

An editor speaks

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AN EDITOR SPEAKS.

By PIERRE BÉGUIN.

"Can Switzerland build her own military aircraft?"

There are not many fields in which Swiss industrial technique has not recorded some notably successful results. Nevertheless, there are two in which we are very behindhand, namely, in the motor-car industry and in that of aircraft construction. On two occasions — this was some forty years ago — Swiss plants started to build motor-cars. Technically speaking, the results were good. But the customs barriers of other countries prevented normal exports, so that these two makes of car very soon disappeared from the market. If a Swiss make of trucks or lorries is known abroad, this is because the plant which manufactures them, whilst practically only building for the domestic market, allows them to be manufactured under licence in other countries.

As for the aviation industry, the situation here is not any more favourable. It is true that we have got some plants which build tourist aircraft, but none of these can be compared in importance to the foreign factories.

Nevertheless, during these last few years, remarkable achievements have been accomplished in order to make possible the manufacture, within this country, of at least some of the aircraft required by our Army. The wish existed, to try and do something so as not to be obliged any longer to choose from among the types used in other armies, but, on the contrary, to conceive and to build types which would be exactly adapted to the original and special requirements of our national defence.

It was in this way that a plant in Eastern Switzerland, supported by the Confederation, was able to produce a new type of fighter aircraft. Up to the present this has existed only as a prototype. A few weeks ago, however, the work on it appeared to have advanced to such a degree that the Swiss Parliament, on the proposal of the Army and the Government, decided to give an order for a first batch

of one hundred aircraft of this type. This was not achieved without some lively polemics in the Press and a certain amount of opposition in military and political circles. However, finally, the appropriation was voted.

Thereupon, a most regrettable incident occurred. One of the three existing prototypes developed trouble when in full flight, and had to be abandoned by its pilot. This, by the way, was already the second time that such a misadventure had occurred. It has caused a great deal of talk, and the order for the hundred aircraft, which had already been given, has been suspended until the causes of this accident have been established by means of an impartial enquiry.

And here we touch upon the crux of the problem. As a matter of fact, however well run is an aircraft works, however conscientious the work of its engineers and specialists, however competent they may be, a plant which only builds one type of aircraft, does not — and cannot — possess that sum of experience which is necessary for really successful results. On the other hand, and this for the very reason that its activities are so limited and inclined to be unilateral, such a plant cannot renew itself with sufficient rapidity and keep up with the progress of technique to the extent that is desirable.

One is thus forced to ask oneself whether it would not be more normal and more profitable, not only to purchase aircraft abroad, but also to build foreign types, which can be adapted to our requirements, under licence, here in Switzerland. By so doing, the efficacy of our national defence would not lose anything. It would be to the advantage of our independence, in so far as foreign countries are concerned. And our Military High Command could then practise, in regard to aviation, a policy more flexible and better adapted to the evolution of our requirements and to new technical possibilities.

It would therefore not be at all surprising if Parliament were to annul its order for the one hundred aircraft of Swiss manufacture and proceed along the lines which have just been described.

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