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COMMENT

No happy haven for the spies

SWITZERLAND is a neutral country. Though it is well-armed in its own defence, it threatens nobody.

The defensive nature of Switzerland's armed forces is generally recognised, yet it attracts spies from Communist countries. It always has done.

One of the reasons is that it is a good place for people to meet. The great towns of Switzerland are international centres of considerable importance. There are many strangers about, and strangers are not looked at as closely as elsewhere.

Nor is it in the nature of Swiss immigration procedures to regard too closely why people enter the country and how long they stay, provided they do not breach the conditions of a tourist visa.

The main sort of breach that the authorities are on the look out for is in the sphere of the labour law. People cannot come to Switzerland to get a job without prior permission. The labour market is closely controlled so that Switzerland will remain as a haven of full employment in an economically depressed continent.

But there are also other breaches of the law. The Swiss authorities take an extremely dim view of people who come into their peaceful country in order to report on their spying activities against other countries.

Third world countries are, in general, very well aware of the dangers of spies. The most dangerous moment for a spy is not so much the actual act of spying - he can say lots of things to explain his presence in a particular spot - but the moment of reporting his findings to a qualified superior. This is what the Soviets and East Europeans have tended to use Switzerland for.

A case has now been judged by a Zurich court. As reported in last month's Swiss Observer, a Soviet citizen and his East German wife were found guilty of using Switzerland as a meeting place for the delivery to their superiors of information about a third country no fewer than nine times in the past seven years.

The third country was Iran, a state which has become of increasing importance to the Soviets in recent years.

There is no particular sympathy in Switzerland with regard to the regime of the Ayatollahs in Teheran, yet it is the principle that counts. It is illegal for Swiss territory to be used for activities detrimental to any foreign country.