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OUR SOUTHERN DEFENCES.

(“Daily Express,” 7.5.40.)

In a wildly skidding car I climbed to-day to within twenty minutes of the summit of the Bernina Pass — a thousand feet higher than the glacier which takes its sluggish course along the valley, a thousand feet below the curve where the road reaches its highest stretch, 7,660 feet up in the clouds, and then corkscrews down to Italy.

Here the car stopped, its wheels locked in the snow. Not for three weeks yet, my guide told me, will the way across from Switzerland to Italy be free.

Three weeks for the Swiss to complete their preparations against what is the hidden, nightmare dread of all Switzerland — an Italian attack in concert with the Germans.

Because it is through this pass the Swiss believe, that Mussolini would launch one of the main shafts of an invasion.

Bernina lies on the direct route between Northern Italy and Munich. From St. Moritz and Pontresina run superb mountain roads and railways through Samaden into the heart of Switzerland.

On the edge of the snowline we passed a ragged stony mountain. It is marked on the map as a “national park” for preserving wild life.

Way up the mountain is perched a restaurant with a telescope through which last summer tourists watched ibex picking their way along the crags. Other things can be spotted through high-placed telescopes — troop movements and the work of fortification, for instance — so the restaurant has been closed.

But in the crevices of the mountain, my guide whispered, vast stores of explosives are planted. An invading force would bring down the whole national park on their heads. They would perish in this lonely gulf like the army of Herod perished in the waters of the Red Sea.

Further up the road, where the snow begins in patches, hidden forts guard both sides of the valley. You could bomb them for weeks, and the defenders would still be firing from that semi-circle of guns, whose nozzles leap out of square steel shutters in the living rock.

Approaches to the forts are ringed by rows of tank barriers. Steel rails are embedded in the side of the road.

There are two ways in which the Italians might possibly capture Bernina Pass.

The first is by a surprise attack over the mountains. Here they will find their match in the climbers and ski-troops of the Swiss Army, who recently sent a company of a hundred and fifty men to the top of Piz Palu in full war kit. A trial exercise, they called it. Piz Palu towers 13,000 feet over the Bernina Pass, a vision of shimmering snow and dazzling blue ice.

These Swiss mountain men are brown as leather, agile as goats. You will find them picnicking on crazy ledges, laughing and yodelling. But their rifles are always ready. Their skis stand upright in the snow beside them. And as marksmen they are deadlier than the Finns.

The second possibility of surprise — however slight — is by treachery of the Quisling type. But the Swiss are quick to seize a point.

Because the first act of the Nazis in Norway was to capture telephone centres you will find Swiss sentries, armed and steel-helmeted, on guard outside every postal station on the frontier.

We stopped on the way back to Samaden at a tiny stone chalet, built 300 years ago. The children were in bed. Husband and wife were sitting close up to the radio listening to the German-language bulletin from London.

“To-night the news is very clear,” they said. “It is not always so. Sometimes jamming is very bad. An Italian station interferes.”

The carved dresser in their living-room bore the arms of a Pontresina family who once ruled part of Northern Italy.

Even to-day, with three generations in between, Pontresina men regret their lost domain.

Italian Blackshirts may cry: “Tunis, Nice, Suez!” on orders from above.

But if the fighting switches to Bernina the soldiers here will look across the Alps and shout “Como, Tirano and Sondrio,” with a conviction which owes nothing to the shifting expedients of politics.

KNOWLEDGE AND CONSCIENCE.

The preservation of our democracy depends less upon the standard of science than on the level of conscience. Upon this level must be inaugurated the spiritual defence of our democracy. The State must again be the object of our sacrifice, not the victim of our aim.

(Message from the Federal Council
9th December, 1938.)

ELECTION BY THE PEOPLE.

The nature of democracy is not such that all should know and do everything — that leads to pure amateurism — but that from out of the masses of the people, and not from out of a privileged class, the right man is put into the right place.

(Hans Nabholz.)

SOCIAL.

The marriage took place last Saturday of Pilot Officer Roy A. Marchand, the only son of Mr. and Mrs. René Marchand, of 6, Hayes Road, Bromley, to Miss Jean Angela Cullen.

After the service at Christ Church, Mayfair, a reception was held at the Dorchester Hotel, Park Lane, W., where a large circle of friends attended to present their best wishes to the happy couple.