

# The Fifth Column in Switzerland

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### THE FIFTH COLUMN IN SWITZERLAND.

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The recent publication of a Swiss official White Book on "The Anti-democratic activities of Swiss and Foreigners in connection with the events of the War, 1939-1945" has shed a strange light on the circumstances in which the Germans planned the invasion of Switzerland. That the attempt was never made was due to a combination of circumstances for which the Swiss must be eternally thankful. At an early stage it was obvious that Switzerland was marked out to share the fate that befell Holland, Belgium, Norway, Denmark and others of the smaller nations standing in Germany's path.

Under the compulsion of strict neutrality Switzerland took appropriate measures to parry the danger. Among these was a highly-developed counter-espionage service. All through the war it was possible to watch dimly the unremitting struggle between the two occult forces, German espionage and Swiss counter-espionage. The Swiss people knew all along that their national independence was always under the German menace, though they did not know till much later how close that menace had been. They also knew that there were Swiss, both military and civil, who were actively assisting in the German preparations — some from conviction, some for gain, a few perhaps because they found themselves caught in toils which they could not escape.

Well before the National Socialists in Germany obtained the power the German colony in Switzerland had made no secret of its conviction that the incorporation of at least the German-speaking cantons into the Greater Reich would be merely a question of time and opportunity. Hitlerism was still in opposition when the foreign section of the Nazi Party was established in Hamburg, and its emissaries began their activities among Germans in the countries bordering on the Reich. In 1932 the Landesgruppe Schweiz was formed, the Landesgruppenleiter being Wilhelm Gustloff, a German employee at the Meteorological Institute at Davos. Following the general practice the Group was given precise tasks. It was required to organise a system of personal espionage among Germans and Swiss, to follow the Swiss press and report upon the editors and their opinions, and to keep under observation the German consuls and other officials in Switzerland. At this stage numbers of Swiss sympathisers with National Socialism were enrolled in its ranks, but it was soon found expedient to form these into a separate Swiss National Socialist movement. The organised Germans carried on in the typical provocative Nazi manner of that period, to such a point that the Swiss authorities, who at first had looked on with a slightly scandalised supineness, felt compelled to intervene. They made a tentative beginning by prohibiting the wearing of Nazi uniforms within the Confederation.

After the National Socialists had come into power in Germany the Landesgruppe Schweiz became increasingly active. It intensified its recruiting among the German colony, augmented its numbers, and organised its adherents into the customary "local groups," "support points" and "cells." By 1935 there were some forty-five local groups with a total

strength of 5,000. They were sworn-in to Hitler, a condition not then regarded by the Swiss as important but obviously capable of creating an awkward situation in time of war. The whole organisation showed open contempt for Swiss democratic institutions and in its actions was apt to consider itself above the law. Swiss public opinion became alarmed. Public nervousness was only partly allayed by Hitler's repeated assurances that Germany would respect the integrity and neutrality of the Confederation "for all time, come what may." These declarations were officially acknowledged at the time with the usual compliments, but with the tacit reservation that thereby the Confederation was not in the least absolved from its full responsibility for the defence of Swiss independence by virtue of its own strength. It was after these incidents that the central Swiss authority set up machinery for keeping the Germans under observation.

Events soon showed this to be a very necessary precaution. A school-camp had been opened for young Germans studying at Swiss universities. Discreet inquiry into their operations revealed that they were all Nazis strictly disciplined and dependent upon a central office in Germany to which they reported. In common with all Germans studying abroad they were required to keep in touch with the Nazi authorities from whom they received their instructions. These included the "cultural-political" task of enlightening the Swiss about the New Germany and also that of filling up questionnaires containing such questions as: "How do the German emigrés conduct themselves? What do they do (a) politically and (b) for a living?" intercepted reports showed that the information forwarded was not only about Germans but about prominent Swiss, and about the German and other consulates. Furthermore, the students were encouraged to spy and report on one another. The Sports section of the Party was of a more militant character. It wore a uniform barely distinguishable from that of the S.A. and its sporting activities embraced field exercises, route marches and bomb-throwing.

The Swiss authorities intervened once more. This time they proscribed the whole National-Socialist organisation, politely informing the German Legation in Berne that the gathering and transmission of per-

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sonal information was a diplomatic or consular function, and must not be undertaken by others. The Nazi *riposte* was at once sharp and skilful. Through the Legation in Berne a strongly worded protest was made against the suppression. But with characteristic willingness the Legation suggested that it should itself take over and run the institutions of the German colony. As the Minister well knew, the Swiss had an arrangement with the Italian Legation on similar lines, the idea being to prevent "incidents," and they thought they could work with Germans in the same way. A favourable reply was sent, but the Swiss were not long in finding that they had made a mistake.

These events coincided with the appointment of a new Landesleiter to the Legation as a member of its staff with full diplomatic privileges. Covered by his diplomatic immunity the Nazi organisation took on a new lease of life. Increasing pressure was put on Germans to join the Party; if they did not they found that they had difficulty in getting their identity papers renewed by the consulate, without which they could not remain in Switzerland. The National-Socialist organisations increased in aggressiveness (especially after the occupation of Austria and the march into the Sudetenland) and their propaganda campaign was steadily intensified.

With the outbreak of war the *Gleichschaltung* was complete. Through the Landesgruppenleiter, Baron von Bibra, the Party centres in Germany were kept fully informed as to the attitude of practically every German in Switzerland, while a network of spies kept the German Intelligence supplied with details of the Swiss armaments and defences. The membership expanded again after the first military successes. Final victory seemed assured and the waverers made haste to join. They seem to have been inspired by two considerations — that later on the consequences might be awkward if they had not, and that they might miss the material opportunities that would arise when Switzerland had been incorporated, as they believed would certainly be the case. It might be asked (and indeed the Swiss often asked themselves) why the authorities did not step in and suppress the whole movement without further ado. Such a step was often considered, but there were several good arguments against it. They realised that in dealing with Hitler they had to reckon with decisions taken not necessarily on military or political grounds, but much more probably in moments of anger or brainstorm. Summary action might have produced disastrous results. Nor could action be taken against individuals because the slightest attempt to do so was at once met by reprisals against Swiss citizens, not only in Germany but in the satellite and occupied countries. The authorities therefore preferred to remain outwardly on good terms with their troublesome guests, but to keep a close watch on all known to be taking part in these manifestations. In a little while they had all the dangerous Nazis listed, and warrants for their arrest ready, so that if it should be necessary to make a sudden descent upon them there need be no delay.

That situation never materialised. During the course of the war Switzerland had on a number of occasions to reckon seriously with a German invasion. Military intelligence was by no means all on one side. The threads radiating from the Swiss military headquarters ran into Germany right into Hitler's own

headquarters. The Swiss Staff was well-informed and able on each occasion to take the necessary defensive steps. But it was known that if the German threats were implemented the Fifth Column in Switzerland was destined to come into action ahead of the invaders. It was notorious that very few Germans in Switzerland had been called to the colours of the Reich; on the contrary, Nazi Party organisers had been withdrawn from the front in order to be posted to leading positions in the German ranks in Switzerland. The strength of the Fifth Column has since been the subject of much discussion. The popular belief of the Swiss public at the time was that an army of 10,000 Germans lived in their midst, ready at the word of command to take immediate action. That was no doubt an exaggeration. There were more than that number in Switzerland capable of bearing arms, but the majority of these were not trained soldiers, and though the Fifth Column possessed some small arms they never had anything like the equipment for such a force. It seemed likely that the main advance action would be taken by relatively small but highly-trained groups, the rest being in reserve. But in any case the groups were sufficiently strong and dangerous to call for careful counter-measures.

German propaganda in Switzerland throughout the war was closely linked to the Fifth Column. It had the dual task of spreading the doctrines of National Socialism and of decrying, ridiculing and obstructing Germany's opponents. The whole tone of the German press was of course directed to this end, its efforts being powerfully seconded in Switzerland by the mass importation of special publications (produced in three languages) designed to appeal to the Swiss. There were many other forms of propaganda — books, pamphlets, picture postcards, gramophone discs and particularly documentary and feature films. The entire German film industry was in the service of the Nazi régime, but its productions in general were not popular in Switzerland, perhaps because even in the feature films there was always an undercurrent of propaganda directed against the democratic ideals to which the Swiss are so deeply attached. A very considerable part of the German propaganda effort, especially in the middle stages of the war, was devoted to popularising the New Europe under German leadership. It was singularly unsuccessful in its appeal. A special section was devoted to influencing the Swiss youth. Apart from the very considerable counter-propaganda effort of the Allies (a chapter in itself) the Swiss relied chiefly on the influence of their own press and their schools. In this they were justified to some extent by the results, though the Swiss press did not always withstand German pressure and not all Swiss teachers were free from Nazi influences.

The postal authorities made some attempt to keep the German material out of the country, but it did not altogether rest with them. The Fifth Column propaganda section met their efforts with the time-honoured devices of camouflaged packets and "cover" addresses. As time went on the postal officials became more and more skilled in detecting such matter and confiscated it when they could. It was a battle of wits, if not very quick ones. But the German Legation had no compunction in using diplomatic channels for the purpose. It brought in small quantities at first by such routes, gradually increasing the consignments till the Swiss railway

officials were confronted with whole truckloads of publications for which diplomatic immunity was claimed. It was, however, the least successful branch of the German effort. The Swiss people soon understood why expensively produced reading matter was being forced upon them unasked for, and the great bulk of it found its way into the national wastepaper collection. The Fifth Column showed a curious lack of what should have been their most powerful weapon — the ability to persuade.

From 1943 to 1945 the development of the German organisations was a faithful mirror of success and failure in the military sphere. The turning point of the war for the Nazi régime was the first failure in Russia. With the news of the successive defeats on the eastern front the Fifth Column in Switzerland — apart from purely military espionage — began to decline. The earliest symptom of this was the falling off in the attendance at German meetings and demonstrations, which declined to a mere fraction of their former strength. Enthusiasm gradually evaporated. Even the speakers sent from Germany no longer sought to instil confidence by fanatical harangues; they became explanatory, apologetic and appealing, and were rather subdued. The Fifth Column seemed to live in an atmosphere of depression. The Germans in Switzerland were of course in a better position to form a general opinion of the war situation than were their blinkered compatriots in the Reich, and when Nazi Germany continued to demand from them the same sacrifices as before they began to refuse. The bonds of discipline were becoming slack. There were periods of recovery, as when the V-bombs came into action, and they were told that the war was won. But these were short-lived, and it was noticeable that the only hope the visiting speakers could hold out was that of a split among the Allies.

Concurrently with these changes Landesgruppenleiter Baron von Bibra was recalled to Germany. His successor, Wilhelm F. Stengel, a prominent Party man, trimmed to the new situation. The arrogant tone declined. The Fifth Column, now thinned out and wholly specialised, went underground to concentrate on military and economic espionage. A spy system, once established, gathers a certain momentum and does not usually cease operating even when the immediate need for it has disappeared — unless perhaps the funds dry up, which was not the case. There was always the possibility that the German army might stage a raid into Switzerland as a desperate measure or for some special purpose, such as the establishment of direct communications with the German armies in Northern Italy. The Nazi espionage apparatus was largely manned by renegade Swiss under German leadership. Even after it was plain that Germany had lost the war it continued to function in the military interest, and as long as this was the case the Swiss counter-espionage could not relax its own efforts. Nor could it ever be sure that the Fifth Column might not come into action after all.


German propaganda was now forced on to the defensive. It passed from jubilations celebrating each German success to sober lectures on the war situation and the circulation of articles designed (if possible) to explain away the Allied victories, and it tried to minimise the effects of defeat. The Swiss attitude hardened as the shadow of invasion and the fear of German re-

prisals faded into the background. They pursued the German military spies and their venial Swiss subordinates with increasing skill and relentlessness, and they kept an ever-closer watch on the erstwhile enthusiasts of the Fifth Column. But it was not until May 1945 that the Federal Government, aided by the cantons and municipalities, seriously undertook the suppression and dissolution of the Nazi Party organisations in Switzerland. By then Germany was on the verge of complete military collapse. Since it was the avowed aim of the Allies to destroy National Socialism in all its forms there could be no question of tolerating its organisations within the Confederation. Somewhat tardily and with extreme care for legality they took the opportunity to remove and expel many of the leading Nazis, thankful no doubt that they had managed to steer their country through the dangerous periods of the war without the actual violation of its frontiers.

Berne.

H. G. DANIELS.


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