News at random

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The Swiss Observer

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NEWS AT RANDOM

Great disappointment has been caused in government circles by the rejection of the Federal bill having for its object to place the employment of 54,000 civil servants on a basis harmonising with modern requirements. The proposed reorganisation of the pension fund necessitating heavy taxation for disposing of the large accumulated deficit seems to be mainly responsible for the unexpected result. The figures so far available show that 288,876 voters were in favour of the measure whilst the opponents reached the formidable total of 483,214. There were four cantons only that accepted the bill, viz. Uri, Baselstadt, Geneva, and Ticino, the latter with a respectable majority. St. Gall and Zurich — cantons with a predominant industrial population who might be expected to be in sympathy with this social reform — recorded practically the largest majorities against.

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In view of the heavy sacrifices borne by mobilised citizens, the military exemption tax (Militärsteuer) will be doubled as from the present year.

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Semi-official reports appearing in the Swiss press give some idea of the gigantic efforts necessary to meet the cost of the mobilisation, which including maintenance of the army during 12 months, is about 950 million francs. In the first instance a capital levy of 1½ to 3% payable by three yearly instalments is contemplated; this would yield about 450 million francs. Secondly it is proposed to appropriate about 300 million francs from a fund deposited at the Swiss National Bank and which represents the profits obtained on the devaluation of the Swiss franc some two years ago. Thirdly the existing war or crisis tax (on interest, dividends, coupons, etc.) will be increased and prolonged for thirty years; an annual income of about 100 million francs is thereby anticipated. As the ordinary budget of the Confederation is likely to balance with a deficit of 70 to 90 million francs for a good many years, a turn-over tax of 2% is foreshadowed; this tax would not be cumulative and would probably become chargeable to the retail trade.

More than half the imports of sugar during October, i.e., 12,510 out of 24,390 tons, were received from Great Britain.

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Women ambulance drivers are now an accepted feature in the Swiss army; some 250 of them underwent a special course of training in the military barracks at Basle.

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A proposal to abolish vivisection in the canton Baselstadt found 7,415 supporters whilst no less than 23,639 voted against it. The matter has been ventilated in the local press during the last few weeks and was preceded by heated arguments from both sides.

* * *

A general increase of from 10 to 20% in the subscription rates of newspapers and periodicals will take effect on the 1st of January next. The new rates are subject to confirmation by the Federal price control office which also has the right to substantiate their justification by an examination of the account books.

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The offices of the "Neue Basler Zeitung" have been occupied by the local police authorities for the purpose of a search and thorough examination. It is stated that about 80,000 copies of this daily paper were regularly dispatched to Germany while the sales in Switzerland did not exceed 1,200. Mystery veils the identity of the persons responsible for the publication but it is believed that a certain Hans Jenni, in Zurich, is the spiritual backbone of the venture; he was one of the so-called "loyal confederates" (Bund treuer Eidgenossen) whose activities formed the subject of a recent prosecution before the Federal Penal Court. In the meantime a civil action is pending with the Basle court: the Neue Basler Zeitung is claiming

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an apology and damages from the "Beobachter" for having published an article in the course of which the former was described as a German propaganda-sheet.

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The issue of "Die Weltwoche" dated November 24th and appearing in Zürich has been confiscated by the military command.

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The Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Der Bund and other papers which for the last few months have been banned in Italy are now again freely admitted in that country.

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Three German airmen, slightly wounded, were arrested — and subsequently interned — near the Franco-Swiss frontier south of Le Locle. Their plane was attacked and damaged during a reconnaissance flight over the south of France and crashed between Pontarlier and Besançon; the three pilots parachuted without being noticed. After having burnt the parachutes and uniforms they set out in their overalls for the 70Km. distant Swiss frontier, which, thanks to excellent maps in their possession, they reached after three days and nights. When questioned during their peregrination they feigned successfully to be English pilots.

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An army instructor, Capt. Albert Walther, was mortally wounded by a splinter from a hand grenade during demonstration exercises on the Allmend in Zurich.

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Col. Hans Kern died in Berne at the age of 65; he was an instructor in the infantry and deputy of the "Waffenchef."

LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND.

1. — *Foreign Trade.*

In spite of the inevitably moderate results for the month of September, Swiss foreign trade has noticeably increased during the first nine months of the year. Imports have advanced by 87.6 million francs as compared with the first nine months of 1938, and exports by 31.8 million. The debit difference of the commercial balance has thus passed, for the first three quarters, from 264.5 million francs in 1938 to 362.3 million in 1939. These figures clearly show the importance of the Swiss market for foreign exporters. Foreign trade has been characterised by an increase in the importation of raw material and the exportation of manufactured goods, especially of machines (+ 6 million francs), instruments and apparatus (+ 7 million), chemical products (+ 40 million) and textile industry goods (+ 4.5 million). The watchmaking industry has, on the other hand, suffered from the uncertainty of the political situation, which has not been very favourable for the sale of luxury articles; the value of the exports in this industry having fallen from 172 million francs (first three quarters of 1938) to 137.6 million (first nine months of 1939). Cheese, condensed milk and the products of the strawbraiding industry have maintained their positions.

Switzerland's most important customer during the period under review has been Germany with 156.2 million francs, followed by England (132.1 million), France (108.2 million), United States (84.6 million) and Italy (58.3 million).

During the first nine months of the year, the situation has been favourable, in spite of the great falling off registered in September, imports having diminished during this month by 51 million francs, as compared with the month of August, and exports by 64 million.

Nevertheless, one must not contemplate the future with too much pessimism. The month of September plunged Europe into a state of war. Trade in different countries must adapt itself to this new condition. During the first weeks of the war, for example, the transport of Swiss foreign trade was, by force of circumstances, seriously fettered. Since then the situation has improved. When transport has been "regulated," if one may use such a term, we may count on a certain improvement in commercial activities, especially as Switzerland, with her powerful commercial organization, remains an important outlet for foreign countries and can continue to export the many high class products for which she enjoys a reputation.

Already, during the month of October, the situation has improved. Swiss imports have attained 171.5 million francs, as compared with 98.4 million in September and 145.6 million in October 1938. Exports have increased during the course of the month of October to 94.6 million francs, as compared with 55.2 million in September and 133.9 million in October 1938.

2. — *Less Unemployment.*

The general mobilization of the army, brought an anticipated relief to the labour market. About 22,500 fully unemployed persons were registered at the Labour Exchanges at the end of September; this being 1,500 less than at the end of August and 14,000 less than in September 1938.

3. — *Cost of Living and Rationing.*

As was foreseen, one result of the War has been a noticeable increase in the price of food commodities and raw materials. The general index of wholesale prices was calculated at 116.8 at the end of September 1939, as compared with 107.4 at the end of the preceding month. The increase is thus 8.8%. Articles, the prices of which have been increased, belong more particularly to the groups of goods for which Switzerland is most dependent on foreign countries (foodstuffs of vegetable origin, textiles, combustibles and metals).

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