swiss Army to be created, which

corresponds to the requirements set forth in the introductory part of this talk. The short training period is not expensive, and yet it suffices, in view of the fact that the Swiss militia man, as a general rule, continues his military training outside his military service. As regards the arming of the people, this guarantees a rapid mobilisation which minimises the risk of a sudden attack. This is of vital importance, as it safeguards the most important task of an Army which exists only for purposes of defence, and is not intended for a war of aggression.

THE WORK OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF
"THE RED CROSS,"
DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR.

"TO HELP....."

Article 78 seems to permit Red Cross Societies to enter enemy territory, in order to distribute relief supplies. This had been done, to a certain extent, during the first World War; but in the last War, no welfare associations, not even Red Cross Societies, were in practice allowed to cross the fighting zone. Furthermore, the senders of collective relief were unwilling to entrust the issue of food-parcels to the welfare societies of the Detaining Power, even if they worked under the emblem of the Red Cross.

Why this twofold veto on the services of the Red Cross Society of the opposing side? Surely, the emblem under which these societies acted offered sufficient guarantee of their doing neutral work, either as agents in enemy territory or on behalf of the enemy, in the execution of a humanitarian task. The above attitude certainly involved a step in the wrong direction. It might be explained, but not excused, by the nature of the war. In each country the entire nation was, in varying degrees, enlisted in the war effort. The enemy was not merely an army, but an entire nation, seen in every citizen wherever he might be, in every institution of whatever kind. As auxiliaries of the Army Medical Service, National Red Cross Societies are necessarily connected in war-time with the military authorities of their country. Some of them are at all times linked by their charter or statutes to the Government.

What was required, therefore, was a neutral intermediary, who might be acceptable to both sides. Such is the distinctive nature of the International Committee. No Convention, be it remembered, called upon it to play this part in relief work; but its position, its former achievements and the establishment of the Agency allowed it to act usefully in this field.

Negotiations began - to gain approval, first of its intervention, and then of a plan of action. It is not enough that relief supplies and a neutral intermediary should be available. Food and medical supplies had to be shipped from the country which furnished them, cross the fighting zones and be received in the country to which they were sent. The war was not a war of armed forces only; it was economic too. Blockade and counter-blockade were weapons to cripple the enemy, if not to bring him to his knees. Blockade regulations were strictly enforced - so strictly indeed that an exception was not readily granted even to help fellow-nationals who had fallen into enemy hands. Governments, Red Cross Societies, the prisoners' next of kin were all anxious to send relief to the captives. This humanitarian and patriotic enterprise might, however, weaken the effect of the blockade, since so many goods would enter enemy territory. Even if the enemy did not profit by them direct, he might find pretext therein to reduce still further the already inadequate rations in the camps.

In consequence, the Allies allowed relief to be sent only to camps in which the Committee was able to exercise effective control of issue. One can understand this restriction up to a certain degree; but it remained a sore point, for it offered one of the most serious obstacles the Committee