

**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:** - (1945)

**Heft:** 1038

**Artikel:** Swiss national defence

**Autor:** [s.n.]

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689776>

#### **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:** 24.01.2026

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

### SWISS NATIONAL DEFENCE.

(The following is a translation of another two talks in a series of 12 broadcast on the Swiss Short Wave service last December, to the direction of which we are indebted for the present publication. The talks were given by Capt. Allgöwer of the Swiss Army General Staff).

#### Our State and its form of military defence.

From the very first day of its existence, our State has always been a Confederation. This Confederation came to life in our small Alpine valleys, far off the paths of the world's traffic. It was, of course, in those days, only a kind of natural organization for mutual help. But as soon as these Alpine passes became of importance to the German Emperors, they were greatly in danger of becoming the playgrounds of European politics. As the Confederates clearly saw the new dangers threatening their freedom, they organized themselves for defence. The traditional, unwritten principles of order became a political creed put down in charters and opposed to the reigning nobility of the region. At the same time, a defensive military organization was created. It was based on century-old traditions and on the experience gathered in the service of other rulers. In contrast to neighbouring countries, the Confederates possessed a real State ideal to which everyone felt personally attached and which everyone served of his own free will. This gave the Confederation such internal strength and outward unity that the neighbouring princes, with their jumbled-up armies, could simply do nothing against it. This is how, in the old days, our present form of government was worked out. The majority of the people voted for order, and, in the interest of freedom, this order was defended by force of arms against any form of aggression. As several small federations on the same lines were created simultaneously on our territory, they naturally joined up to form a union.

The first to join were the small countries situated in the heart of Switzerland. They were followed later on by towns and outlaying districts. This union did not exactly form a State in the modern sense of the word, for it lacked any kind of central authority. The different federations were quite independent, excepting that they owed one another mutual assistance. Thus, the union did not interfere with the freedom of the various towns and regions; it only took care of their protection against armed enemies. As it exercised no internal political pressure, it enabled regions speaking different languages to join in. In the course of the centuries, new regions were added to the Confederation either through treaties or conquests. To-day, most of them still belong to it. Thus the union comprised

territories belonging to three different spheres of culture, all united by the same political and spiritual creed. Throughout the centuries, we have become quite accustomed to the fact that our State was composed of peoples speaking different languages. We have no problem of minorities; we represent a collaborating union of four different cultures and languages. It is not blood, language or any geographical circumstances which make us a nation; only our determination to have order and freedom makes us ready to defend our country with our lives against any threat. It was only during the last century that we became a modern State with a central government. Before us, the United States of America and France introduced such a form of democracy, with a central authority and a legislative body. In 1848, after decades of confusion and experiments, the evolution took definite shape, combining the traditional confederative forms with modern democratic institutions. The most important innovation then was the creation of the Federal Council, an active central authority meant to represent the whole country in home as well as in foreign affairs.

The CANTONS retained part of their sovereignty, especially regarding education and penal matters. Every canton has its own government, and every COMMUNE its own president. They are elected by the people or the parliaments, and can only act according to existing laws. In the Confederation, these laws are enacted by the National Council (House of Representatives) and the Council of the States (Senate); in the cantons, by the cantonal parliaments; and in the communes, by the communal councils. Furthermore, unlike other democratic states, the people vote on numerous questions, such as constitutional reforms, military organization, financial matters. They elect teachers, and so forth. In this way, they directly participate in the legislative work of the country. Justice is in the hands of independent judges. All cantons and districts have their own courts, and the central authority has the Federal Court, which however is not a constitutional or criminal tribunal, but just the highest authority for civil law.

Only in a Confederation established on such modern lines was it possible to organize a unified army. In the old days, every canton trained and equipped its own troops. It stands to reason that in our days we could not afford to have 22 different types of armies, and that we must have the same military organization for the whole country. It was only in 1907 that this organization was definitely established. At first, political representatives were afraid that such an organized army might become an internal danger, as it was likely to make possible the existence of a co-government and to interfere with democratic principles. But finally, the

## WORLD TRANSPORT AGENCY LIMITED

Established 1913.

are resuming their Truck Load Groupage Service by the direct route across France in the near future.

*Register your shipments now to ensure early despatch.*

**BASEL**  
VIADUKTSTRASSE, 8.

**TO AND FROM SWITZERLAND**

**LONDON**  
1, MARTIN LANE,  
CANNON STREET, E.C.4

general trend of European affairs helped to overcome this resistance. We saw how the neighbouring powers were systematically organizing their forces. Many a battle was fought near our frontiers, and we observed how war had changed from a battle limited in field and time to an extended total war, lasting for several years. If, for sheer reasons of self-preservation, we were to stand up against such a war, we would have to create a unified federal army. In order to materialize the maximum of our military strength without creating a danger for the State, the federal army was shaped in accordance with our national character. As was already the case politically, national defence became a matter concerning every citizen. Every able-bodied Confederate was asked to offer voluntarily his services as a soldier, as had been the tradition in the cantons. This gave our army that internal strength which enables us to hold out even in the teeth of critical situations. Our army became the expression of the unrelenting will for independence, affording us strength to face the world. On the other hand, military life must have the right to organize itself according to the exigencies of war. In an army, there can be no democratic structure, erected from the bottom upwards, there can only be a hierarchical built-up organization, with the leaders of highest rank and responsibility at the top.

Our army and our political life have thus been kept apart, in order to prevent the one from interfering with the other. The contrary would lead either to a militarization of political life or would give the army a political character, and the one or the other would only be a source of weakness. The army is entrusted with the protection of the State and does not meddle in political affairs. On the other hand, every soldier remains a citizen, and, even when in uniform, takes part in the political life of the country without enfringing military order or discipline. Every Confederate is at the same time a soldier and a citizen; but he knows how to keep these two forms of life apart, and how to do his duty according to the requirements of the general situation. In this way, our federative democratic State has been able to create a firmly organized army, an efficient weapon of defence.

#### Conclusion.

The history of the nations shows that war is recurring. Now that we can again examine a number of armistice treaties and peace plans, it does not seem to us that the foundations for permanent peace has been laid. As long as there exists no international power stronger than the strongest great power there can be no possibility of making peace secure under all circumstances. Such an international organization, endowed with sufficient moral strength and practical means to enforce its will, can probably never be created; it would compel the great powers to alienate the greater part of their unlimited sovereignty and liberty of action. Some sort of international organization may render the banning of war possible for a certain time, let us say during a generation having endured great loss and suffering. But, after a while, the ruins and destructions disappear and are forgotten, and the following generations do not believe any more in the senselessness and horrors of war. On the contrary, they hope to find in war the means of settling certain problems and of achieving certain aims. Though we Swiss expect a lot from peace and are making every possible effort so that this expectation shall be brought to fruition, we do not

believe in the possibility of establishing everlasting peace. Geographical and historical differences between the peoples, especially in Europe, are so great that armed conflicts are hardly avoidable. We believe, therefore, that our country will be menaced by war in the future too, and that it constantly must arm itself against war.

More than 650 years ago, our ancestors united in order to defend their freedom. We, Confederates of to-day, still have the same ideal. We want to live according to our own ways and traditions. We want to draw up our own laws, elect our own government and our own judges. Our main effort consists in building up our State according to our own free will. We are prepared, of course, to exchange ideas and to work with all nations, providing our internal development and our collaboration with other peoples remain subordinate to our political independence. However, as a small State, we only can defend our freedom so long as we are not dependent on other nations nor drawn into their quarrels. For over 400 years, we have kept clear of active power politics; this we have done of our own free will and in the interest of our freedom. During all conflicts, we have observed a strict and unlimited neutrality. This attitude is no sign of weakness or indecision. On the contrary, for it requires courage and a strong sense of responsibility to stand alone, even when exposed to the lack of understanding generally shown to neutrals by belligerent powers. We do not want to owe our existence to any great power, neither do we wish to be politically, economically or militarily dependent on any one. During the present conflict, we have seen many examples of what happens when small powers become dependent upon a great one, even to the slightest extent. Our neutrality is the expression of our will to decide for ourselves, for we do not take sides with any great power or party. In this way, we alone protect and guarantee our liberty of action.

However, nothing is achieved by a simple and formal declaration. First of all, we must keep to our fundamental principle in all practical matters concerning foreign policy. This often involves great difficulties, especially when one of the belligerents on our frontiers has been defeated. But we also must have the practical means to defend our neutrality. Already after the last

## Rutli Ladies' Club

**Dance with Entertainments**  
in celebration of the  
**SWISS NATIONAL DAY**  
will be held at  
**SEYMORE HALL, SEYMORE PLACE,**  
**BRYANSTON SQUARE, W.I**  
**on 1st AUGUST, 1945, from 7 to 11 p.m.**

The premises are fully licensed and  
refreshments will be supplied — Tickets 5/-

**All Swiss and their friends will be heartily welcomed.**

Apply for tickets to :

Mrs. C. Bolla, 74, Carleton Road, N.7 — Tel. North 4932,  
or to Miss Gosi, 22, Ducie St., S.W.4 — Tel. Brixton 3308.

World War, we solemnly pledged ourselves before the whole world to defend our neutrality by force of arms. During both world conflicts, the respect of our foreign policy depended upon whether we were ready, at all times, to keep mobilized a large part of our army, a part sufficiently important to have our neutrality respected. Thus, owing to our army's special task, there is a marked difference between military service in peace and in war time. This is why we call the latter "active service." This means that we must not only have enough soldiers ready for all eventualities, but that we must continuously improve our equipment and keep on with the intensive training of all ranks. When active service lasts a long time, this is no easy thing. Troops do not have to fight, and yet they must always be ready to fight. They run the risk of taking things less seriously and of becoming neglectful in their efforts. However, until now, we have been able to master all signs of discouragement. On the one hand, the social side of the question has been solved; it now creates no more difficulties. On the other hand, we see so much real suffering on our frontiers that every man understands why he has to stand there and hold out. But more important is that every Confederate possesses such thorough political maturity that he is able to act on his own consideration of things and not merely on a general frame of mind. After five years of active service, we not only have a better armament, but a stricter discipline and a firmer attitude.

The protection of neutrality is only possible if we possess a defensive organization which is considered to be militarily effective by the great powers. An ordinary police force is not enough. Effective defence is only possible if the army is backed up by the whole people and if all material means are put at its disposal. We reply to total warfare by total defence. In our democracy every citizen is required to take an active part in the building up of the State, he therefore is equally responsible for its defence. Thus, we demand of every citizen a political and military watchfulness which is made possible by collaboration in numerous practical matters. In war time, the government, which has been elected by the people, is given full powers and entire liberty of action, so that it can protect the army against any political manoeuvres or attacks from a fifth column. Economic preparations must allow us, if necessary, to exist without imports. Social measures binding the individual to the State are strengthened, so that the citizen can fulfil his duty without being worried by financial considerations. The army itself is developed and trained according to the technical and tactical evolution of war, so that it is ready to face a well trained aggressor. All our political, economic and military preparations tend to demonstrate to the great powers that an attack on our little country would not pay. The whole world must know that freedom and independence are our foremost aim. We are a peace-loving people, and we are ready to serve peace with all our strength; but, should our freedom and independence be threatened, we would not be frightened by war. We would stand up in their defence. Neither are we ready to make, in exchange for fallacious advantages, any kind of political or economic concessions which might sooner or later deprive us of our independence. During the present conflict, especially since 1940, we have often heard bitter criticism and derogating insinuations concerning the ability of small nations to defend themselves. It is a fact that certain powers have not

been up to the mark in this respect during this war. Had they been better aware of realities and had they possessed better trained and equipped armies, they might have resisted much longer and thus influenced the whole course of hostilities. However, the heroic resistance of some small nations during the last four years and the numerous liberation movements which came to light during last summer have shown that even small States possess a certain power of resistance, provided this power is properly organized and led. We can say that we have organized our defence with a view to facing any attack by land or by air, and that we will always remain capable of defending our freedom and independence.

### PROBLEMS OF DEMOCRATIC RECONSTRUCTION AS SEEN BY A SWISS.

Under the auspices of the London Group of the Nouvelle Société Hélyétique, an opportunity was afforded our Swiss Colony to hear this topic expounded with authority by one of our eminent compatriots, Dr. Hans Zbinden. This distinguished writer and philosopher had come over on a short visit with the Delegation of Swiss Editors and Publishers, and those who gathered at the Dorchester Hotel on Thursday, 12th July, were deeply impressed by his great learning and the sincerity of his exposition of the problems confronting the future of democracy.

The speaker was introduced to his audience by Mr. A. F. Suter, President of the London Group of the N.S.H. and Dr. Zbinden made it clear at the outset that the views he expressed were entirely his own, and not necessarily representative of Swiss opinion as a whole.

We were reminded that whilst military operations have ceased, the fight for Europe still lies ahead; a great battle remains to be fought and won, that of the moral rehabilitation of our Continent, based on true and lasting democratic principles. Five years of strife have given new values to the essence of democracy, of which the greatest, freedom, in all its aspects, has acquired a fresher and more dramatic meaning to men of to-day. One is instinctively led to think first of economic reconstruction, but restoration of moral and spiritual standards is just as urgent. The guarantee of success in this direction lies in a conscious choice of those entrusted with the leadership of nations. This in itself is the essence of democracy, and the speaker recalled an opinion of Bernard Shaw voiced twenty years ago to a group of Swiss students to whom he said "The future of democracy resides in a good selection of responsible men."

In times of crisis, as if by a miracle, great leaders are invariably discovered; such men always exist in normal times too, and must be found. But society in its valuation of the best has undergone many changes in the course of years. In the 17th Century "l'honnête homme" was considered the best, to be displaced in the 18th Century by "l'homme de bon sens," and subsequently by the "nationalist" and in the present days the "mass man" or the man in the street, as we know him. The advent of the totalitarian State precipitated this levelling down, in which the speaker sees one of the chief dangers to democracy.

Dr. Zbinden went on to deal with modern education in relation to democracy; here too, he asserted,