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SWISS MILITARY TRAINS OF 1919-1920


Derrick Slate



At the end of the First World War transport and distribution of goods in Central and Eastern Europe were chaotic. Most areas had acute shortages of some essential commodities and large quantities of other goods. The Railways were almost powerless to keep the necessary transport moving, as well armed gangs of bandits were holding up goods trains and leaving them rifled and badly damaged, particularly near the new frontiers of countries that had not yet developed the authority or power to cope with the problem. Switzerland was hard hit by this situation as it was faced with two tasks – to restore its international trade that had been devastated, and to repatriate its citizens who had been isolated in other countries and were still unable to return. The solution was found by providing armed Swiss Army escorts for trains from Switzerland to Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia and Romania and back. During this period (1919/1920) about 30 trains left Switzerland. At first, these trains carried food, medical supplies and other relief goods. A typical train was staffed by two officers and 30 non-commissioned officers. The Swiss forces, having been neutral, were accepted in all the countries in which they travelled, being well-trained and well-armed, including anti-aircraft weapons depressed to deal with ground targets. Only one Swiss train was attacked, but the Swiss army guards soon chased the attackers away! During WW1 the Swiss forces defending the country's borders, remember these were Citizen Soldiers of its Militia Army, had been issued with special Soldier Stamps to enable them to write home to their families. This was the original idea of a Captain Frederick Bieri of the 26th Bernese Fusilier Battalion, who in 1919 found himself commanding Train No.5 to Warsaw. The train left on the 22nd July 1919 with 5 coaches and 46 goods trucks. The train arrived in Warsaw on the 29th July and departed a fortnight later. The journey to Warsaw took 128 hours and 142½ hours back. Captain Bieri arranged for a stamp to be printed by typography. A white cross was specified for the stamp, but by mistake the printer printed a red cross. About 1,000 stamps were printed and given to the guards as souvenirs, free of charge. The only other trains where it is known that Soldier Stamps were issued, were Train Nos.10 and 12 that travelled to Bucharest in Romania. Little

is known about train No.10 but train No.12 left Switzerland in November 1919 and apparently did not return until February 1920, although the exact date is unknown. It is known that the stamps issued for its soldiers were lithographed at Bucharest. We have attempted to reproduce examples of these special stamps.

Swiss Express Editorial Note

From the railway operating side of these exercises the trains would probably have been a motley collection of freight rolling stock (no doubt including flat wagons for the guns to be mounted upon), plus ancient 4 or 6 wheeled carriage accommodation for the army contingent and any Swiss citizens that were to be repatriated. By the end of WW1 the Swiss operators were short of equipment and it is doubtful if they would have risked losing any decent rolling stock. These vehicles would have been assembled as block trains handed over at the appropriate frontiers, where the adjacent railway administrations would provide motive power and train crews to take the equipment through their territory. Locomotives are designed for their local operating environment, loading gauge, etc. and seldom stray, though SBB had in 1918 sold some old freight engines to the military railway administration in Poland and also Hungary. Swiss crews would not know the routes to be used and the local crews with the route knowledge needed would not have had experience of using 'foreign' locos. With changing engines and crews at each frontier, and en-route, in the difficult post-war environment (and the probable 'clapped-out' state of all the engines), it is no wonder that some of the trips took days and weeks rather than the hours the journeys could be completed in today. A first search through our archive has not revealed any contemporary photographs of these trains. Incidentally, many Swiss locomotives did work in Germany and France during both WWI and WWII, partly for hire, and partly as a bargaining counter, horse trading to compensate shipments of necessary supplies such as coal and foodstuffs. An article on this is in preparation. If any SRS Members have any knowledge to add to the information on the relief trains we would welcome it. 

This is an edited and expanded version of an article that first appeared in the Helvetia Philatelic Society's 'Newsletter'. We thank its Editor Richard Donithorn, and Derrick Slate the author, for permission to reproduce it in 'Swiss Express'.

Swiss Tip Good ideas and information about Switzerland from travellers.

Fancy a walk with a difference? The SBB has just completed a major overhaul of the great reinforced concrete viaduct over the valley of l'Orbe on the line between Vallorbe and Le Day. For those with a head for heights, there is a public footpath suspended underneath the tracks between the arches of the viaduct. Enjoy!