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**Survival First:
The Role of Switzerland in the Second World War**

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Dr. Louis Truschel

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HONORS THESIS

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The storied survival of Switzerland in the face of fascism during the Second World War has long been an inspiring topic to historians. But with the reemergence of issues surrounding Swiss banking and economic practices during the war, the question of how a nation with an overwhelming ethnic German population surrounded by the Axis Powers could maintain its independence has become highly contentious. Oftentimes the most simplistic of explanations are offered to explain this paradox, but these analyses are very one-sided and tend to overlook the broad scope of strategy employed by the Swiss to guarantee their continued autonomy. The true reasons for Germany's failure to invade Switzerland are complex and entail aspects of political and racial ideology, military defense, foreign trade and economic self-reliance. The Swiss were aware of the German threat and took, meticulously, necessary steps in all of these arenas to minimize the threat of invasion. They did so in the ways that best fitted the national ideology of neutrality and the discouraging realities they faced.

In order to dispel the basic generalizations made about Switzerland during the Second World War, it is essential to establish what those misconceptions are. The first is the belief that Switzerland survived the war because of a firm national resolve and a powerful plan of military defense. They were prepared to destroy their own infrastructure in order to make the fight as long and painful for the Germans as possible, while simultaneously draining off their forces in other parts of the continent. Although it is true that the Swiss plan of defense would very likely have achieved these goals, it is hard to believe that Hitler would have held back his armies out of fear. The military explanation is valid, but it is not strong enough to stand alone.

The other predominant opinion is one that reemerged in the 1990's, that the Swiss survival was due solely to collaboration with the Nazis. For a price, Swiss businessmen hid ill-gotten Nazi gold in their banks, actively traded with Germany, and took whatever steps available to profit from the war and help ensure success for the Axis with some level of cooperation from Berne. While these accusations certainly have a reasonable basis, they are hardly fair. The reality of the topic is far more complicated, and can not be watered down to such bold statements. A reasonable consideration of Swiss actions during the war requires an all encompassing analysis.

In recent years more documentation has been available to research the period, and in December of 1996, the Swiss Federal Council and Parliament commissioned a group of experts to investigate the perspectives, opinions and claims, both positive and negative, surrounding Switzerland's war time role. The Independent Committee of Experts Switzerland- Second World War, or ICE, spent the next six years researching the vast amount of material available, and accomplished research that one or two independent historians would be hard pressed to accomplish in a lifetime. After many preliminary reports and publications, the final report of the ICE was published in 2002, and is now the paramount work on the subject. In the conclusion of the report, the ICE describes their historical approach:

The analytical perspective which we have developed differs from the clichés which portrayed Switzerland, on the one hand, as a small, neutral country which from 1940 onwards was completely encircled by the Axis powers and only survived thanks to its power of resistance, and on the other as a country of bribable bankers whose only concern was to extract

profit from the human and economic havoc engendered by the war surrounding the country.¹

The clichés to which the ICE referred dominate the available historical material, and even the most thoughtful and well written books carry a clear bias. The passion with which these works have been written shows the tensions surrounding many of the issues at hand.

Before delving further into the topics of Switzerland's specific war time actions, however, it is important to examine briefly the practice of neutrality, specifically how that policy has been manifested in Switzerland. Since the Napoleonic era, when Switzerland was last used as a battleground, the Swiss have abided strictly by the concept of armed neutrality, and, for the most part, did so before Napoleon as well. Switzerland would not only avoid taking sides in any conflict that took place around them, but they signaled their intent to fiercely protect their own sovereignty through military means.

This idea sunk in during the First World War, when the clash between Germany and France involved the invasion of Belgium. Swiss troops sat at the border, especially at the point where the German and French lines met close to Switzerland. The war ended largely without incident for the Swiss; there had been very little motive for either belligerent to invade the country. The war had been entirely political as opposed to ideological; a contest between European powers to see who was on top.

The real threat to Swiss independence came in the 1930's with the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany. While the Nazis wanted political dominance just as badly as the old school of politicians had wanted it at the turn of the century, the ideology behind their

¹ Independent Committee of Experts Switzerland - Second World War, Switzerland, National Socialism and the Second World War (Zurich: Pendo, 2002) (hereafter ICE), 494-495.

actions was what became suspicious and threatening to Germany's neighbors. Among the many racially frightening aspects of Nazi ideology to the Swiss was Hitler's drive for the unification of all German people. The ethnically motivated policies of the Nazi regime led to the *Anschluss* with Austria in 1938, and understandably increased apprehension from the Swiss, whose borders adjoined both Austria and Germany. German propaganda subsequently increased its insistence on the topic, as a Frankfurt newspaper proclaimed that "no branch of the German race has the right or the possibility of withdrawing from the common destiny of all the Germans." Statements such as these reflected the sentiment of the highest Nazis; they required the approval of Josef Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Propoganda.²

The Swiss response to these actions was anything but positive. Switzerland was a country that ideologically defined itself as a *politische Willensnation*, meaning "a nation shaped by the political will of its citizens."³ For centuries the Swiss had not defined themselves by race or language, but by a mix of religions, races and languages that in and of itself had grown into a distinct culture. Of course the marriage of German Reformed Protestantism and French Catholicism was not always an easy one. Napoleon had played off these differences to his advantage in the early nineteenth century, but political intrigue through the infusion of doctrine was not likely to be an effective means of subversion for the Nazis in Switzerland. The Swiss were simply too unified and vigilant to let it happen.

Action readily accepted by the population was taken by the Swiss government to stem the influence of National Socialism. Distinct factions of the Swiss government had been moving apart in their convictions in recent years, but the new threat of German

² Stephen P. Halbrook, Target Switzerland: Swiss Armed Neutrality in World War II (Rockville Center, Sarpedon, 1998), 47.

³ ICE, 62.

ethno-irredentism started to reunify the Swiss. In the spring of 1938, the Swiss Parliament, apart from two communists and the one fascist, declared the following:

All the political groups of the two houses approve the declaration of the Federal Council. They solemnly affirm that the entire Swiss people – without regard to tongue, confession or party – are prepared to defend the inviolability of their territory against any aggressor to the last drop of blood.⁴

The media also played a key role in revealing the political sentiments and tendencies of the Swiss on the eve of war. Moderate censorship of the media was accepted by the press with little fuss, and many media outlets were faithful in censoring themselves. This was not solely a noble act of patriotism on the part of media corporations; it was a calculated response to pre-existing attitudes. Suppression of Nazi sympathy was not only good for the cohesion of the nation, it was good for business.⁵

After the war started, some clashes between the government and the press naturally took place, but no heavy restrictions were ever laid down. The vast majority of the press had been and continued to be heavily slanted towards the Allies, much to the annoyance of the Third Reich. Despite repeated complaints from the Axis, the Swiss press remained mostly free, respecting the federal request for moderation throughout the conflict.⁶

Politically, Switzerland insisted on being non-preferential for the duration of the war. Regardless of German ethnicity or democratic ideology, the Swiss government maintained neutrality as the focal point of foreign policy and relationships with

⁴ Halbrook, 50.

⁵ ICE, 78.

⁶ Urs Schwarz, The Eye of the Hurricane: Switzerland in World War Two (Boulder, Westview, 1980), 120-122.

belligerent nations. Though the Swiss in general were more ideologically sympathetic to the Allied cause, they were forced to tread lightly in the shadow of German imperialism.

The area of Swiss national policy requiring the most change to face the threat of war was, for obvious reasons, the military. The racial ideology of Germany, combined with the aggressiveness it had displayed towards its neighboring nations, showed clearly that it was the biggest military threat to Switzerland. Thus, when in 1939 full scale war broke out in Europe, the Federal assembly named Henri Guisan commanding general of the Swiss military. In times of peace, there was no supreme general to command the Swiss armed forces; one was named only when facing a distinct threat or in case of army mobilization. Both were the case in 1939.

The significance of Henri Guisan's nomination rested mostly in his ethnicity. The Swiss military leadership had traditionally been German, but Guisan was French-Swiss, born, raised and educated in the Canton of Vaud.⁷ This is not to say, however, that Guisan was a supporter of France itself over Germany. The truth is that, in the years before the war, Guisan, like many French military officers, felt much more threatened by communist rumblings in France than by the Nazi movement in Germany.⁸ Guisan's selection as a political statement was due more to his ethnicity than his actual political beliefs.

Regardless of where Guisan stood in the mid 1930's, it was very clear to him and the rest of Switzerland that Germany presented the greatest potential threat to Swiss autonomy. Consequently, the first plan of defense adapted by the military was one based solely on the notion that Germany would be the invading nation, not France.

⁷ Willi Gautschi, General Henri Guisan: Commander-In-Chief of the Swiss Army in World War II, trans. Karl Vonlanthen, (Rockville Centre, Front Street, 2003), 1.

⁸ ICE, 80.

Additionally, the plan assumed that Germany and France would be at war, and that a front could be established in Switzerland as an extension of French defenses.

This plan, known as the Limmat Line, or *Limmatstellung*, was a defensive chain that stretched from Fortress Sargans and the former Austrian border in the east to Basel and the Rhine River in the north, near the beginning of the French Maginot Line. The boundary included Lake Zurich and the Limmat River and was heavily fortified. General Guisan even made preparations for joint French and Swiss resistance, but only if called for by Swiss leaders.⁹

The French were more than happy to cooperate in the event of an invasion. Germany had stormed through the neutral nation of Belgium in the First World War in order to catch the French on their heels; there was no doubt that this method could be tried again, and Germany could possibly use the Swiss lowlands in the same manner to swing around the French lines. By defending Switzerland, France would in fact be working to defend herself. The Swiss military felt prepared for the war, and when the Scandinavian kingdoms of Denmark and Norway were invaded in April of 1940, the government expressed to military personnel their duty to defend Switzerland whether on active duty or not.¹⁰

The conclusion of Germany's 1940 campaign, however, forced the Swiss to rethink their strategy for survival. The Blitzkrieg and subsequent defeat of France left Switzerland surrounded by the Axis- Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and the puppet state of

⁹ Jürg Stüssi-Lauterburg, "The Threat of Three Totalitarianisms: The Swiss Response," in Switzerland Under Siege 1939-1945: A Neutral Nation's Struggle for Survival, ed. Leo Schelbert (Rockport: Pickton, 2000), 27.

¹⁰ Schwarz, 14.

Vichy France. No longer could the Swiss depend on an Allied country to come to the rescue in case of a German or Italian invasion.

The new developments in Europe's political balance meant the necessity of a new defensive strategy in Switzerland. It was well known by the Swiss intelligence service that the Reich had plans to invade, so the task facing the Swiss government was to make that option as unappealing as possible to the German High Command and to Hitler. This meant an overall national strategy that included distinct plans for the military and the economy, with elements of both self-sustainability and international cooperation.

The task of the military was the most straightforward, once several key facts were understood and accepted by Guisan and his staff. Most importantly, it had become increasingly obvious that if Germany chose to invade, the Swiss would not be able to stop them at the borders. All the army could hope to do was slow the advance of German troops as much as possible. This meant the abandonment of the *Limmatstellung* and the development of an entirely new defensive scheme.

On July 25, 1940, General Guisan held a meeting for all of his unit commanders at the historic site of Rütli meadow, on Lake Lucerne. It was at this site that the Swiss Confederation was formed by the first three Cantons in 1291. Here, following the fall of France, Guisan entreated his men to fight for Switzerland to the end, resisting any invading force no matter what the cost.¹¹ The plan that developed from this notion of unconditional resistance was that of the national redoubt, or *réduit*.

A *réduit* is an inner layer of a fortress, used to make the stronghold more forbidding overall. Using a highly defensible chain of fortresses and natural barriers, the

¹¹ Gautschi, 518-a.

Swiss created a military belt around the heart of the country.¹² The plan was to retreat to the confines of the réduit immediately following an invasion, where the Swiss military and government would then hold out as long as possible.

The Swiss réduit maintained the same mountainous borders in the south, but left the Cantons of Ticino and Grabunden largely undefended. In reality, the Swiss did not fear an Italian invasion nearly as much as a German attack. In part this was due to the geographical conditions; much of the Italian border was simply impassible. Furthermore, the Italian army was not to be nearly as feared or respected as their German counterparts. They had failed to invade France successfully even as German soldiers entered Paris, so the Swiss firmly believed they could repulse any attempt by Mussolini. Switzerland's northern Alps formed the other side of the réduit, however, leaving the lowlands of northern Switzerland relatively exposed.

This primary strategy of this defensive scheme was not found in its ability to win a war with Germany, but served two other very important purposes. If Switzerland were invaded, the réduit would hopefully provide a means by which the army and government could hold out for months or even years, hopefully long enough for the Allies to win the war and break the siege. Most of all, the overall plan was meant to discourage an attack from ever taking place. By convincing Hitler that the invasion would be too long and costly, the Swiss could prevent war from ever entering the country.

For this very reason the plan in its strategic aspects was not kept secret. Knowing that the chief purpose of an invasion would be to directly link Germany and Italy,

¹² Edgar Bonjour, "Severely Tested: Swiss Neutrality During Two World Wars," in Switzerland Under Siege 1939-1945: A Neutral Nation's Struggle for Survival, ed. Leo Schelbert (Rockport: Pickton, 2000), 124.

Guisan's plan was to deny just that.¹³ In this sense, the defensive plan had a direct impact on the economic sector. Critical railroad lines passed through Switzerland connecting the Axis nations, crossing over (or through) key passes, including Sargans, St. Maurice and St. Gotthard. Fortresses were constructed at each of these locations, to be defended to the last. In addition, bridges and tunnels across the country were prepared for demolition in case of a German attack.

These three primary fortresses were not a single fort as one might imagine, but a series of tunnels, bunkers and fortifications stretching over 100 square miles of rough mountains. The only valley entrances, as in the case of the Sargans fortress near the Austrian border, were completely covered by heavy cannon concealed in the mountains. Panzers would not be able to threaten the *réduit*, mostly because of terrain, and the effectiveness of air strikes would be minimal, since most forts were built directly into cliffs and mountains and reinforced by concrete and steel.¹⁴

It is pertinent before analyzing the decisions made by the Swiss in defending their country from the Germans to examine the military tradition of the nation. Militarily, the Swiss have a legacy covering centuries. Any European power that understood the military history of the continent did not take the Swiss lightly. For hundreds of years the men of Switzerland had served in crack military units for hire, renowned for unwavering ferocity and loyalty, a fine compliment to any nation's forces.

The military system put in place by the Swiss created as formidable a force as could be expected from the small nation on the eve of the Second World War. The idea of a "citizen soldier," a soldier who would live at home with his rifle and equipment,

¹³ Halbrook, 119.

¹⁴ Ibid 112-113

ready to answer the call of duty at a moment's notice, seemed almost natural for the Swiss way of life. In addition to the ferocious maintenance of freedom from her neighbors, the Swiss citizen seemed almost the perfect model for a soldier. One of the reasons for this is the emphasis placed on marksmanship in the social context of Swiss life.

Hugh Wilson, the American Ambassador to Switzerland for ten years in the nineteen twenties and thirties, commented: "The Swiss citizen retains his uniform and rifle at home, ready for instant mobilization; and he spends many of his Sundays qualifying for marksmanship awards with his friends in his community as men of other nationalities spend their leisure at golf, fishing or other recreation."¹⁵

Shooting was essentially the national sport of Switzerland, with a standard distance of 300 meters, very far indeed, used for competition. Swiss soldiers were trained at shooting from distances of 50 to 300 meters, and practiced even outside of training. In contrast, German soldiers were only trained to shoot within a range of 100 meters.¹⁶ If the two nations were to meet in partisan type fighting among the Alps, the Swiss would have a distinct advantage in this capacity. Accordingly, that is exactly what Guisan had in store with his plan for a *réduit*.

Of course it would be impractical to assume that Hitler went so far as to analyze details such as these when making his decisions on Switzerland, but the point is still made. The Swiss were a people whom many respected for their soldiering capabilities. In addition, it was important for the superpowers of the time to learn from the Soviet debacle that was the Winter War of 1939-40. Even by conservative estimates over half a

¹⁵ Ibid, 27.

¹⁶ Ibid.

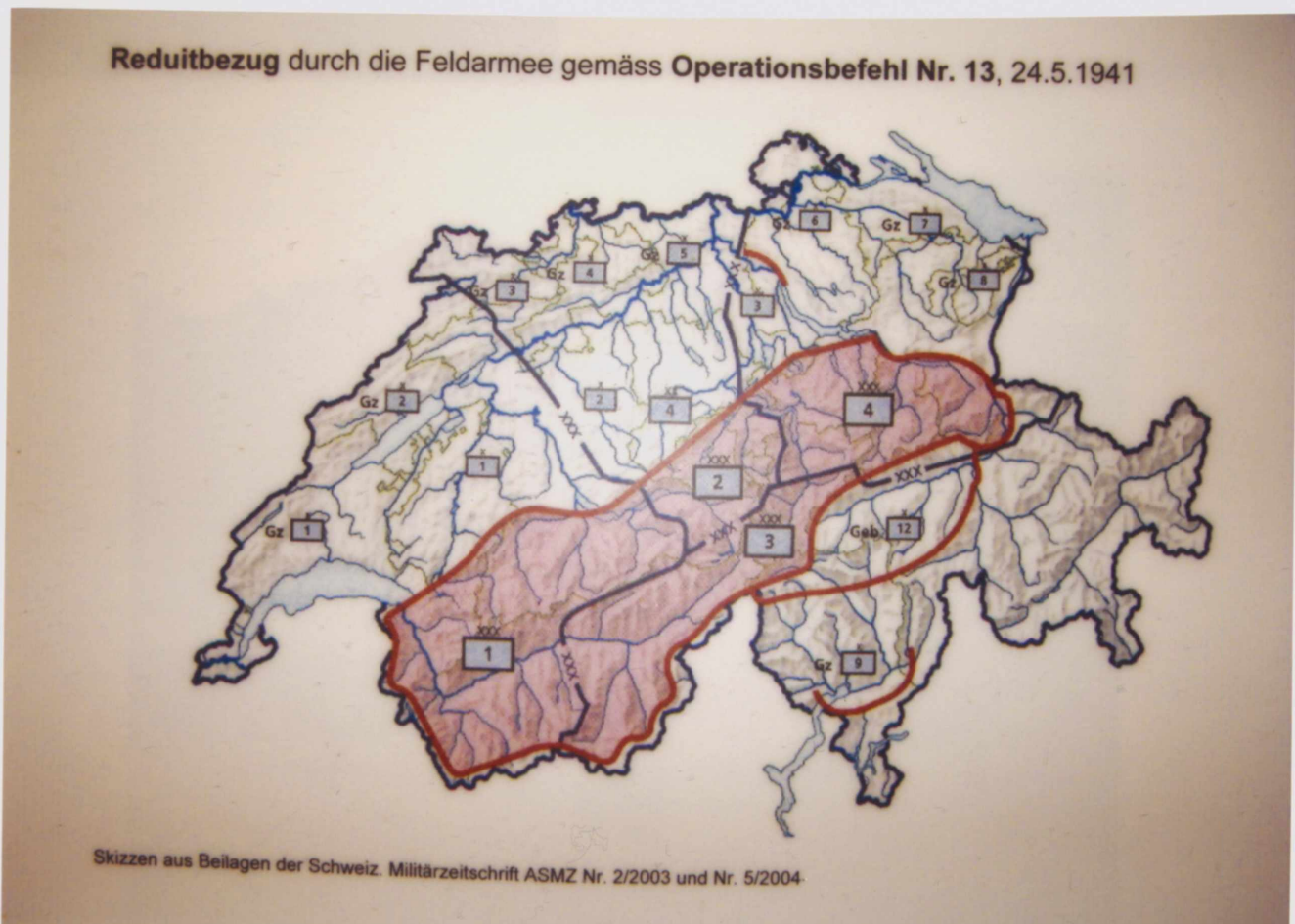


Above: Rust reveals a fortification that once blended with the forest near Vallorbe



Right: The highway leading up the south side of the St. Gotthard pass

Below: Map of proposed defensive perimeters





Above Left: A mural in Bern depicts the unity of the Swiss during WWII

Above: A postcard depicts the historical relationship of Switzerland and the Red Cross



Left: A disguised cannon defends the Sargans valley

Below: Real farmhouses dot the landscape in the Grabunden Canton



million Soviet soldiers were killed by the badly outnumbered Finns. The Red Army lost twenty men for every one Finn. Two things marked this war: the marksmanship and soldiering abilities of the Finnish troops and the effect of climate and terrain on Stalin's ability to run a successful campaign.

However, the well-trained German military could not be equated to the inefficient Red Army. The Swiss would have had the advantage of mountainous terrain not available to the Finns, but would also be facing a much more formidable opponent than the Soviet Union. At any rate, the point is not that the same thing would have happened to Germany had Switzerland been invaded, but that there was a possibility of something similar happening. The German military could not ignore the lessons stemming from the Winter War simply because they were in better condition than the Russians.

Nevertheless, the Germans did have a plan for the invasion of Switzerland, in conjunction with the Italians. On June 17, 1940, one week after the French government had fled Paris, Hitler initiated a plan for total encirclement of Switzerland. The plan was to completely cut them off from the outside world, or at least secure the ability to do so at a moment's notice. On the same day, The Italian and German ambassadors to Switzerland met to discuss how the nation would be divided between the two belligerents.¹⁷ Operation Tannenbaum, a plan for the actual invasion of the country, was developed in secret.

The encirclement was unsuccessful, partially because of the failure to secure the last railway link to the outside world. The railway from Geneva to the French city of Annecy remained inside the control of Vichy France, much to the frustration of the

¹⁷ Klaus Urner, "Let's Swallow Switzerland": Hitler's Plans against the Swiss Confederation, trans. Lotti N. Eichhorn (Lanham: Lexington, 2002), 25-27.

Führer. Furthermore, the Italians were unable to secure the Savoy region, which encompassed the south shore of Lac Lemman to the Mediterranean Sea and the Italian border. Because the Italians did not conduct a successful campaign against the French in the mountains of the region, Vichy France would not accept defeat by their hands. Consequently, Switzerland failed to be completely isolated.¹⁸ Unfortunately for Germany, the order to secure all French territory bordering Switzerland was received just fifteen minutes after an armistice was signed with the Vichy government.¹⁹

The most critical time for the Swiss during the course of the war was from May 1940, when the invasion of France commenced, to June 1941, the start of Operation Barbarossa, the attack on the Soviet Union. Germany was unlikely to divert forces to a full scale invasion of Switzerland before France had been dealt with, except perhaps briefly as a conduit around the French lines. Subsequently, the chance of Hitler sending his precious divisions to Switzerland after the invasion of the Soviet Union had begun, or even as preparations were for the attack were being made, was much smaller. Even after the occupation of Vichy France in 1942, effectively surrounding Switzerland, the time of greatest threat was over. Hitler needed every soldier available to maintain a two front war; an invasion of Switzerland would have been a severe strategic error.

This is of course assuming that Switzerland met some minimum economic requirements of the Axis powers. In some ways Germany especially was dependent on Switzerland for reasons of trade, and therefore the Swiss took economic measures to ensure their independence, complementing those steps taken militarily. The first and most obvious step to take was not really a step at all; it was in fact the maintenance of

¹⁸ Ibid, 46-47.

¹⁹ Halbrot, 111.

previous policy. Switzerland was placed very strategically to be successful in European trade, and so the use of the north-south railway lines by other countries was encouraged as part of its own development. With the onset of the Second World War, and the increased threat of fascism, it only made sense to continue these policies.

For example, the railway lines linking Germany and Italy through Switzerland were essential to the Axis war plan. Of the four main railroad links connecting the Axis powers, the two more direct routes went through the heart of Switzerland. As long as Switzerland allowed the free flow of goods through its borders, they were more likely to be left alone, with the unlikely possibility of interference from the Allies through sabotage or air raids.²⁰ If, on the other hand, the Swiss decided to close their borders and cut off trade through these railway links, the Axis would have been backed into a corner. One thing is for certain: the railroad links Switzerland maintained became one of the key bargaining chips for the duration of the war. Consequently, they were treated as one of the country's greatest assets. The railroads were heavily protected by the Swiss military, while simultaneously prepared for demolition in case of an invasion by the Axis.²¹

The statistics of north-south transit through Switzerland are quite revealing on this matter. Fifteen to twenty thousand tons of freight passed through the country on these lines each month before the summer of 1940. By 1941 this number had jumped to 30,000, and then doubled to 60,000 by the spring of 1944. The steep rise in tonnage was coupled by a shift from consumer goods towards raw materials, such as metals and chemicals. In addition, a rise in illegal transit developed in the latter part of the war. With the fall of Mussolini, the German army essentially pillaged Italy for anything that

²⁰ Schwarz, 62.

²¹ Ibid, 64.

could be of economic use in the continuing war effort. Machine parts and scrap metal taken from Italian factories, and even stolen food, were taken by the Germans and sent north despite grossly violating international law.²² This led to increased pressure on the already strained relations of Switzerland and the Allied powers, and Swiss customs eventually cracked down on the illegal activity and did its part in preventing the Italian infrastructure from being completely and unapologetically dismantled.²³

Switzerland had motivation to maintain good economic relations with Germany for other reasons as well. At the end of the First World War a general strike crippled the Swiss economy. The strike had been triggered by massive unemployment during the war, which had in turn been caused by abnormal trade relations with the belligerent nations. Because Switzerland's industry was dependent on the import of many raw materials, a decline in trade foretold a rise in unemployment. To prevent a similar fate during World War Two, a continuation of normal trade relations with nations on both sides became the top economic priority of the Swiss.²⁴

The issue of food for its citizens was also an issue that weighed heavily on the Swiss government. The nation was dependent on imports to feed its population, and therefore must be sure that it could continue to provide for its people. A system of rationing was put into place, but the key to survival was to develop sustainability for all of Switzerland's food production. If the Swiss could develop a completely independent system to provide food for its population, it would be able to distance itself from the belligerents.

²² ICE, 230-232.

²³ Ibid, 236-237.

²⁴ Heinz K. Meier, "Between Hammer and Anvil: Neutrality and the Necessities of Trade," in Switzerland Under Siege 1939-1945: A Neutral Nation's Struggle for Survival, ed. Leo Schelbert (Rockport: Pickton, 2000), 131.

A strategy was developed by a committee of scientists charged with improving the situation, known as the Wahlen Plan. The plan called for a massive increase in acreage for growing potatoes, vegetables, and wheat. At the same time, the amount of livestock in Switzerland was greatly reduced. As former Swiss soldier Urs Schwarz reported, "Football fields, parks, roadsides, railroad embankments, and the lawn in the smallest garden soon became covered with potato blossoms, bean sticks, and tomato plants and after working hours would swarm with men, women, and children feeling they were doing patriotic work."²⁵

The Wahlen plan served several purposes. Perhaps most importantly, it made up for a lack of supplies normally provided by the Western powers. However, though this was a benefit of the plan, it was not its original intent. The goal of the Wahlen plan was to serve more as a defensive step against the Axis than as a reaction to a lack of imports. In the case of being completely encircled by the Axis, there may have been an attempt to lay siege to Switzerland by cutting off supplies. The plan would help to combat any such attempt through agricultural sustainability. By 1943, the acreage of cultivatable land was doubled in size.²⁶

The most controversial economic policies of the Swiss, however, surrounded Swiss banks and foreign exchange. Because the value of the German Mark faced devastation by the war, it was important for the Nazi government to back their holdings with the currency of a more stable country; a neutral country. For reasons of proximity Switzerland was one of the most obvious choices for this process. Furthermore, due to the treatment many citizens of the Third Reich were subjected to, the Nazi government

²⁵ Schwarz, 71-72.

²⁶ ICE, 83.

was able to sell gold that was acquired through less than honorable means. This gold, and its transaction from Germany to Switzerland during the war, presents perhaps the most difficult issue of Switzerland's war time actions to address.

Some simple facts reveal why this issue is so contentious. 1,231.1 million francs worth of gold was sold by the Reichsbank to the Swiss National Bank between 1940 and 1945, and 101.2 million more was sold to commercial Swiss banks. When the Reichsbank shipped gold abroad, over three-quarters of the gold was arranged through Switzerland. The political and legal implications of this relationship, not to mention ethical issues, became a main source of discussion as to Switzerland's wartime role.²⁷

The Swiss government sought to increase the amount of gold within the country to back the printing of the Swiss Franc. One very effective way of doing so was through the purchase of gold from various nations involved in the war to provide a dual service. The belligerent nations would have access to Swiss currency, and the Swiss National Bank would have more gold to back that currency, thereby strengthening it.²⁸

The issue here is not one of favoritism, but of judgment. During the course of the war Switzerland actually purchased more gold from the Allied countries than from the Axis. From the United States alone Switzerland purchased 2,242.9 million Francs worth, vastly more than it bought from all of the Axis nations combined.²⁹ The discretion that Switzerland used in its transactions with Germany is what has become the subject of scrutiny. It was no secret where the gold was coming from, and consequently the Swiss could not simply play ignorant to the facts. Attempts to make these transactions out to be

²⁷ Ibid, 238.

²⁸ Ibid, 239.

²⁹ Ibid, 242.

“business as usual” were unsuccessful, and consequently they are seen as one of Switzerland’s greatest wartime faults.³⁰

In stark contrast to some of the more controversial economic policies of Switzerland, which in the extreme painted the Swiss as war profiteers and Nazi collaborators, stood the services provided to victims of the war. As a neutral nation, Switzerland was able to help in ways that would have not been available had they gotten involved in the fighting. For example, the International Committee of the Red Cross, based in Geneva, was able to help wounded soldiers and helped to process letters from prisoners. Additionally, it sought to reunite wounded soldiers and families, using an immense registration system.

Because of Switzerland’s location, refugees were an important issue of national policy. It is estimated that about 300,000 total refugees, military and civilian, were admitted to Switzerland during the war, an impressive number considering that the population of the country was less than 5 million.³¹ Jewish refugees were at one point cut off by decree of the federal police chief, Heinrich Rothmund. The resulting public outcry was so powerful that the policy was almost immediately overturned, and Jewish children, families, and elderly were allowed to enter.³² The sentiment of the Swiss people is more revealing than the failed policy; a general impression of Swiss sympathies is provided by instances such as these.

³⁰ Ibid, 227. The issue of gold transactions during World War II, especially involving Switzerland, is an extremely complicated matter. In addition, the questionable actions of Swiss banks after the war in dealing with money stolen from and deposited by victims of the Holocaust is not something addressed by this paper. It is a very important topic, but the analysis of this paper is limited to Swiss actions during and before the war, not after. For a more extensive analysis see ICE 238-279.

³¹ Ibid, 116.

³² Halbrook, 169.

Switzerland also served as a political go-between for nations at war, a “protecting power.” Urs Schwarz describes the role as follows: “Each government therefore requests a nation not at war with their opponents to assume the mission of the protecting power, and entrusts its diplomats with the defense of certain interests on the enemy’s territory.” Switzerland at one point assumed the challenging task of fulfilling this role for 219 diplomatic relationships, including protecting power for Germany in the United States and vice versa.³³ Switzerland served in this capacity to limit the destruction of the war as much as possible, through actions such as the negotiation of the exchange of prisoners.

It is true that frequently refugees were turned away from the Swiss border; many who came across did so by cover of night, illegally, and simply were not forced to leave. It is relevant, however, to examine the refugee policies of other nations during this time. The government of the United States, from which many of Switzerland’s sharpest postwar critics hailed, followed more stringent immigration policies than its Swiss counterpart. By 1941 it was virtually impossible for citizens or relatives of citizens from the Reich to enter the United States. From 1938 to 1942 less than half of the visas made available by the State Department were actually issued, despite desperate attempts to seek refuge within the country.³⁴

This comparison is not provided to excuse Switzerland’s policies, which at some points inhibited or prevented the admittance of many people, including Jews. Rather, it is an example of how nations responded to related problems such as national security and domestic supplies, both difficult matters for the Swiss. Perhaps the Swiss are to be admired for the number of refugees they admitted in spite of these glaring concerns.

³³ Schwarz, 132.

³⁴ Halbrook, 170.

The popular sentiment in the Allied nations was that the forces of democracy in the world needed to stand together against the tyranny and oppression that constituted fascism. In this sense, many regarded Switzerland as a traitor to her own beliefs and to her fellow nations that shared those beliefs. Indeed, it is not difficult to see why the citizens of the Allied countries felt this way. Switzerland, which long stood for freedom and democracy, was seen as shying away in the face of an enemy, abandoning her desperate ideologues in their time of greatest need.

The frustration of the Allied nations is understandable, but historically is an unwarranted case. For over a hundred years Switzerland's principles had stood not just for freedom, but for neutrality. Since the ill effects of the Napoleonic Wars, Switzerland had managed to stay out of all European wars- despite the unification of its northern and southern neighbors in the late nineteenth century and the implosion of its eastern neighbor in the First World War. After being completely surrounded by war for years in that conflict, and seeing the pain and destruction caused by it, the Swiss could not help but recognize how fortunate they had been to evade it.

Ideology, rather than being motivation to join the war, was the very reason Switzerland sought to do everything possible to maintain its autonomy. The precedent had long been set; the Swiss would do what they needed in order to guarantee freedom for themselves. They would also help those outside Switzerland, but only as a secondary priority. This had long been the Swiss way, and is not reprehensible, but demands respect. The Swiss did much in the course of the war to help others, and should be admired for their perseverance, not criticized for their focus on self-preservation. The ICE made a brilliant analysis of the situation:

Switzerland's neutrality policy had fostered the illusion that by radically restricting its foreign policy, not only could it remain outside the "game of powers," but also remain aloft from the social and political developments of the day. The events of 1940 shattered conventional wisdom about Switzerland's status in Europe and the world; suddenly, it found itself in a unique and extremely one-sided situation of dependency.³⁵

The Swiss were not accustomed to the level of scrutiny and international pressure applied to them in the Second World War. Their attempt to remain absolutely neutral proved to be extremely difficult, as the continuation of "normal," non-preferential economic and political relationships was clearly more helpful to the Axis. Nevertheless, the accusation of war-profiteering against Switzerland as a whole is hardly fair. Some individuals obviously benefited from the increased demand for war supplies in Germany, and others from the questionable trade of gold, but the Swiss economy may have been better off if there had been no war at all.³⁶ There is no clear evidence that Switzerland's economy benefited from the war.

The people of Switzerland, from the rural families working under the Wahlen Plan to government officials determining policy for international trade and defense, did what they could to ensure the security of their nation during the war. Security meant more than simply preventing a German invasion of the country. Obviously this was a top priority in Berne, but many other issues were of great importance as well. The assurances that its citizens would be fed and its economy kept alive were among the top motivations for policy, and as such affected relationships with other nations.

Though historians have the gift of hindsight, the Swiss government caught up in a dangerous situation did not. It would be easy to look upon the decisions made by

³⁵ICE, 49.

³⁶ Ibid, 519-520.

Switzerland and decide how much humanitarian action, economic withdrawal, or even military action was feasible, but that is not the aim of this study. Rather, it attempted to provide a context and an explanation of Berne's wartime priorities. Switzerland's response to the crisis of a second world war fought around it in Europe as a two pronged strategy of military resistance and economic appeasement provides that context.

Switzerland could not be expected to abandon its own interests for a cause, no matter how noble. The Swiss served a humanitarian role through the care of refugees and wounded soldiers. They practiced ignoble financial policies and cooperated economically with the Axis. Perhaps most importantly, they were prepared to defend their country to the last, a fact they made clear to every nation involved in the war. The general population of Switzerland, as well as their government, cannot be judged for their actions in the Second World War. Though it may be reasonable to point out the mistakes and errors in judgment made by political and economic leaders, it is not warranted to condemn the alpine nation for its role in the war.

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