

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 17 (1952)
Heft: [9]

Artikel: Why Swiss are so prosperous
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-942584>

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: 21.02.2026

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

SWISS COULD MOBILISE 700,000 MEN IN THREE DAYS

STRONGEST ARMY OF CONTINENTAL EUROPE

Switzerland today has the strongest army of Continental Europe. This astonishing situation is due to the fact that the Swiss did not suffer from the material damage and the psychological shock of the Second World War, and that they never believed in utopian schemes of disarmament. On the contrary, after the last war Switzerland not only maintained its military system but began the work of modernising its army in proportion to the growth of international tension.

Switzerland can mobilise in three days a well-equipped army of about 400,000 fighting men and 300,000 in the auxiliary services. No other country of the world can compete with the rapidity of mobilisation and the relative strength of the Swiss Army.

A sinking birth rate made it necessary to reform the divisional organisation, but the increasing fire-power of the units resulting from the rearmament programme nevertheless guarantees high quality. The army consists of the Field Army (nine divisions, three mountain brigades and three light brigades), the frontier-covering brigades, the fortress brigades, and the so-called "reduit" (redoubt) brigades. In addition, there exists an organisation for dealing with the problems of the civilian population in wartime, the "Territorial Service," which includes civil defence against air attack.

Rearmament

A considerable rearmament programme is in progress. New anti-tank weapons, new machines for engineers, and new wireless sets for signallers are either in the hands of the troops or being manufactured. Tanks for supporting the infantry are deemed indispensable. Parliament has voted £130,000,000 especially for the rearmament programme, which it is hoped to carry out by 1955.

Yet even now the Swiss Army is well equipped, and it can stand comparison with the armies of the Great Powers. Compared with the population the Swiss Army is numerically strong; the frontiers along which battles could be fought are rather short; the intersected terrain, with its valleys and mountains, not to speak of the Alps, is the army's best ally.

During the last war Nazi Germany enclosed Switzerland on all sides, and it was therefore necessary to draw back into the Alps. The "reduit" was built, a sort of fortress wherein we could expect to resist as long as possible. Now

the strategical scheme has changed, and the army will fight at the frontiers and in the country where the big centres of industry and population are situated. The method of "elastic defence" demands a strong and mobile field army as its weapon, and the infantry is and remains the main pillar of the Swiss forces. There is no need for an offensive strategy, but both equipment and organisation will allow a tenacious war of defence which, of course, includes tactical attack.

Refresher Courses

Preparedness for war is secured by the annual refresher courses, by placing of the personal equipment in every soldier's home, and by the organisation of quick mobilisation. The first task is to prevent the enemy succeeding by surprise attack. Once the army is called to the colours it should be possible to give a long-lasting and obstinate battle to any aggressor.

The army is deeply rooted in the tradition and in the heart of the people. By law every citizen must be called to the colours; people not able to fulfil their service pay a special exemption tax, and nobody can become a commissioned officer without beginning as a recruit in the same training school as boys aged 20 from all ranks of society. The Swiss people is proud of its army and strongly hopes that the continual modernising of arms may exercise a restraining influence upon foreign general staffs in preventing them from considering an attack against Switzerland.

WHY SWISS ARE SO PROSPEROUS

The Swiss economy is riding a wave of prosperity. New construction and fresh paint are everywhere. There is no unemployment. In most lines exports are topping even the record figures of last year, says Jan Hasbrouck, in the New York Herald Tribune.

Swiss business men and government officials are cautious, but a general optimism about the outlook for the next year or more is prevalent among the great majority.

No Resources

The solidity of Switzerland's currency, the high standard of living of its people, and the prosperity of its economy are something which the post-war world has come to take for granted. But, in fact, it is no mean achievement for a country of fewer than 5,000,000 people with no resources whatsoever except mountains which provide nothing but scenery and water power.

The scenery and the water power, like everything else in Switzerland, have been made to

yield the last centime. A century and a half of peace have helped, too. But these factors alone could not bring prosperity to a land which must import half its food and virtually all its iron, coal, cotton, petroleum, non-ferrous metals, and all the other staples of modern industrial society.

Answer is Quality

The answer is a large reservoir of highly skilled labour and specialisation. Both spell quality and, generally speaking, it is with quality rather than price advantage that the Swiss seek customers.

The main Swiss exports are therefore items which have a high value in proportion to weight and size. Watchmaking for them is a natural—the amount of raw materials in a watch is very small and the amount of skilled man-hours high.

But the same principle extends to other Swiss industries. Swiss industry is small and cannot compete with the giant enterprises of bigger European countries or the United States in mass-produced goods. Specialisation is the answer. The Swiss leave the mass markets to the mass producers and concentrate on odd sizes, rare shapes, and the small tailor-made orders which giant plants cannot touch. Flexibility and adaptability are as much the watchwords as quality.

Take the Swiss steel industry. Compared with that of the United States, or even of Britain, France or Germany, it is strictly a back-yard operation. Even the country's biggest firm, SA de Roll, does not try to compete for big orders of standard items. But it does a very prosperous business by accepting orders for its rolling mills of as little as one ton and by being prepared to fabricate 2500 different sections.

Small Amounts

The world-wide textile slump has hit Switzerland, but the effects have not been as severe as elsewhere, for the same reasons. The Swiss textile industry makes fabrics and finished goods for the quality trade. It follows the fashions closely and produces in small amounts and to unusual specifications. Therefore the huge world inventories of mass-produced textiles which have hit production elsewhere, have been less felt by the Swiss. Their products are not the kind in which large inventories are kept.

The main outlines of the Swiss economy can be quickly summarised. First, as to what the Swiss people do: 20.8 per cent. are in agriculture, 43.2 per cent. in trades and industry, 10 per cent. in commerce, banking and insurance, 4.3 per cent. in hotels and restaurants, 3.8 per cent. in transport and communication, and 7.4 per cent. in the professions and public service.

It is indicative of the Swiss penury of raw materials that 0.1 per cent. are listed as miners.

World Trade

An analysis of the figure of 43.2 per cent. in trades and industry shows 4.1 per cent. in textiles, 5.2 per cent. in the making of clothing and shoes, 4.0 per cent. in the metallurgical industry, 6.9 per cent. in the machinery and equipment industries, 2.5 per cent. in watchmaking and jewellery, and 6.9 per cent. in the construction industries.

The importance of foreign trade to Switzerland is clear from the fact that in 1950 exports were about 225 dollars per capita compared to 122 dollars for Britain and 68 dollars for the United States. Switzerland normally runs a heavy adverse balance of trade with the world—in 1951 it amounted to about 300,000,000 dollars.

But this adverse balance is more than made up in the so-called invisible items, such as Swiss investments abroad, insurance, tourist trade, and transhipments.

The Swiss have an effective long-range philosophy about their commercial relations with the rest of the world. One leading Zurich industrialist put it this way: "When the world is politically disturbed and everyone is arming, we have a good market abroad for our industrial output. When political conditions are good, we can safely place our capital abroad."

33rd SWISS NATIONAL AUTUMN FAIR

"Comptoir Suisse," 13th to 28th Sept., 1952

In contrast to the great majority of nations participating extensively in world commerce, Switzerland has preserved the national character of her great annual industrial expositions. This principle is justified primarily by the fact that these fairs function as the "show window" for the country's export industries, i.e., approximately 90 per cent. of the national production for export trade. Swiss foreign trade statistics covering more than 100 countries show that in 1951 Switzerland's imports totalled 5915 million francs as compared to exports of 4691 million francs. The keen interest which foreign countries take in Switzerland's industrial fairs in Basel and Lausanne is primarily due to the specifically Swiss character of these two expositions.

The 33rd Swiss National Autumn Fair, or the "Comptoir Suisse" as it is called, will be held from 13th to 28th September, 1952. Some 2250 exhibitors will display products giving a full survey of Swiss agriculture, commerce, industry and manual arts. As Switzerland's most important autumn commercial event, the Lausanne Fair will cover nearly a million square feet in