

The Swiss deep sea fleet

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THE SWISS DEEP SEA FLEET.

by JOHN W. HARRIES.

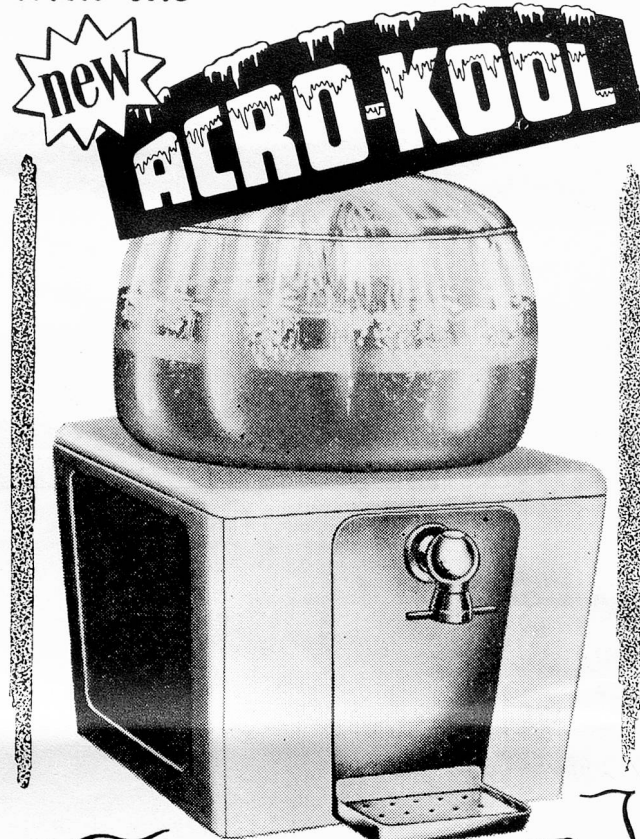
The following article which appeared in the "Syren and Shipping" publication is reproduced by the courtesy of the Editor.

Ironically, in reference to an errant State in days gone by, the threat used to be made: "And if they don't behave we'll send the Swiss Navy against 'em." No less absurd in those times would have been an hypothesis concerning a Swiss mercantile marine. But times change, and global wars, blockades, ship warrants, navicerts, etc., offer a powerful stimulus to improvisation, whatever the element, so that if a Swiss Republican Navy is still as much a figment of the imagination as the sea coast of Bohemia, the white cross on a red background is now seen flying on an increasing number of cargo vessels using the seven seas on their lawful occasions.

All seagoing vessels under the Swiss flag, in conformity with legal requirements, have Basle as their port of registry. To some, perhaps, there may appear something anomalous in this fact; certainly it is sad to think that none of the wanderers can ever come home to the splendid and historic city whose name is so proudly emblazoned on their counters. For the great inland port on the Rhine, with a population of 200,000, distant from the nearest salt water 220 miles as the gull flies, has a depth of water varying between 8 and 11 ft. only. Although this depth is sufficient for the great Rhine river ships — mainly diesel-engined — coming from Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Antwerp and laden with up to a maximum of 3,000 tons of transshipment cargo, it is patently inadequate for ocean-going ships. Basle provides a pleasant surprise for visitors interested in such matters both by reason of the modernity of its port installations as well as by the amount of cargo handled. The latter now amounts to nearly 5,000,000 tons annually, of which approximately 90 per cent is represented by imports.

The birth of the Swiss Mercantile Marine could not have taken place under less propitious conditions; its period of gestation, too, was about the longest on record. With customary national shrewdness, the Swiss Federal Government had seen the necessity for ocean life-lines as early as 1864, and if the plan remained in embryo for more than 75 years, the initial reason was the surprising opposition from two countries primarily or actually regarded as land Powers, France and Prussia. Even in 1921, when the Barcelona Conference changed the outlook for inland countries so that land-locked States such as Czechoslovakia and Austria could send their flags overseas (from German Hamburg and Italian Trieste respectively), two more decades were still to pass before the frightening impact of total war in 1940 forced the Swiss Federal Government at last to implement the plan of 1864. It is true that Swiss private interests had under consideration the purchase of two seagoing vessels just prior to the war, but it was not until 1940 that the s.s. *Calanda* and s.s. *Maloja* were actually transferred from Panamanian owners to the Swiss flag. To ensure the regular transport of coal at the commencement of the war years was

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the impelling motive. Ownership of the vessels was vested in the Swiss Shipping Company, although it seems that the Swiss Government, the State Railways, the Syndicate of Swiss Gas Works and some of the larger Swiss industrial concerns all shared in the venture. There was, incidentally, a storm of criticism regarding the price paid — at present exchange, nearly £300,000 — for the two vessels which could, so it was alleged, have been obtained at one-fifth of the cost less than six months earlier. Be that as it may, tonnage was not easy to come by even at the beginning of 1940, so the Swiss authorities, the Swiss War Transport Office and the commercial interests involved can be congratulated on their foresight and acumen in obtaining useful ships to start the fleet. As already implied, a regular supply of coal was the prime factor at the commencement. Thereafter, decisions were taken rapidly, the crucial one being to charter 15 vessels, all owned by a Greek company, which gave the Swiss War Transport Office well over 100,000 tons dw. for Atlantic and Mediterranean trade. Grain, in keeping with the indications of the process of war in Europe, now ranked equal in importance with coal. Thus, not only was Switzerland assured of a measure of fuel and food but her vital export trade could be maintained overseas in reverse. The Swiss flag, Greek vessels and the neutral Italian ports of Genoa and Savona as terminals offered almost foolproof security until Italy's cowardly attack on France, whereby her neutral status was forfeited; finally, by her ignoble invasion of Greece. As practical propositions, there remained Portugal and Spain. Following astute bargaining with Allies and enemy, Lisbon was agreed as a terminal, with transshipment by Spanish flag to Genoa as far as cargoes by the Greek vessels were concerned. This traffic was helped out by the chartering of Portuguese auxiliary sailing vessels in addition to overland arrangements for rail transport from Lisbon and road transport by convoys of motor lorries, either via Irun on one side or Port Bou on the other. They were cruel years, and drastic remedies were needed to keep any State alive. The Swiss met the problem in their usual quiet and efficient manner, but, let it be admitted frankly, the Swiss flag flew over some of the most amazing old crocks ever to have been seen entering the Tagus. Small wonder that casualties were heavy, and few of these were war risk claims! For 1941, the Swiss Register showed 19 vessels, of which four were State-owned, eight were the Greek vessels under charter, the remaining seven being under private ownership.

The idea of a Swiss Mercantile Marine had abundantly justified itself during the war, but there was no longer the same call for Government ownership or control on the conclusion of hostilities. The Swiss War Transport Office offered its fleet for sale and wound up its affairs by the end of 1948. By 1950 the number of owners had increased to 11 and vessels to 20; but total gross tonnage had dropped from 77,178 to 70,182 and deadweight tonnage from 133,880 to 112,329. Eight of the ships were 30 or more years old, the veteran being the s.s. *Chasseral*, built in 1897. The 1954 Swiss Register, while still inviting facetious comparison with the famous hymnal, has slightly less emphasis on the "A", the two present veterans being in the prime of life — in their forties. Three oldsters were sold during 1954 — t.s. *Neuchatel*, built 1930, 9,555 gross; s.s. *St. Gotthard*, built 1911,

5,461 gross; and s.s. *Ticino*, built 1920, 6,528 gross. The disposal of the *Neuchatel* is perhaps understandable when considered in the light (or gloom) of Lloyd's Casualty Reports Nos. 6, 8, 9, 10 and 13 of 1954. Since November, 1952, when this vessel grounded at Havre, she had not the best of luck, suffering weather damage in May, 1954, losing her starboard anchor and eight lengths of chain cable when mooring in Havre Roads — in fact, four casualties in all, which, it has been whispered, would necessitate repairs costing perhaps as much as £70,000. To set against the diminution in total tonnage by the aforementioned sales, it should be recorded that two vessels of about 5,800 tons gross and 10,000 tons dw. each are to be built in Yugoslavia for account of the new Oceana Shipping Co., the building being supervised by the Suisse-Atlantique Society of Lausanne, who will later act as managers. Still appearing in the Register, but a doubtful starter, is the s.s. *Lepontia I*, which has been under repair at Venice for more than a year. If this vessel is eventually sold, her owners do not contemplate replacing her.

While the Swiss flag on an ocean-going vessel no longer provokes a smile of disbelief, it is still newsworthy. As recently as February [1955], in the magazine *The Trident*, which to old-timers recalls *The Blue Peter*, there was a very interesting article by Mr. E. C. Osborn, entitled "Plan for Colombo." The author mentioned the various ensigns seen flying in that harbour and added: "... even the Swiss flag is seen, though rarely." The issue of *Ships and Ship Models* for the same month included an article on "Auckland's Shipping" by Mr. Clifford J. Hawkins. One of the fine illustrations to that was over the caption: "Funnel of Swiss *Allobrogia* at Auckland." Almost half the available Swiss tonnage is employed on regular voyages, the remainder tramping. The *Allobrogia* and the other ship of the Transports Maritimes Suisse-Outremer, the *Anunciada*, are, by reason of changed conditions, now on time-charter, but at least once every year the owners see to it that they make a port between Antwerp and Hamburg for survey or repairs, provisioning and paying off crews. Between 1948 and 1953 the *Anunciada* was employed regularly for her owners in the grain trade from Canada or the U.S. to Europe. On regular lines are the vessels of the Corgos Maritimes — Baltic-U.K.-Mediterranean; Keller Shipping Co. — Italy-Spanish ports-North Africa; Nautilus Line — Italy-West Africa; Swiss Shipping Co. — Continent-West Indies; Trafina Co. — U.K.-Baltic (in season) -Spain and Portugal (in summer); Transoceanique-Suisse — Western Mediterranean-West Africa; Zurich Shipping Co. — Canada-West Indies. Out of the ordinary for British observers is the small tanker *Leman*, of the Marivins Co. As the latter name implies, she is engaged solely in the carrying of wine and trades between Spain, Greece, Portugal and Algeria. The entire Swiss Mercantile Marine can be classified as "cargo," but some of the larger units have accommodation for from 6 to 12 passengers. Most important of Swiss owners is the Transoceanique-Suisse, of Geneva, which holds all the capital of the Nautilus Line. The management of these two companies seems to be in the hands of the Keller Shipping Co., of Basle, but it cannot be stated definitely here whether the latter holds a financial interest as well. Running these three combined concerns close in point

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of total tonnage is Suisse-Atlantique, of Lausanne, which is said to be a subsidiary of André et Cie., an important Swiss export firm and international grain dealers.

A brief report from Berne in connection with the "*Schweizerische Hochseeflotte*" which appeared in a Zurich paper in mid-April [1955] commented on the personnel position of the present-day Swiss merchant navy. According to this report, at the end of 1954 the 31 ships in the fleet gave occupation to 702 men, of whom 287 were of Swiss nationality. This percentage of 40 compares favourably with barely 7 per cent at the end of 1947, but it was emphasised that while Swiss owners have done, and are still doing, their utmost to engage Swiss nationals — an endeavour which is gradually meeting with success so far as young men for the crews are concerned — there is still a considerable shortage of Swiss officers.

With the exception of the *Neuchatel*, whose ill-luck has already been remarked though her name no more appears in the Register, the Swiss flag happily did not figure prominently in casualty and adverse news reports during 1954. In August the *Rhin* was detained at Port Said by the Egyptian authorities, quite unwarrantedly so it seems. She was carrying meat, wood and hides from Ethiopia and, in spite of pessimistic Press reports, her cargo was found intact on eventual arrival at Haifa. The principal, though more or less minor, casualties were: s.s. *Calanda* — heavy weather and damage sustained through an encounter with ice; m.s. *Carona* — two collisions, with Dutch tank lighter in the Scheldt and with British m.v. *Cornish City* just after leaving Rotterdam; m.s. *Helvetia* — collision with m.v. *Panama Express* at Genoa; m.s. *Romandie* — twice heavy weather damage, first on voyage from Yokohama to Vancouver and, later in year, while on voyage from Coos Bay to Cape Town (in the surveyor's opinion the condition of the rudder assembly was not wholly attributable to the heavy weather); m.s. *Baden* — more to amaze retired masters and chief engineers than for any other reason may be mentioned the report that this vessel put into Dakar with piston trouble on October 22; two Doford piston heads were sent by air and arrived at Dakar on October 29; the ship proceeded on her voyage in the evening of that day; m.s. *General Dufour*, threatened from two directions, a broken crankshaft 18 miles from Jupiter, Florida, on October 14, and by hurricane "Hazel" which was reported in the vicinity of the Bahamas; the ship was towed by a U.S. Coast Guard cutter to anchor and thence by two tugs to Jacksonville for repairs.

What is the predictable future of the Swiss deep sea fleet? It has, perhaps, come to stay in one form or another because it has proved so successful a re-insurance in time of war. But then, it may be argued, will any future war follow the pattern of any war of the past? And what is predictable in these times? Those imponderables and the utter lack of any meaning or significance in the term "neutrality" when measured in the gloom of the aggressive designs of Communism, render a forecast impossible. On the economic plane, a surfeit of tonnage and falling freight rates must give even those realistic traders, the Swiss, furiously to think. And some of the Swiss owners are still faced with the problem of replacing their old ships.

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