

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK

Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom

Band: - (1940)

Heft: 947

Artikel: The defences of Switzerland

Autor: [s.n.]

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-686850>

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: 21.01.2026

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

BUNDES RAT MOTTA AN MINISTER PARAVICINI.

Der Chef des Eidg. politischen Departements, Bundesrat Motta, hat an Herrn Minister Paravicini ein überaus herzlich gehaltenes Dankschreiben gerichtet, das die erfolgreiche 20jährige diplomatische Tätigkeit des Gesandten und die wertvolle Unterstützung, die er bei seiner Gattin fand, würdigt. "Sie wissen," schreibt Bundesrat Motta u. a., "welchem Interesse in Bern die lange Reihe ihrer politischen Berichte begegnete, in denen sich neben Ihrem so abgewogenen Urteil Ihre vollkommene Kenntnis der britischen Einrichtungen und der Persönlichkeiten des Hofes und der Regierung widerspiegeln. Ich fand darin oft wertvolle Anhaltspunkte, um mir eine Meinung über die zahlreichen widersprechenden und mitunter so schweren Greignisse bilden zu können, die die Zeit zwischen den beiden Kriegen gekennzeichnet haben. Ich weiss Ihnen daffür grossen Dank. Aber noch erkenntlicher bin ich Ihnen für die Hilfe, die Sie uns immer zuteil werden liessen, um in England Verständnis und eine günstige Aufnahme für die politischen Notwendigkeiten unseres kleinen Landes zu erwirken, die der Regierung eines so mächtigen Imperiums nur durch ständig erneuerte Anstrengungen des guten Willens fassbar werden konnten. Dank der festen Freundschaftsbande, die Sie in London zu knüpfen und zu unterhalten wussten, ist Ihnen dies aufs beste gelungen und Sie konnten mit Genugtuung sehen, dass die Beziehungen zwischen der Schweiz und Grossbritannien während beunruhigender Wechselfälle freundschaftlich und vertrauend geblieben sind."

REPORT ON SWISS TRADE AND INDUSTRY IN 1938.

The "Swiss Federation of Commerce and Industry" has just published its annual *Report on Swiss Trade and Industry during the year 1938*. The abundance of economic facts and figures will enable any reader to obtain an insight into Swiss economic conditions.

As formerly, the general part of the Report contains a succinct statement about certain important questions concerning prices, commercial policy and political economy.

Then follows a statistical part, giving all the most important data about the different branches of Swiss economics, such as: population, waterpower, factories, labour questions, cost of living, banking, foreign trade and finance.

The greater part of the volume is devoted to special reports in the individual branches of trade and industry, on traffic, insurance and banking, on production and distribution of electric energy and on technical and commercial education.

The Report appears like last year in a French and in a German edition and may be obtained at the reduced price of Swiss francs 5.— (plus postage) from the "Secretariat of the Swiss Federation of Commerce and Industry," Zurich, Börsenstrasse 17.

SWISS RAILWAYS IN WARTIME.

(*"Modern Transport,"* 6.1.40.)

The Swiss Federal Railways have completed their preparations for dealing with the conditions imposed by war in Europe, vast quantities of stores having been acquired and credits voted for the purchase of additional rolling stock. A visible sign of preparedness is the sight of huge stacks of coal in the open spaces adjoining the larger stations and sheds, these supplies having been purchased from Germany as part of the tourists-for-coal barter agreement. Meanwhile, all available steam locomotives have been repaired and made ready for use to haul supplementary trains on the lines which are still steam-operated, and also upon the electrified lines, if necessary. As regards international traffic, Switzerland has concluded agreements with neighbouring States under which free transit is granted to Switzerland from certain Atlantic and Mediterranean ports. In this connection, however, plans have been completed to operate such services with Swiss rolling stock and personnel, as experience during the war of 1914-18 proved that it was necessary for the Swiss to run their own trains to the ports concerned if they were to be successful in obtaining delivery of the goods. As an indication of the traffic now passing over the Swiss Federal Railways, it is interesting to note that in November, 1939, tonnage increased by 765,365 tons to 1,900,000 tons, and earnings from goods traffic amounted during that month to 23,442,000 Swiss francs, as compared with 13,687,912 Swiss francs in the corresponding month of 1938, whilst the total operating earnings were 32,744,000 Swiss francs, an increase of 9,932,000 francs as compared with November, 1938. Purchases of new rolling stock, for which 7,822,000 Swiss francs have been voted, include 28 light all-metal coaches and 280 goods wagons.

THE DEFENCES OF SWITZERLAND.

(*"The Times,"* 3.1.40.)

The Alpine skiing season has begun — less for urbans (for several frontier districts are closed to them) than for soldiers. The Swiss Alpine troops have been using skis from the very beginning, but the Army Command is now forming new units of skiers composed of volunteers drawn from all Army units. These men, mostly members of the Swiss Alpine Club and Association of Swiss Ski Clubs, are undergoing special training courses in the mountains. They carry about 40lb. on their backs, and they shelter in the huts of the Swiss Alpine Club (which have all been commandeered by the Army), or dig holes in the snow, or build igloos, in which they sleep very comfortably. Apart from these units there are special frontier squads, which are stationed on the border, sometimes at 9,000ft., where they stay from 10 to 15 days before coming down to the valley to enjoy civilized life again. Most of the men belonging to these squads are Alpine guides and porters, but they also include a small number of town people, who do splendidly in the snow wilderness.

Some military critics still hold that, as it is almost impossible for the Germans to break through the

Maginot Line, they are bound to apply their usual method of wing attack, and will launch an offensive through Holland and Belgium on one side and through Switzerland on the other. The question is whether an attack through Swiss territory is likely to be successful. That seems improbable.

The easiest point at which to invade Switzerland is the former Austrian border, between Ragaz and the eastern end of the Lake of Constance. But first the attacking forces would have to cross the Rhine, which is a powerful natural obstacle defended by a chain of forts and pillboxes. They would then have to face the fortifications in the mountains, on the left side of the Rhine valley. Should they force them they would find themselves in the mountain districts of Appenzell and St. Gallen, where roads are few and narrow, where small forces might hold them up for some time, even if the westward attack was supported by a southward attack launched from the Constance region. Once the invading troops had surmounted that obstacle and passed out in the more even open regions east of Zürich, they would find themselves stopped by the Lake of Zürich and Limmat River, the banks of both of which are now strongly fortified. It is on the Limmat line that the French General Massena stopped the Austrians and Russians in 1799.

Should the invaders get over that second defence line they would push on westward and pass out on the "Plateau Suisse" which stretches a distance of 100 miles down to the Lake of Geneva. But this "plateau" has a maximum width of 40 miles, and is flanked by the Alps on the south and the Jura range on the north, so that it does not afford any chance for the deployment of a big army. Moreover, it is not really a plateau, but is very hilly, and cut off by big forests; roads are not numerous, bridges are not always strong

enough for standing the weight of heavy tanks and artillery, and rivers cross northwards to the Rhine. The principal rivers are the Reuss, the Aare, and the Sarine, on the banks of which fortifications have been built and are now developed and strengthened day after day.

Even should the drive along the "Plateau Suisse" succeed, it would not assure the invading army a very safe position. The Germans would be menaced on each flank by the Swiss troops posted on the Jura and the Alps, two huge natural strongholds which it would take weeks to conquer. When the invaders reached the Lake of Geneva they would be faced by the French forces rested on the fortifications built on the Haute Savoie and Jura mountains.

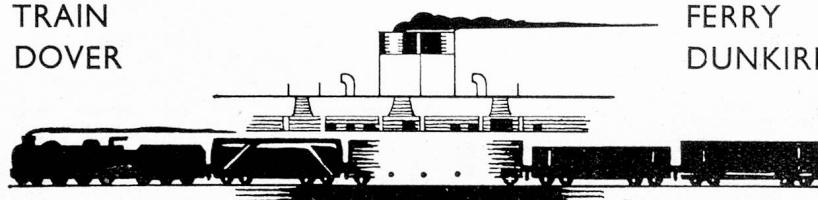
In fact, a drive across Switzerland would only be useful if it was a lightning action, and that seems impossible. The distance from the Lake of Constance to the Lake of Geneva and Yverdon region (from which an attempt might be made to attack Besançon through the narrow Jura passes) is about 160 miles. The invaders would lose several days, even weeks, in forcing the successive fortified defence lines manned by the Swiss Army, which is nearly 600,000 strong, well armed and so abundantly equipped with machine guns, infantry guns, and other automatic weapons that it possesses the highest relative firing power on the Continent. Most of all, a German attack would result in an immediate intervention of France, which has guaranteed Swiss neutrality. Within two or three days several French divisions with heavy artillery — in which the Swiss are comparatively poor — would join the Swiss defence, possibly on the Zürich-Limmat line.

An attempt at breaking through Basle and Huningen might also be contemplated, but the invad-

ACME - GOTH SERVICES FOR SPEED AND RELIABILITY

TRAIN
DOVER

FERRY
DUNKIRK



OFFICIAL AGENTS

ACME TRANSPORT Co. Ltd.

Head Office: 20, WHITECROSS STREET, LONDON, E.C.1

Also at : BRADFORD - DOVER - PARIS.

GOTH & Co. BALE - ZURICH - ST. GALL - GENEVA.

FASTEAST DAILY EXPRESS, G.V. & GROUPAGE SERVICES
TO & FROM SWITZERLAND.

ing forces would find it most difficult to cross the Jura ranges with few and inconvenient roads and narrow defiles and gorges, all powerfully fortified. And that would not bring them behind the Maginot Line.

The conclusion should therefore be that a German offensive through Switzerland, though not impossible, would not be worth while, as the crossing of Switzerland would take too long, and would allow the Allied forces to make all necessary arrangements for opposing it. No surprise attack is possible.

HOW RED CROSS WORKS TO-DAY.

(*"Oxford Mail,"* 3.1.40.)

The Geneva building where League Assemblies and international labour conferences met before the new Palais des Nations was erected is now, alas, the scene of another kind of activity. There the International Red Cross Committee has established a central agency for prisoners of war, just as it carried on a similar enterprise 25 years ago in a smaller building only a stone's throw from the present site.

No time was lost in setting up this agency. On 2nd September — the day before France and Great Britain entered the war — the Red Cross Committee offered its services to the belligerents, stating that it proposed to carry out its duties under the conventions of 1864, 1906 and 1929.

These duties included the creation of a central agency for war prisoners, which was actually in being by the middle of September. To-day, in addition to a staff of 60 employees, about 350 voluntary workers are hard at work.

By that time also the Red Cross Committee, which is presided over by Max Huber (a former president of the Permanent Court of International Justice at The Hague), had sent its representatives to Berlin, Paris and London to establish the necessary contacts and working arrangements with the Governments and national Red Cross societies concerned.

The International Committee is exclusively Swiss in composition, with a view to ensuring the most complete neutrality possible.

Another Red Cross organisation, the League of Red Cross Societies, of which an American, Norman Davis, is president, and which links together some 60 national Red Cross societies for purposes of practical co-operation, moved from Paris to Geneva in the early days of the war, and is working amicably in the closest touch with the International Committee.

Indeed, before the end of September the two bodies had arranged for parallel missions in the countries bordering on Poland, and subsequently issued a joint appeal for the Polish refugees (military and civil) who had streamed out of Poland during the tragic days of the German and Russian invasions.

The latest figures for these refugees are: Hungary 45,000, Latvia 2,000, Lithuania 17,000, Rumania 40,000.

I was much impressed by what I saw at the agency the other day when I was shown round by a member of the International Committee, a former editor of the "Journal de Genève."

During the war of 1914-18 there were some days when the daily post reached the high total of from 15,000 to 18,000 letters. By the end of the war the

names in the card index amounted to more than 5,000,000, representing military prisoners and interned civilians.

To-day, naturally enough, the new index of prisoners is relatively small, though there are 60,000 Polish prisoners officially notified by Berlin, and it is known that the number of Polish soldiers and civilians interned is very much larger than that.

German prisoners of war are few as yet, but the number of interned German civilians is considerable. There are many German residents in the British and French Empires (including the mandated territories formerly belonging to Germany), nor must the refugees be forgotten, large numbers of whom have been interned, especially in France.

The daily post at the agency is already very heavy. It is between 3,000 and 6,000 daily and has once numbered as many as 7,000.

This is not surprising when it be remembered that the agency deals with correspondence not only directly concerned with prisoners of war and internees, but also passing between civilians in general on opposite sides of the conflict, including the German refugees, all of whom have relatives and friends on the other side of the battle front with whom they wish to keep in touch whenever practicable.

Then again the agency is wrestling with the problem of establishing contact between the scattered and shattered families in Poland and their friends and relatives outside — a tragic and almost superhuman task.

On a wall hung a big map of Poland, and one saw workers poring over this with magnifying glasses in an attempt to establish the exact destination of this or that anxious message.

That is only the beginning of what is all too often a complicated if not fruitless search.

If Poland, and now Finland, bring heavy burdens to the agency, certain older tasks are not yet finished. No fewer than 6,000,000 messages have been passed on by the International Committee in connection with the Spanish Civil War alone.

This work continues, since there are very large numbers of Spanish internees and refugees still in France.

One sometimes hears the International Red Cross Committee criticised for hiding its light under a bushel and for an alleged excessive caution.

The caution and discretion are there all right. In every room at the agency a notice signed by Max Huber was prominently displayed warning the whole personnel, from committee member to messenger boy, against divulging any detail of the information given to the agency, and enjoining the most complete impartiality and neutrality in matters political.

A moment's reflection will show that such warnings are not superfluous. Unless the Geneva Red Cross enjoys the most complete confidence of the belligerent

Drink delicious "Ovaltine"
at every meal - for Health!