

**Zeitschrift:** The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK  
**Herausgeber:** Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom  
**Band:** - (1941)  
**Heft:** 992

**Artikel:** The beleaguered country  
**Autor:** [s.n.]  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-690239>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

**Download PDF:** 04.12.2024

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

usage le Conseil fédéral a-t-il le droit d'en faire? Jusqu'à quand doit-il conserver ce droit?

Il est assez caractéristique que ces questions soient posées en ce moment même en Suisse. Ce simple fait prouve que nous n'acceptons pas volontiers l'idée d'une perpétuation de ce régime et que notre idéal, mis un instant sous le boisseau, doit revivre pleinement le plus rapidement possible. Mais il prouve également que nous sommes soucieux de l'avenir et que nous n'entendons pas sacrifier l'intérêt national à des conceptions idéologiques, si attachés que nous soyons à celles-ci.

En effet, dans certains milieux qui n'ont rien de révolutionnaire, on commence à se demander si les pleins pouvoirs du Conseil fédéral ne devront pas être maintenus après la guerre, en tout cas pendant un certain temps. On n'a pas oublié les remous qui ont immédiatement suivi la conclusion de l'armistice en novembre 1918. On entrevoit que, cette fois-ci, les bouleversements économiques et sociaux risquent d'être plus graves encore et qu'il sera plus difficile de rester maître des événements. On prévoit que nous devons adapter notre vie à une situation entièrement nouvelle et que, pour dominer l'incohérence d'une opinion publique désemparée, nous aurons plus que jamais besoin d'un gouvernement fort. On n'exclut pas l'éventualité dans laquelle le Conseil fédéral serait appelé à décréter de sa propre autorité certaines réformes durables, à édifier de son propre mouvement certaines parties de la maison dans laquelle nous habiterons.

Cette éventualité a été récemment évoquée par quelques journaux. Mais, si l'on en juge par des réactions très caractéristiques, il est clair que l'on répugne, d'une manière générale, à donner aux pleins pouvoirs une portée qu'ils n'ont jamais eue, puisqu'ils ont été accordés au Conseil fédéral exclusivement pour que celui-ci soit en mesure de surmonter les difficultés nées de la guerre et du service actif. De la sorte, la mission gouvernementale extraordinaire a été clairement définie. Il faudrait, pour permettre au Conseil fédéral d'aller au delà, lui confier expressément une mission nouvelle. Il ne peut pas l'inférer de celle dont il est d'ores et déjà chargé.

Ce problème ne trouvera pas sa solution prochaine. Il est sain, il est heureux que notre opinion publique envisage les événements futurs avec prévoyance et qu'elle se garde des illusions les plus séduisantes. Cela nous permet d'espérer qu'elle sera à la hauteur de toutes les situations et que, fermement attachée à notre idéal de la démocratie directe, elle continuera à tenir un juste compte des nécessités gouvernementales. Si nous voulons succéder dans les tâches de demain, il ne faut pas hypothéquer l'avenir. Il faut surtout maintenir cette discipline intérieure et ce sens civique qui sont, depuis de longs mois, nos meilleures forces et nos plus belles sauvegardes.

Pierre Béguin.

## THE BELEAGUERED COUNTRY.

*This article is reprinted from "The Sphere," September 6th; it represents an instructive survey though some of the figures given will hardly stand up to facts. In its conclusions the writer seems to have gone astray and we certainly cannot agree with some of the aggressive though well-meant statements.*

For two years Switzerland, gradually encircled, has been living in a state of siege. Among the still neutral countries of warring Europe, little Switzerland, with her 6,000,000 citizens (of whom only 4,000,000 live in the homeland) and her territory of 173,347 square miles, occupies a special place. Spain has been with the Axis for a long time; Sweden and Finland are more or less involved in the war between Germany and Russia; Turkey endangered her independence by signing the pact with Germany on June 18th, 1940; the independence of Portugal is that of a free port which will end on the day when the last American steamer leaves the harbour of Lisbon or the last Atlantic Clipper takes off from the airfield of Sintra. Switzerland alone — squeezed in between Italy, which has long been casting an avid eye on Tessin; Germany, which covets Berne, Basle and Zurich; and Fascist France, which would like to recoup her defeat by annexing Geneva — keeps the "guard on the Rhine," the guard of its neutrality.

In a *military* sense, Switzerland is the most mobilised country in the world, including the countries engaged in war. Of the 4,000,000 Swiss living in Switzerland, about 2,000,000 are men; of these nearly 1,000,000 are under arms.

*Economically*, Switzerland has to struggle not only against the British and German blockades, but also against the "peaceful" pressure of Germany, which is practically Switzerland's only customer and seller, and against the difficulties of transportation through thousands of miles of starving countries. Only 20 per cent. of Swiss territory is cultivated, only 10 per cent. serves as pasturage, the remaining 70 per cent. is sterile mountain country. To maintain the Swiss living standard, the highest in the world, is the particular task of the little State, whose food situation is a real paradox: while the besieging armies of Europe are all starving, the besieged fortress of Switzerland still has enough to eat.

The *financial* situation of this European Tobruk deserves special attention. The few uncensored reports trickling out of Switzerland have not yet thrown any light on the part played by the Confederation as Germany's financial centre. Every day the Germans receive from the French alone nearly 20,000,000 French francs for the upkeep of war prisoners, and a great part of these and almost all other occupation costs flow to Switzerland in the form of banknotes, where they are exchanged for Swiss francs, to be later magically metamorphosed into dollars. Switzerland is to-day the centre of a financial smuggling enterprise involving not relatively small private holdings, but the wealth of entire nations.

Politically, too, Switzerland presents the picture of a besieged fortress. A democracy ruled by a coalition of minorities always has difficult problems to solve, and it is not accident that the three last Swiss referendums resulted in Government defeats. And while "the oldest democracy in the world" is engaged

Drink delicious "Ovaltine"  
at every meal—for Health!

in a heroic struggle, Georges Oltramare, the Swiss Quisling, is biding his time in Paris, in the editorial offices of the *Paris-Soir*.

In September 1939, immediately after the outbreak of the war, Switzerland ordered general mobilisation — just as she did after the outbreak of the first World War. All able-bodied men between twenty and sixty years of age are mobilised: 1,000,000 men are constantly under arms. In Switzerland, every citizen has to serve in the Army, and the 1,000,000 Swiss soldiers are really trained troops, of whom 500,000 are excellently armed and motorised; 200,000 men between fifty and sixty years of age are active in the auxiliary services, and 300,000 are busy erecting a second fortified line in the hinterland. This second fortified line is really the only one — for the Swiss first line of defence consists of the Alps. These mountains are, however, the most formidable fortress that ever defended the borders of a country; the tunnels through them are all mined and can be blown up at any minute. The St. Gothard Pass, the most important artery of communication between Italy and Germany (it is considerably wider and more accessible than the Brenner Pass) can be completely destroyed in five minutes; and the Swiss General Staff has repeatedly warned Berlin that, in the event of an invasion, it will issue the briefest but most efficient of all military orders — an order comprising only three words: "Blow up everything!"

The political, economic and moral consequences of the Swiss mobilisation are considerable. From a material point of view, it is almost unthinkable that Switzerland is able to meet the costs of her permanent mobilisation. The "frontier guard," as the Swiss modestly call their Army, costs 5,000,000 Swiss francs a day — that is somewhere in the neighbourhood of £300,000. But this is only a small part of the damage suffered by Switzerland as a result of her mobilisation. The removal of large masses of men from agriculture creates great difficulties, in view of the fact that the specialised Swiss farmer can be replaced only after a long period of training. Likewise, Swiss industry, like the watch factories in the Jura, the chocolate factories in the eastern cantons and the cheese industries in the cantons of Berne and Graubünden, require highly specialised labourers.

This makes it clear why the Swiss, who are as proud of their Army as scarcely any other nation, dislike their state of permanent mobilisation. The Swiss Army is commanded by a General appointed by Parliament. General Guisan, the present Commander-in-Chief and the only living Swiss General, is married and the father of four children. He is a former pupil of Saint-Cyr. Though a Francophile, his love for France did not induce him to take the French Army as his model. The prematurely grey-haired General, with the lean face of an old soldier and the prominent cheekbones of a Swiss peasant, is sixty years old and is exceedingly popular in Switzerland, because of his typically Swiss family life. "*Nous avons un général*" ("We have a general") is the proud slogan of the Swiss — a slogan that has nothing in common with the cult of the Führer in Germany.

It goes without saying that the dissatisfaction with the state of permanent mobilisation offers a favourable ground for the work of Hitler's fifth column. But mobilisation is not the only factor adversely affecting Swiss economy.

Because of her unfavourable topography, Switzerland is greatly dependent on the importation of food. Formerly she bought wheat, corn, rye and vegetables from Hungary, Rumania, Yugoslavia, Argentina, France and the United States; she even imported butter, which may seem astonishing, from Denmark. These sources of supply have been reduced to a mere trickle by the blockade. Virtually no restrictions, however, were imposed during the first six months of the war: rationing was introduced only on January 1st, 1940, when food, textile and coal cards were issued, and the consumption of petrol cut down to a minimum.

The food cards entitle their bearers to 500 grammes of butter, 425 grammes of fats, 500 grammes of sugar a month, and  $\frac{1}{2}$  litre of salad oil for a family of four which does not use its fat rations. In addition, the cards provide for 250 grammes of cake, and 500 grammes of flour (all the flour is mixed with corn; the milling of white flour is forbidden). Bread is sold without cards, but it must be at least twenty-four hours old. The buying of fresh bread is punished by fines up to 10,000 francs and by imprisonment up to a month; those who sell it can be fined up to 30,000 francs and imprisoned for up to five months. Meat is not rationed, but pork is sold only one day a week, as pigs must be delivered to Germany for coal.

All these rations are for the most part theoretical: the salad oil, for instance, is, in present-day Switzerland, a pure myth. The butchers close their shops three days a week, and most of the unrationed articles have so deteriorated in quality that the Swiss, accustomed to high standards, can scarcely recognise them. Whipped cream has been abolished; only cooking chocolate can be found on the market; candy is forbidden. On August 1st, milk and cheese, hitherto obtainable in unlimited quantities, were also rationed.

Such is the petrol shortage that last April the circulation of private cars was forbidden, except for physicians, who may buy 20 litres of petrol a month at 18 cents a litre.

Particularly strict is the rationing of coal and clothing. Each citizen is entitled to two suits or dresses a year — it is true that the restrictions apply only to woollen articles. Each Swiss citizen is allowed but three pairs of stockings or socks a year; woollen underwear or shirts can be had only at the expense of suits or dresses. By contrast — aside from stockings — there have never been so many silk articles in Switzerland as to-day. The Germans sold the silks plundered in France to Switzerland. But as the official rate of exchange of the German mark in Switzerland is 80 per cent. higher than its real value, the prices of silken goods are exorbitant.

The most striking shortage in Switzerland is that of coal. Last winter the available amount of coal was only 40 per cent. of normal; next winter there will be only 20 per cent. Wood for heating purposes can be had only on cards, and only those are entitled to it who have no facilities for heating with coal. Last winter bitter cold reigned in all Swiss dwellings. Moreover, the Swiss, known as "the most-washed European," is permitted hot water for his bath only one day a week, from Saturday 6 p.m. to Sunday 6 p.m. Saturday evenings, no Swiss is to be found outside his home: all Switzerland is taking a hot bath.

The heating problem could easily be solved by deforestation, but there is no Swiss who would not

gladly give up all his beloved comforts to save his forests. This is typically Swiss.

It goes without saying that under these circumstances Swiss industry suffers enormous damages. The hotel industry has completely broken down. It is literally bankrupt. Most big hotels are so deeply indebted that almost without exception they now belong to the banks, which do not seize them only because there are no buyers. The watch industry suffers from the general economic terrorism exerted by the Third Reich. Most of the large world-famous watch factories are closed; many have been reorganised and are producing precision instruments for Germany. The unemployed are absorbed by the Army, but this does not solve the problem of supporting their families, and the country with the highest living standard in the world is being rapidly reduced to the lowest common denominator. Only the Sulzer Works in Winterthur, the Brown-Boveri Works in Baden and the Oerlikon Corporation in Zurich are going full steam, but they are working exclusively for Germany. The Sulzer Works make locomotives and Diesel engines; the Brown-Boveri Works turbines and electrical apparatus; the Oerlikon arms, above all anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns — defensive weapons whose quality is said to be unsurpassed anywhere.

This revolutionary change in Swiss life is apparent even to the casual visitor. Since 1799, when Korsakov's armies came down from the north and entered Schaffhausen in pursuit of the French, and the Swiss national poet, Zschokke, issued his appeal — alas, so timely to-day! — “for pity for suffering mankind,” the Swiss had not known the meaning of misery. To-day, Switzerland — which is still a paradise compared to the rest of Europe — is gradually sinking to a lower standard. On the deserted Geneva waterfront the shutters of the big hotels are drawn and the doors closed. The Beau Rivage, where Empress Elizabeth of Austria died and Edward Benes signed the Little Entente Pact (in the same suite) and the Hotel Metropole in which Stresemann, Briand and Sir Austen Chamberlain once dreamed of European peace, are closed. *A la carte* service has vanished from the restaurants; there is only a scanty *table d'hôte* from which meat is absent three days a week. The only street traffic is that of bicycles.

The parks, formerly characteristic of Swiss cities, are in process of disappearing. On the banks of the Rhine in Basle, in the large park behind the Hôtel des Trois Rois, salad is growing; and in Geneva the Parc Bertrand and the marvellous Ariana Park of the League of Nations are to-day one large potato field.

If the account of the Swiss military preparations, the food situation and the industrial breakdown seem sombre enough to serve as material for a Zola novel, the history of Swiss finances sounds like a cheap detective story.

Switzerland is the most important financial centre of the German Reich. This does not refer to the direct “gifts” sent by Switzerland to Germany. The Swiss gold reserves have for the most part been sent to the U.S.A.; a certain portion of this gold — a return to the primitive! — is, however, buried in the depths of St. Gothard. Billions in gold may be blown up at any moment. The part played by Switzerland in financing Germany is little known abroad, but it helps to account for the fact that German finances have not yet entirely broken down.

The story begins with the French defeat. The occupation costs paid by the French, the wages for war prisoners, and above all, the enormous amounts of French francs confiscated by the Germans in Paris and in occupied territory, have been flowing to Switzerland in an uninterrupted stream. It goes without saying that the Swiss have no economic use for French francs; but the Swiss National Bank was compelled to pledge itself to buy and exchange French francs. A Swiss bank director in Basle described Germany's financial business with Switzerland as “the biggest swindle in history.”

Every day, *viâ* the diplomatic pouch and through a smoothly functioning organisation of several hundred smugglers, the Germans import many millions of French francs to Switzerland. To understand what this means, there is no need to study the secrets of Swiss banking. If you enter the vault of any Swiss bank, you will see freshly printed French 5,000-franc notes piled high on the shelves. To-day, the rate of exchange of these 5,000-franc notes is 125 Swiss francs — that is, 25 Swiss francs for 1,000 French francs, or 5.80 dollars for 1,000 French francs — while 1,000 French francs are officially worth 100 Swiss francs, or 23.80 dollars.

In other words, Switzerland is compelled to buy the devaluated francs from Germany at an excessive rate. What happens to these francs? They return to France through many channels. The Swiss Government itself tries to send them back to France to buy Swiss Government bonds and industrial stocks held by the French at a low price. As there is no official clearing arrangement between France and Switzerland, many Swiss citizens buy French banknotes and send them to France, thus settling their private debts at a profit. With a clearing arrangement, the Swiss would have to pay about four times as much as he pays to-day. And there is still another thriving business. Many Swiss capitalists buy enormous amounts of banknotes, smuggle them into France, and purchase land houses and stock. The Swiss National Bank looks on silently because it wants to get rid of the banknotes the Germans compel it to accept, even though this manner of disposing of them endangers Switzerland.

There is hardly any form of smuggling that cannot be encountered in present-day Switzerland. One of the most curious is the exchange of 5,000-franc bills for 1,000-franc bills, and of 1,000-franc bills for 100-franc bills. In France 5,000-franc bills are more highly valued than 1,000-franc bills, and the latter more than 100-franc bills, for the simple reason that it is easier to smuggle large bills than small ones. The business consists in “grabbing” the 5,000-franc bills circulating in Switzerland, in selling them in France with a profit, re-smuggling the smaller denominations into Switzerland and again exchanging them for higher denominations.

The centre of the smuggling trade is Geneva. The whole border between Switzerland and Unoccupied France is defended by a barbed-wire fence taller than a man. It is the only border in the world in which not a single free passage is to be found. But this does not stop the smugglers. Dozens of patrol boats guard the stretch between Lausanne and Evian-les-Bains on the lake of Geneva; all night long their searchlights glide over the smooth surface of the water. But all this is in vain: dozens of fishing-boats slip through. And

when night falls over Switzerland, the Swiss forests — like Birnham Wood — become alive and begin to march. By legal and illegal methods, the Germans force the Swiss to comply with their wishes. What is true of the French francs is also true of the German mark, though reselling the mark is so difficult that even the Germans do not often engage in the business. German trade with Switzerland is nothing but disguised plunder. Germany sells Switzerland raw materials from which Switzerland manufactures arms, munitions and instruments that must be sent back to Germany. Germany sends to Switzerland just as much iron, steel and coal from Alsace and Luxembourg as she pleases and pays for Swiss articles with commodities which she does not need.

Never has Switzerland been politically more split than to-day. Around her twenty-one lakes her people used to live in almost fabulous harmony. The ideological war raging at Switzerland's frontiers has destroyed this political unity.

This year three referendums were held in Switzerland. According to the Swiss constitution, a petition signed by 10,000 citizens suffices to submit a law to popular approval. In all these three cases the Swiss decided against their Government.

In the first referendum the Government wanted to raise the salaries of the Civil Servants: the people regarded the salaries of this strongly bureaucratized country as high enough. In the second case the Government wanted to assign more fruit to the manufacture of alcoholic drinks: the Swiss decided that a child eating fruit is more important than a man drinking brandy. In the third case the Government refused to increase the number of Cabinet posts from five to seven, so as not to admit the Social Democrats to the Government. The people voted for the extension of the Cabinet.

All this is explained chiefly by the fact that a coalition of middle-class parties — the Radical, Conservative, Catholic and Peasant parties — rule in opposition to the Social Democratic majority. Even after the referendum, the Social Democrats were not admitted to the Government. This exclusion of the largest political party in the country causes a permanent political tension.

In October 1940 Pilet-Golaz, President of the Swiss Confederation, received, without informing the members of the Council representatives of the forbidden Nazi party — their Swiss name is the "Frontist Party" — and discussed Switzerland's policies with them. Public indignation was so strong that Pilet-Golaz and his circle were forced to abandon their plans.

The radical mood of the population, among whom both Nazi-ism and Communism are gaining ground, has infected the Army. It is an open secret that the relations between the Leftist men of the rank and file and the Rightist officers are increasingly tense. There is no doubt that the St. Gothard and Simplon tunnels are tremendously strong arguments in the hands of the defenders of Swiss freedom.

The Swiss bureaucrats, influenced by Germany, are growing increasingly hostile towards foreigners. All foreigners, with the exception of Aryan Germans and Italians, must leave the country within six months "because of the food shortage." Until that date, all

foreigners, regardless of their material situation, must be interned in labour camps. By contrast, every destitute foreigner who leaves Switzerland equipped with a regular *visa* receives 400 Swiss francs. Thus the Swiss are trying to find a middle road between the traditional rights of asylum and the new Fascist intolerance.

Europe's last "free" country is a beleaguered fortress. Its courageous inhabitants continue to keep watch on its frontiers. But even more than the countries which fell to Hitler's brown battalions, the example of Switzerland demonstrates that there can be no neutrality and no freedom as long as Hitler's shadow hangs over Europe. Switzerland is the model of a country which, so far, at least, has not been invaded by military methods, but by spies, swindlers, speculators, business agents, diplomats, manufacturers and all those German invasion troops who wear no helmets, and not even a uniform.

### UNE VISITE A "SUNSHINE HOME."

Le samedi 16 août, près de 30 compatriotes, membres de la N.S.H., se trouvaient réunis à Swiss House. Un autocar confortable les attendait pour les conduire à Sunshine Home, East Grinstead, Sussex. Pour ceux qui ne savent pas ce que ce nom représente, disons qu'il s'agit d'un home pour enfants aveugles, dirigé par une "matron" anglaise que seconde avec beaucoup d'amour et de compétence une compatriote, Mlle G. Zingg, membre fidèle de notre groupe londonien de la N.S.H.

A East Grinstead, les membres de la N.S.H. furent rejoints par Monsieur le Ministre et Madame Thurnheer, qui désiraient voir aussi le travail accompli pour les petits aveugles.

Le nom de ce home est symbolique; il représente bien la réalité; car il n'est pas exagéré de dire que, grâce à ce home, c'est le soleil et la lumière qui entrent dans la vie de tous ces petits pensionnaires de Sunshine Home. On sent que tous forment une grande famille, suivie avec amour par un personnel actif et dévoué. Il y a des bébés; il y a des enfants plus âgés, jusqu'à 7 ans; ils y reçoivent une excellente éducation, et malgré leur cécité, ils apprennent à vivre une vie complète et presque normale; ils ont même une petite école, où leur cerveau apprend à travailler et à se développer. Ils font des jeux, beaucoup de jeux, et il fait bon les voir prendre leurs ébats, insouciantes et joyeux. On sent alors que grâce aux soins dont ils sont l'objet, ils trouvent dans leur vie un bonheur qui sans cela leur aurait été refusé pour toujours.

Mademoiselle Zingg fut heureuse de montrer à des compatriotes, en compagnie de la directrice, cette magnifique institution; et malgré la guerre, les participants furent accueillis pour un thé qui ne rappelait en rien un temps de restrictions.

Monsieur le Ministre, au nom de tous, remercia nos hôtes et exprima son admiration pour le travail accompli. Et c'est avec un peu plus de soleil dans le cœur que nous repartîmes, heureux d'avoir vu une œuvre si constructive, à l'heure où l'on entend constamment parler de destruction.

P.