

Home affairs

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HOME AFFAIRS.

by PIERRE BÉGUIN.

"Re-organisation of the Army."

Of late, there has been a good deal of talk about a "malaise" in regard to military matters. Discussions on this subject, have not yet quietened down. And they will continue, in any case, so long as the Popular Referendums proposing a reduction in expenditure for national defence and the appropriation of the sums thus economised for social and humanitarian purposes, have not been dealt with by Parliament, and then submitted to the Sovereign People. And this will last for at least two years.

Meanwhile, another debate is taking place, also on the subject of our national defence. This concerns the choice that will have to be made by our authorities, when it has been decided as to the manner in which our Army must be re-organised, in order that it should be equal to carrying out its task, in any situation that might arise. Since the end of the war, a rearmament plan has been drawn up and realised, to a very large part. Our Army has been strengthened by being given new weapons, which it did not possess ten years ago, as for instance jet aircraft and armoured tanks. A certain evolution has taken place. Nevertheless, the fact remains that technical evolution has been such that we are now faced with the necessity for making a choice.

M. Chaudet, the new Head of the Military Department, who has only been in office for a year, has been busily engaged in work, in close collaboration with the heads of our Army. On various public occasions, he has spoken on this subject, explaining the terms of the problem and even expressing some preferences. He has, however, always reserved the opinion of his colleagues on the Federal Council, making it clear, each time, that it was to the Government alone that belonged the competency to orientate the studies which were being engaged upon, and to proceed, in the first instance, with choices which were not solely of a technical or a military character, but also political and psychological.

As a matter of fact, we find that two schools of thought are confronting each other. On the one hand, we have among us traditionalist elements who consider that our Army must remain a defensive one, in the strictest sense of that term, that it must remain attached to the terrain, it must be strengthened, it must defend the national territory and push back any eventual aggressor in short it must practice the tactics of a hedgehog. Obviously, this way of looking at things is very close to what we have in our minds, for, our country, firmly decided, as it is, never to attack anyone, having even forbidden itself to do this, has a great difficulty in thinking in terms of an offensive.

During the last few years, however, another school of thought has come into being. It goes without saying that its adherents do not contemplate for one instant that Switzerland might take the initiative of an attack on one of her neighbours, or even participate in any attack decided upon by some other country. But, placing themselves on a strictly technical point of view, they think that nowadays it is no longer sufficient, in order to repel an invader, to dig oneself in, to wait for him in a fortified position

and to prevent him from entering. They are convinced, on the contrary, that blows should be given before they are received, that steps must be taken to prevent the attack before it has taken place and has deployed all its effects, and that, therefore, an attempt must be made to disorganise the enemy, at the right time. And that is why they are of the opinion that our Army — or, at any rate, an important section of this Army — should be more mobile and possess a greater firing power. Which presupposes a very notable effort being made in order to develop armoured vehicles and the air force.

This second conception meets with a good deal of incomprehension in our country. People find it difficult to abandon the doctrine of simple defence, in order to adopt that of strategical defence, but also of tactical offensive. What is feared most of all is that the development of the mechanised arms, will, in the long run, necessitate a large increase in specialised technicians, and this would not be at all compatible with our traditional idea of a Militia Army. Moreover, it would entail expenditure in no way compatible with our national resources.

These two conceptions were put forward recently, during a session of the New Helvetic Society. Unquestionably, the traditional idea met with the greatest favour. The discussion, however, made it possible to perceive a solution which would conciliate the two theories. It would appear as if endeavours are being made on both sides to overcome a great many preconceived ideas and to seek for a synthesis. That would indeed show wisdom.



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