

Switzerland's overseas communications

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SWITZERLAND'S OVERSEAS COMMUNICATIONS.

The present world war, even more than the last, has severely hit the economy and overseas communications of neutral countries. Switzerland, being a neutral country without seaports, has to undergo even more hardships than countries possessing ports and a merchant navy. Her imports and exports have to pass a double blockade, and her overseas trade can only be maintained with the greatest difficulties on account of the shortage of shipping space all over the world. Switzerland is making the greatest endeavours to overcome these ever increasing difficulties.

What are the present overseas communications of Switzerland, how can she import essential raw materials and food as well as export her goods in order to maintain her economic life, and what were the circumstances which have led to the foundation of a merchant navy under the Swiss flag? All these questions can be answered as follows:

Based on experiences during the last world war and the difficulties then of importing the necessary foodstuffs on account of the shortage of shipping space, the Swiss authorities decided, when war broke out, to secure a number of larger freight ships for the duration of the war which would enable them to supply their most urgent needs. An agreement was concluded with a large Greek shipping firm by which Switzerland leased from them for the duration of the war fifteen modern freight ships totalling 115,000 tons. This, of course, was done in the expectation that Greece would not be involved in the present conflict. These ships from the end of 1939 up to the autumn of 1940 mainly served for the importation of grain and fodder, and maintained a regular service between the Argentine and Genoa-Marseille. Then Greece was involved in the war and consequently, these Greek ships were no longer able to cross the Mediterranean; their cargoes had to be unloaded in Portuguese ports and had to be transhipped by other neutral boats to Genoa. In addition, considerable imports from overseas came into the country through other ships under neutral flags, which were rented from voyage to voyage. When the war spread to Jugoslavia, U.S.A. and various South American countries the possibilities of securing shipping space became less and less.

Under these circumstances the Swiss Government, in the spring of 1941, decided to purchase ships for themselves; according to the international convention of Barcelona of 1921, inland countries also have the right to sail under their own flag. Based upon this convention and also to guarantee the purchased ships the maximum amount of safety, the Swiss Federal Council, on April 9, 1941, decided to create a Swiss maritime law and to introduce a Swiss Naval Flag. Thus Switzerland became the youngest member of the seafaring nations. Through the participation of Swiss private firms the Swiss Confederation was able, within a comparatively short time, under the greatest difficulties, to create a small Swiss merchant navy, which consists at present of 10 units:

S.S. "St. Gotthard" 8.339 tons.	S.S. "Eiger" 8.137 tons
S.S. "Saentis" 6.690 "	S.S. "Chasseral" 4.206 tons
S.S. "St. Cergue" 7.600 "	S.S. "Calanda" 7.470 "
S.S. "Maloja" 2.640 "	S.S. "Albula" 2.030 "
S.S. "Lugano" 9.300 "	S.S. "Generoso" 2.360 "

These Swiss vessels as well as the following 8 Greek ships, which are at present still in the Swiss service, namely

S.S. "Helene Kulukundis" 10.000 tons	S.S. "Master Elias Kulukundis" 10.000 tons
S.S. "Kassos" 9.535 "	S.S. "Marpessa" 8.732 tons
S.S. "Mount Aetna" 7.935 "	S.S. "Nereus" 9.500 "
S.S. "Stavros" 9.214 "	S.S. "Thetis" 7.600 "

are marked as vessels for the provisioning of Switzerland and are recognised as such by both of the belligerent parties. On both sides of each vessel "SWITZERLAND" is painted in big letters and these ships are fully lit at night; their departures and routes are communicated in advance to the belligerents; they only carry goods coming from Switzerland or destined for Switzerland. Through these precautions and the agreements made with the two belligerent parties losses through warlike action so far have been avoided.

On account of the shorter distance and in order to make use of the available tonnage in the most rational manner, grain is mainly imported from U.S.A. Rather less frequent traffic is proceeding to Central America, Argentine, Brazil and Portuguese East and West Africa for the importation of sugar, coffee, rice, oil, fats, cocoa etc.

The Swiss Federal War Transport Office, which is organising all sea transports from and to Switzerland, gave its attention to the transport of Swiss goods to the different overseas countries very soon after the regular shipping services of neutral lines had ceased to operate.

From the beginning of 1941 on, direct departures from Genoa to New York, Philadelphia-Baltimore took place at regular intervals. This direct traffic was complemented by a shuttle service from Genoa to Lisbon whence the goods are transhipped to U.S.A., Central and South America on Spanish and Portuguese boats.

However, Swiss ships are now also going direct from Europe to South American ports. The first Swiss steamer carrying a valuable cargo of Swiss goods direct to Buenos Aires-Montevideo was the S.S. "St. Cergue", which left Genoa on the 21st September, 1942. The Swiss ship "Eiger" followed a few weeks later, also with a cargo of Swiss goods. Loaded with South American products destined for Switzerland, these ships then return direct to Genoa, whence the goods are transferred to Switzerland.

The maintenance of a regular direct trade with the principal overseas markets is of vital importance for Switzerland. With this view in mind, the Swiss Federal War Transport Office, therefore, will continue to try their utmost to keep this service going.

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CHANGE OF COMMITTEE.

Pursuant to the request published in the August issue of the "Helvetia", a number of Swiss compatriots of Auckland had a meeting on Saturday the 11th, for the specific purpose to nominate a new committee to the Swiss Benevolent Society in New Zealand.

All members present expressed regret that the Wellington Committee found reason to resign. It is considered that the leadership of the Society was in good hands during the past two years; in particular, the able Secretary, Mr. Schlatter, has done a great deal of useful work.