Switzerland on guard : ready for any invader

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SWITZERLAND ON GUARD.

Ready For Any Invader.

(Glasgow Herald.)

In the Defence Pavilion of the Swiss National Exhibition at Zurich there are successive sections proclaiming the triple slogan, " Switzerland can, will, and must defend herself." For 500 years no Swiss army has crossed the frontier for aggressive purposes, and the national militia of this mountain bastion and unique strategical centre of Europe is organised solely for defence.

Whatever happens in the rest of Europe, the Swiss, true to their traditional policy of neutrality and independence, are determined to defend their democratic heritage to the last man. They know their friends and appreciate the implications of a foreign policy which recognises their integrity, but formal guarantees would not be welcomed from any quarter, as they might be interpreted in other States as " tipping the balance " for that masterpiece of equilibrium which is the Swiss Confederation. If, and when, they need assistance, the Swiss will ask for it — but not before.

For such a small country very onerous expenditure on rearmament is being incurred, but the fervent patriotism of the Swiss is equal to this and any further demands that may come. By the end of 1939 this nation of 4,000,000 people will have spent nearly 1,000,000,000 Swiss francs (about £48,000,000) on its defence programme since these extraordinary rearmament commitments were decided on at the beginning of 1937.

At the time of the September crisis last year there was an atmosphere of acute tension in Switzerland, as elsewhere, but since the Government and the Army Staff have " looked to the moat " with far-seeing energy and efficiency the people are facing the uncertain future with calm determination and confidence. Switzerland is like the calm centre of a gathering cyclone, and travellers from Amsterdam, Berlin, and other European centres are impressed by the cool and soothing normality of everyday life in Berne and Zurich.

The Swiss fortifications along the German and Austrian frontiers are laid out on a very formidable scale at all the strategic points, and the series of well-prepared defence lines from Basle and Schaffhausen to Berne are a standing guarantee that Switzerland is prepared to give any invader a testing reception. The nature of the terrain is everywhere favourable to defence.

Switzerland was the first country in Europe to introduce universal military service, for when the three forest cantons of Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden united in their " Everlasting League " and defeated Leopold of Austria and his knights at Morgarten in 1315 every man was ordered to fit himself to bear arms in the struggle for independence. The nation's present-day military organisation, derived from the illustrious example of these ancient warriors, is suitably adapted to the requirements of a later age. The citizen army, which can be expanded into a force of 400,000 men, is so organised that it can be effectively mustered in about 24 hours, while through a recent development of the defence system there is also in being a permanent force of between 3,000 and 4,000 troops at the frontier posts to " hold the fort " until the mobilisation of the militia in any threatened area has been completed.

In the House of Commons debates on the Government's measure for compulsory training the Opposition criticism has been accompanied by demands for greater democratisation of the British Army, and as our new militia will soon be enrolling for service some account of how the essentially democratic Swiss system works in practice may be of interest. By courtesy of the Swiss military authorities I recently had the privilege of learning something about the organisation at first hand and of watching recruits in the final stages of their training to defend the homeland.

Every Swiss citizen must undergo a medical examination at the age of 19, and those declared fit for military service are called up a year later to take the training course at a recruits' school. Unfit men and citizens living abroad have to pay a tax instead of giving personal service. No allowance is made for "conscientious objectors" in Switzerland's democratic system. Pay in the ranks is about 90 centimes (9d.) a day, and there is a very comprehensive scheme for payment of compensation in cases of injury or illness on service. The recruits' course lasted about three months under the old system, but the period is now being extended to four months. After completing his training the young recruit is allocated to one of the various units forming the militia and becomes one of the 400,000 citizen soldiers of his country. Rapidity of mobilisation is ensured by the fact that each man takes home his rifle and equipment, which is inspected periodically. Cavalrymen take their mounts home, and by an arrangement with the Army authorities can become the owners of their horses after ten years.

Service in the first line — the *élite*, as it is called — lasts until the soldier is 32, when he passes into the Landwehr. At 42 he reaches the third stage, the Landsturm, a less active kind of reserve force. To ensure continued efficiency there are refresher coursese (" *cours de repetition* ") once a year with the soldier's unit, which mobilises for that purpose at the place where it would come together in case of war. These courses last three weeks, and end with military manœuvres. There are also compulsory firing courses at which the soldier must attain a prescribed standard of efficiency with his rifle.

The non-commissioned officers and the officers are selected on a democratic basis from among the rank and file of the soldiers. Those who show real qualities of command may attend a special training school for non-commissioned officers, and on promotion to corporal they are ready to train the next yearly quota of recruits.

Lieutenants and *chefs de section* are chosen from among the corporals, and they must go through a very intensive course of training at a special school. The whole military organisation works on a nicely balanced system characteristic of Switzerland. A fine spirit of democratic comradeship is thus fostered, for the right men are in the right place and the road to the highest command is open to the man who can prove himself worthy of it in the military sense.

Under the guidance of a staff colonel I had an opportunity recently of seeing recruits carry out an exercise in defence and attack in a valley of the Jura, and was able to learn for myself that there is a core of truth in the saying that the Swiss infantryman combines in himself the military virtues of both the French and the German — the *élan* of the one and the stolid, determined spirit of the other. An ex-officer of the Guards who was with us commented on the very earnest way in which these men, after less than three months' training carried out their duties in this mimic warfare.

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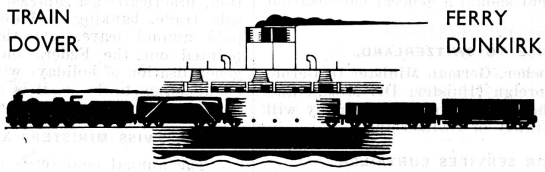
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