

Noble Papal Guard not to be abolished

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NOBLE PAPAL GUARD NOT TO BE ABOLISHED

“HOW many divisions has the Pope?” Stalin reportedly asked.

Recently, eighteen recruits of the Swiss Guard were sworn in on the occasion of the annual celebration of the unit's military feat of 1527. The “divisions” of the Pope — the Swiss Guard, the Noble Guards, and the Palatine Guards — have a total strength of 650 men and a few officers.

If the Noble Guard leads the Vatican forces in rank (with its fifty aristocrats whose titles have been in their respective families in Italy for over 100 years), and if the Palatine Guard is the most numerous (500 men, all citizens of Rome and responsible for the Musical Corps), the Swiss Guard is by far the oldest — 460 years compared with about a century for the other two.

It was the “Impetuous Pope Julius II”, as Stendhal called him, who created the Swiss Guard. Swiss mercenaries were highly regarded in all the principalities of the early XVIth Century, and so it was that the Pope sent his commander, Pierre von Hertenstein, to the “Confederation d'Allemagne Superieure” to recruit 200 soldiers. On 21st January of the following year, the Swiss troops entered Rome and received the benediction of Julius II.

In those times, they did not have to wait long to show their mettle; in 1527, the Bourbons took Rome, laying it to waste. The Pope — then Clement VII — took refuge in the Chateau of Saint Ange, where he was protected by 42 Swiss Guards. The remainder of the Guard, 147 men, had been killed in defence of the Vatican. Their Captain, a certain Roust of Zurich, was massacred in St. Peter's itself and his wife put to death on his body.

On 7th June, 1527, the Chateau of Saint Ange was placed under siege and the Swiss Guards annihilated. Twenty years later Pope Paul III reformed it. Until 1870 the Swiss Guard fought valiantly in the wars of the Vatican against enemy princes. The unity of Italy and the end of the temporal powers of the Pope sounded the death knoll for the Guard's military prowess.

A bellicose Colonel under the very peaceful Pope Pius X attempted to “militarise” the activities of the Guard. He led the Guard in weekly military manœuvres at which it was his custom to arrive in full battle regalia, armed with field glasses and a briefcase full of maps.

Colonel Repond's dream was to mount his canons on the terraces of the Basilica. “But what on earth for?” cried Pius X, overcome with astonishment. Disconcerted, the Commander of the Guard was forced to abandon his plans to fortify His Holiness against his enemies.

But the Swiss Guard owes much to Colonel Repond — that which has contributed more than anything else to their celebrity: their stunning uniforms, which are reproduced by the millions

on toy lead soldiers sold in the souvenir shops of Rome. The costume, attributed to Michelangelo, was revived by the good Colonel, much to the delight of the tourists who want that prized photograph at the side of a Swiss Guard.

The defence budget of the Vatican unlike that of most modern states and some not much larger than it, is not a heavy drain on finances. Equipment for the Guards amounts to a total of 100 mausers and a hundred halberds. Their colours is a flag of five horizontal bands of blue, red and yellow on which are attached the arms of the reigning Pope, Julius II and the Commander of the Guard.

Re-organised in 1959 by Pope John XXIII, the Swiss Guard Corps which has often been threatened by disbandment, was reduced in size. It now includes seventy men, two drummers, twenty-three non-commissioned officers, a chaplain and four officers including the Commander, Robert Nunlist.

Their quarters are decorated with old mosaics discovered during excavations under the Vatican. The young Swiss, which are still recruited from the Helvetian Cantons, enlist for a period of at least two years and have the right to a pension in Swiss francs after twenty years of service.

But their military functions, in this age of the atomic bomb, are limited to the guard of the external gates of the Vatican and the antichamber of the Pontifical Apartments. The Swiss Guards, more than any military corps, is a symbol of peace, and force in the service of the spirit.

After the closing of the Ecumenical Council, it was rumoured that Pope Paul VI was contemplating to drastically reduce, or abolish, the Swiss Guard, but it now appears that the plan has been set aside for many reasons, concerning the security of the Vatican and the many thousands of visitors.

That the Guard will remain seems confirmed by the recent admission of 18 new Swiss recruits.

(“Swiss Journal” California)

News of the Colony

AUCKLAND SWISS CLUB

On June 24th some members of the Auckland Swiss Club put on a play at the Edendale School Hall. The “Daellebach Kari” proved to be a very entertaining play; there was plenty to laugh about and on the other hand there were also certain parts that gave us food for thought. All the different parts were