

Switzerland's extensive defence preparations

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SWITZERLAND'S EXTENSIVE DEFENCE PREPARATIONS.

We should like to recall to our readers the order of the day given on the 15th June, 1944, by the Commander-in-Chief of the Swiss Army, when additional troops for the guarding of our frontiers had to be mobilised. In this order General Guisan stated: "It is better to be at our posts too early than too late, it is wise to watch every post and not to neglect a single one!" Events on the European battlefield during the three months since this order was issued have greatly changed the position of Switzerland, which is no longer surrounded by only one side of the belligerents.

In order to give our readers an idea to what extent Switzerland had prepared defences against attack, we reprint here part of an article from the "American Mercury" written by Edward Byng, who for many years was chief of the European service of the United Press. Mr. Byng based his article on the assumption of a sudden attack on Switzerland by Germany.

At the headquarters of General Henri Guisan, Commander-in-Chief of the Swiss Federal Army, the prearranged signal flashes up. A few seconds later, terrific explosions rend the air all along the Swiss frontiers. That is the first defensive measure - the most methodical demolition work that a technically advanced nation has been able to devise during four years of unrelenting preparations.

At one fell swoop, from Basle in the north to the little principality of Liechtenstein in the east, all bridges over the Rhine, the natural boundary between Switzerland and Germany collapse. Myriad land mines, many of them subject to remote control, long sown on the Swiss side of the river bed, await the first Nazi landing rafts and tanks. Other fields of land mines are spread for the invader on and below the Swiss shore of Lake Constance in the north-east, just across from Friedrichshafen.

If necessary, the famous tunnels that pierce the huge bulks of the Simplon and the St. Gotthard on the direct route to Italy can be made to disappear amidst the roar of full-sized landslides. So thorough has been the preparatory work for this destruction by Switzerland's world-renowned tunnel-building experts that now the Germans must simply set about boring and blasting new tunnels - a task of at least a year. At the same time innumerable viaducts, railway crossings and other masterpieces of engineering can be destroyed.

Switzerland's entire railway system is electrified, because the abundant water power provides all the "white coal" needed. Now, along with the tunnels, bridges and viaducts, every dam and power station not actually needed by the Swiss army is blown up in accordance with a carefully co-ordinated master plan.

One of the jobs of the power plants that have remained intact is to electrify the ingeniously camouflaged tank traps and barbed-wire fences. In a fraction of a second they can be charged with powerful electric currents. This weapon is natural for Switzerland, where electrical engineering has reached the height of efficiency and electric power resources are plentiful.

Confronted with this maze of defences and destruction, the Germans have to depend upon their Luftwaffe, including paratroops and transport planes, for their military operations. But the airfields, especially those in the Midlands region of Switzerland, no longer exist. Explosives have taken care of that, too. Since its own air fleet is much too small to match the Luftwaffe, the Swiss Supreme Command is willing to demolish most of the airfields that the enemy might seize and use during the first phase of the campaign. But, for reasons that will become apparent, certain carefully camouflaged aerodromes in the country's mountainous central region are spared in the general destruction.

This mechanical aspect of the defence is, of course, accompanied by military measure. Well before the present war started, the Swiss general staff revised its mobilisation plans on the basis of experience derived from the invasions of Austria and Czechoslovakia as well as from the first World War.

That experience proved that a small neutral nation can be overrun before it has a chance fully to mobilise. Conventional methods of mobilisation were therefore discarded. Now, as soon as the order reaches the country by radio and word of mouth, every Swiss citizen-soldier not in active service simply picks up his rucksack and gun and hurries straight to the post to which his standing order have long assigned him.

Switzerland has only a citizen militia. As in other European armies, following completion of his military training the citizen becomes a member of the reserves. It is the pride of the country that every citizen is allowed to keep his army rifle and ammunition in his house.

The enemy, advancing from the north, near Basle, and the west, near Neuchatel and Geneva, might eventually force his way into the relatively flat region of the Swiss Midlands. The virtually inaccessible mountain districts in the southern area would thereupon become the scene of the Swiss army's real stand. These mountain sections are honeycombed with bomb and gas-proof shelters, subterranean fortifications and munition dumps, food stores, water reservoirs, artesian wells, dugouts for artillery of every calibre, underground infantry barracks, pillboxes and perfectly concealed nests for snipers, advance machine-gun and flame-thrower units.

Artificial landslides and avalanches form a distinct feature of the defence in these regions. High up, in strategic positions, huge boulders lie heaped upon latticework frames made of tree trunks. Simple pressure on a lever hurtles them down the mountainside, smothering everything in their path.

There is another vital aspect of this picture of little Switzerland at grips with the giant from the other side of the Rhine. A German invasion would automatically make the country one of the United Nations. A number of unique airfields are therefore in readiness for use by Allied air forces. Situated in highlying sectors some of these fields, complete with hangars, gas and oil tanks and other supplies, have been blasted out of the solid rock, so that German bombing could hardly do more than scar them.

Switzerland has a long and heroic military tradition. The present army is based on general conscription of all able-bodied men. In times of peace the recruits undergo a training of from 65 to 90 days, according to the branch of the service. Then, annually for seven years - 10 in the case of sergeants - the men rejoin the colours for a period of from 11 to 14 days. In normal times the Swiss army has no generals, as it is composed of several divisions headed by colonels. In an emergency the Federal Legislature designates a single general who becomes Commander-in-Chief. Henri Guisan, who now occupies the supreme office, is a citizen of the French-speaking canton of Vaud. The country now has half a million men under arms, with another two hundred thousand available at a moment's notice.

The world's model democracy, Switzerland, is thus on the alert.