

Swiss national defence [to be continued]

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SWISS NATIONAL DEFENCE, TO-DAY AND TO-MORROW.

A series of twelve talks given by the Swiss Short Wave Service — Berne.

By PETER DÜRRENMATT.

I. The principles of Swiss National Defence and the keenness shown in matters pertaining to it.

When, after the first World War the hopes of the Peoples were carried on the crest of the wave and it was believed that this was the last war, there were a number of quite honest lovers of peace who accused the Swiss of being the last militarists. They based this serious accusation on the fact that every Swiss kept his rifle at home and that every Saturday afternoon, throughout the entire country one could hear the sharp report of rifles being fired — and this merely because of the prevailing love of shooting. Can one call a nation which is so keen about shooting, anything else but militaristic? So they asked — but they were wrong. Swiss keenness with regard to arms, which is undeniable, has absolutely nothing to do with militarism because it is connected closely with the very existence of the Swiss Confederation and with the Swiss conception of freedom. Switzerland lies in the very centre of Europe and is surrounded on all sides by Great Powers. She constitutes an important geographical connecting bridge, in view of the fact that it is on her territory that are to be found both the great Continental passages from North to South in the shape of the Gotthard and the Simplon Pass-Roads. Only once in the 650 years-old history of the country were the Swiss unable to maintain their sovereignty over this passage from North to South, namely at the time of the Napoleonic wars. This failure brought to them both misery and war. It also taught them a lesson, namely, that they should, in future, be so strong as regards their military position, that it would be impossible for any Great Power to get the idea that it could, by an unexpected attack on Switzerland obtain possession of these passes and thereby hold a European key-position. It was the fact that they occupied a position in the centre of the troubled European Continent which forces the Swiss to become so capable in the defence of their country. This fact also led them to an important political conviction: for about 450 years, the Swiss Confederation has renounced war as a means in her foreign policy. During all that time, she has never once made any attempt to expand her territory by the use of violence and she has declared herself neutral in every war engaged in by others. As guardian of the important Alpine passes, she considers that her neutrality is something which can be of service to the cause of Peace. At the same time, she has declared throughout the ages, that she intends to protect this neutrality herself. The Great Powers may recognise it, but it's Switzerland herself who sees to it that it is maintained. This, however, necessitates a well trained Army. The Swiss Army is not suitable for an offensive war. It is an Army for tenacious defence purposes.

The aim of this defence, however, is not limited merely to the safeguarding of our neutrality and of the Alpine passes. It is, at the same time an expression of the Swiss will to be free. Switzerland has renounced from any policy of power or expansion. But the Swiss people firmly intend to be masters in their own home and to organise their country themselves in accordance

with their own free decisions. Switzerland is determined to remain independent. Throughout the history of the European nations, she has always cleaved to the side of freedom in the struggles which have arisen time and again, against the spirit of power and of despotism. The Swiss Army is an objective, visible expression of this will for freedom. It demands great sacrifices from this small nation of mountain folk. But it is just because of the sacrifice demanded that it becomes such a serious business. Freedom is not worth anything as long as it is only on paper. A people must be ready and willing to stake everything in order to maintain it. When, during the Second World War, Switzerland was, for a time, completely surrounded by Hitler's and Mussolini's armies the entire Alpine massif was transformed into a fortress and it was the thought of the valiant army ready for its defence that kept confidence high throughout those anxious years. The recollection of this has done much to strengthen the defensive spirit of the Swiss soldier. The army will remain in being, as a necessary counterpart to our determination to be free, so long as there is no real guarantee in this world for the peace and right of existence of the small nations.

II. Regarding the characteristics and structure of the Swiss Militia.

History, the limited resources of a country without any raw materials and its geographical position, have all contributed towards the formation of a very special Army system in Switzerland. An Army had to be created, which was capable of carrying out its task and was, at the same time, not too expensive. It was thus that the Swiss Militia came into being, in particular form of general compulsory military service. Every Swiss citizen capable of bearing arms, as soon as he has attained his twentieth years, receives a thorough military training, lasting, on an average, four months. After that, he is bound each year to attend so-called refresher courses, which, at present, last for three weeks. When he reaches a certain age, he need only attend such refresher courses at stated intervals, and at a still later period he is only bound to present himself for inspection, that is to say, he is called up once a year in order that he may submit his armament and equipment for inspection and show that it is maintained in good condition.

In addition to this programme, there are also the so-called "military duties performed when not on military service." Every year, the Subaltern, the Non-Commissioned Officer, and the soldier must carry out a rifle-practice programme in one of the Rifle Associations, and prove that they have lost nothing of their skill in shooting. A large number of officers, N.C.O.'s and soldiers carry out voluntary military activities, in addition to their obligatory duties, within the military associations, of which there are a great many in this country. The Swiss form of militia is based on the idea that a minimum amount of military training provided by the State, should be supplemented by the voluntary readiness of its citizens to prepare themselves for an effective carrying out of their military duties.

The fact that the Swiss soldier is himself in charge of his own arsenal may also be considered as a duty performed outside his military service. This particularity of the Swiss Army system is quite unique. The Swiss soldier keeps in his own home his personal equipment, his uniforms and his arms. In time of special danger he is issued with ammunition also. In this way,

he is ready to march off at any time and the mobilisation of the Army can be carried out in a few hours. Motor-cyclists and cyclists muster with their vehicles, cavalry men with their horses. The system has developed as a result of a long tradition, which has proved its worth: it has been found that the percentage of militiamen who had to be punished for neglect of their equipment or arms, was extremely small. On the other hand, this system of the complete arming of a people requires, quite naturally, that the political conditions in the country be quiet and stable and that there should be complete confidence in the Government. For a country like Switzerland, which is encompassed on all sides by Great Powers, a rapid mobilisation in time of war can be a decisive factor. The Militia is a guarantee for it. The number of regular officers and men is extremely small. Some of the regular officers are known as the Instructors; their task consists in ensuring appropriate military formation of all ranks in Recruit Schools and during refresher courses. The officers in the higher commands, such as Commanders of Divisions or Army Corps, are also regular officers, whereas it is not necessary for the Commander of a Brigade or a Regiment to be a professional soldier. As regards other ranks, a number of regular soldiers and Non-Commissioned Officers also do permanent military service, chiefly as a corps for the defence of fortresses.

The Militia system has made it possible for a Swiss Army to be created, which corresponds to the requirements set forth in the introductory part of this talk. The short training period is not expensive, and yet it suffices, in view of the fact that the Swiss militia man, as a general rule, continues his military training outside his military service. As regards the arming of the people, this guarantees a rapid mobilisation which minimises the risk of a sudden attack. This is of vital importance, as it safeguards the most important task of an Army which exists only for purposes of defence, and is not intended for a war of aggression.

III. Why should there be an Army reform?

Since the war ended, somewhat lively discussion has arisen, from time to time in Switzerland as to whether or not the Army stood in need of reform. The reasons for these discussions are manifold. For one thing, there are the new and impressive technical re-

sources which played such a decisive rôle in the last war. Switzerland, a small country, very poor in raw materials, must decide which of these new war machines are the most suitable for the defence of her country, and which are not. She must also examine the forms of her own manner of conducting a war, in order to be able to minimise as much as is possible the effects of an attack with these modern weapons. As no one in Switzerland even thinks of abolishing the Militia, it will be necessary henceforth to obtain as good results as possible from the short training period, which is peculiar to the Swiss Army system. For all these reasons a clamour is going up, demanding certain reforms and urging that only those forms of military training which are of essential utility be retained, whereas all that serves the superficial purpose of external smartness be abandoned.

A remark which could be heard repeatedly during these discussions was that the Army must be made more democratic. This expression — which as a matter of fact rapidly disappeared from these arguments, as nothing could be more democratic than a Militia — really meant that care should be taken by the authorities in order that the Army should remain a true people's Army as it was during the war. It must not — as has been the case frequently in peace-time — be imbued with a spirit redolent of the barracks, but must maintain the spirit of an active relation between the citizen and the soldier, which corresponds to the true character of the Swiss Militia. In order to satisfy both these demands — that of a simple and practical form of military service, and the other pertaining to the maintenance of close relations between the citizen and the soldier — a decision was made to revise the Service Regulations of the Swiss Army. A Commission composed of officers of all ranks, Non-Commissioned Officers and men, drew up a new project, which is to form the basis of the work of revision.

The question as to the extent to which armament, strategy and tactics must be changed to meet the requirements of the new conditions is — and this is quite comprehensible — much more ticklish. It cannot be answered as easily as that concerning new Army Regulations. It is now being carefully examined by some of the leading Army Authorities. One or two

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ideas were made public a couple of months ago when the Federal Government issued a complementary Report to that prepared by the Commander-in-Chief of the Swiss Army on his Command during the second World War years. From this complementary report it can be gathered that in any war that might occur in the future, Switzerland has decided upon a "area defence," with the aim of putting up a fight, based on an infantry which is thoroughly well trained in technical guerilla tactics. Concerning our future armament, certain decisions have already been taken: Switzerland has given up the initial plan for the organisation of an Armoured Command, but intends to do her utmost to make her anti-tank defence as effective as possible.

A word might not be out of place regarding the open way in which these discussions take place in public, in Switzerland. Press articles and lectures in the various military and political associations deal extensively and with the greatest keenness with the subject of the Army Reform. The opinion prevails in Switzerland that such publicity is necessary, as it can only promote the spirit of resistance of a small country: people like to know quite clearly what they are fighting for and what they have to fight with. Open discussion on the subject of Army reform tends to educate the people, in the sense that they learn to take a thorough interest in vital questions affecting the existence of their country and to discuss them in a serious manner. The Swiss citizen hasn't only his uniform, his arms and — on a number of occasions — his ammunition in his home. He also wishes to participate with his head and his heart in any decision concerning the future defence of his country.

IV. *Looking back at the War Period 1939-1945.*

Can the War of 1939—1945 have exercised an effect on the Swiss Army, in spite of the fact that this Army did not participate in the fighting? This question is a justifiable one, but it also shows that the person who puts it does not yet possess a clear picture of the Swiss idea of defence. During the whole of the six war years, the Swiss Army stood in a permanent state of readiness. It is true that it did not take any offensive, but, daily and hourly, it was faced with the thought that it might be called upon to undergo the supreme test. If the Swiss Army was to fulfil its purpose, it had to be something more than a mere symbol of liberty. It had to represent a definite defensive strength with which any would-be aggressor would have to reckon and to include in the calculation of his operational plans. Therefore, it was in no way sufficient to merely have the Army in a state of preparedness, so that as soon as there was an attack, it could be fetched out of the barracks. What the situation really demanded from the military leaders and from each, individual soldier was that they should follow the development of events with the greatest care; they must not allow themselves to drift into any manner of carelessness or imagine that it would be time enough to put things on a war basis when War became a reality.

This six years of preparedness on active service, required the following two things from the country: in the first place, it was necessary to establish a proper relation between the number of men taken away from their jobs for military service and the requirements of the country's economy. It was impossible for us to belong to only one or the other of two categories — civilians engaged in work or soldiers ready for battle: no, each one of us was continually being called up for

both purposes. It can thus be said that the experience gained throughout the war served to make still closer the relations between the civilian and the soldier, as emphasized by the particularity of our militia system. The Swiss is first of all a civilian, but he is transformed into a soldier just as soon as any attempt is made from outside to interfere with his right to arrange his public and social life in accordance with his own ideas. As a soldier, he submits voluntarily to discipline and to a hard physical training. At the same time, however, he expects to be given the consideration due him as a citizen by those in command. This recognition became general as a result of the active service lasting throughout the long war years, and it should, wherever possible, be strengthened and applied to an extent greater even than heretofore in our Army training methods.

The second lesson the war taught our Swiss Army was that mentally it must remain flexible to the highest degree. This we realised acutely, more especially during the middle phase of the war from the time when France collapsed until the capitulation of Italy, when we were surrounded on all sides by the Axis armies and knew that in case of an attack we would have to fight against forces greatly superior to our own. It was imperative for us to organise our country and our material possibilities in such a way that it would be necessary for the attacker to employ large numbers of troops if he wished to gain a speedy victory over us; and our infantry had to be trained in such a way that, in spite of our inferiority in the air and our entire lack of an armoured command, it would be able to inflict the maximum amount of damage to the invader. In other words: the plan for defensive measures against an enemy so greatly superior in force must be envisaged from the standpoint of how to make this attack as costly and as ineffective as possible. Such a defensive plan was elaborated and worked upon continually. . . . The procedure for mobilisation was adapted to modern requirements and de-centralised. Battalions, and sometimes even individual companies, were often mobilised in the vicinity of that sector in which they would be called upon to fight should the invasion take place. The troops were continually reminded of the possibility of an attack in order to accustom them to the idea, and they were trained to be able to fight independently, in small, isolated groups, by night as well as by day. The training of the Infantry was carried out on a new basis, which provide for the instruction of the men in the technique of close combat and small engagements. From these few examples taken from the war period, we can see that the notion of a purely defensive army and that of the Militia system are quite compatible with the maintenance of an active and prepared Army. The determination to possess mental flexibility in this connection, may be considered to be a valuable asset inherited from active military service during the war.

(To be continued.)

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