

TARGET SWITZERLAND

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Swiss Armed Neutrality
in World War II

By
STEPHEN P. HALBROOK



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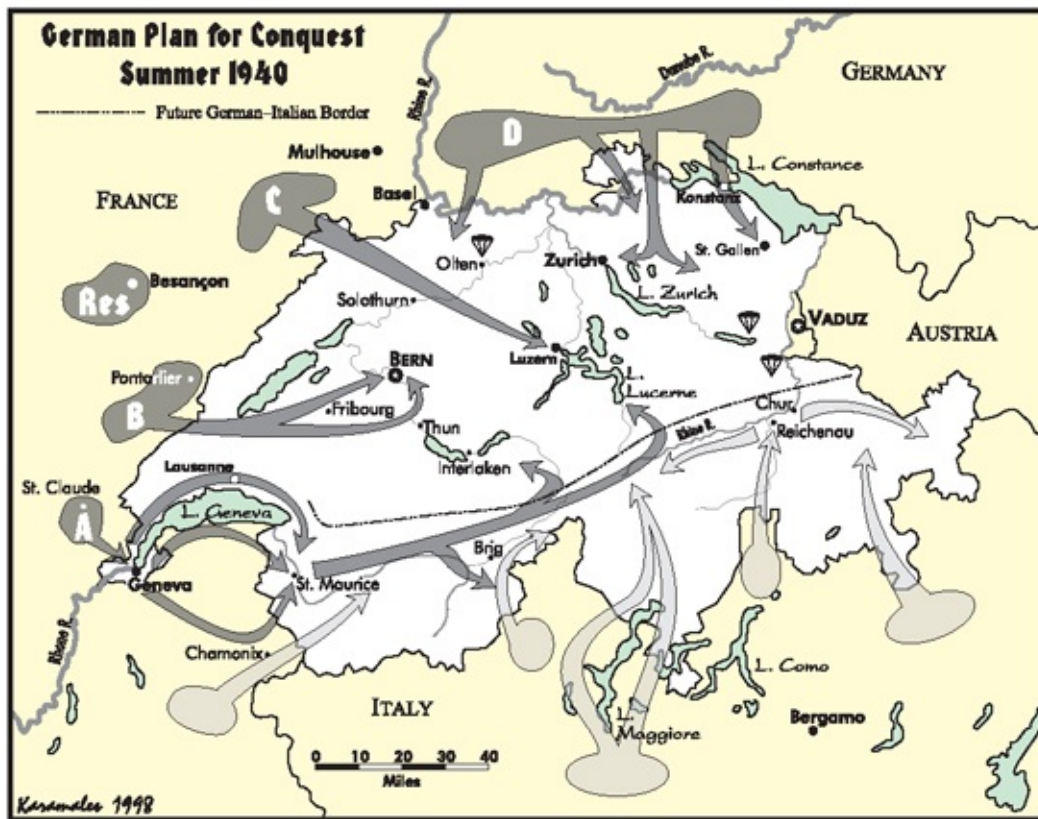
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One of several plans for an invasion of Switzerland submitted to the German Army High Command (OKH) after the fall of France. (Adapted from Kurz, *Operationsplanung Schweiz*, 41.)

Preface

Even the most casual student of World War II is familiar with the “white spot” that appears in the center of maps depicting the conquests of the Third Reich. This territory, of course, was Switzerland: the one nation on the European continent from the Iberian peninsula to the Volga River that never succumbed to German occupation or submitted to Nazi threats. Over half a century since the end of the war, the story of how this small democracy maintained its independence while completely encircled by aggressive, totalitarian powers seems to have been forgotten. It was a time when Switzerland’s existence as a democratic nation was imperiled and a time when Switzerland, alone among the nations of central Europe, successfully deterred Germany from invading and occupying her territory.

Switzerland “has one tenth of its population under arms; more than any other country in the world. . . . They’re ready to fight to defend their way of life,” wrote William L. Shirer, the eminent war correspondent, in 1939, just after Hitler launched World War II.¹ In 1940, only weeks before the Wehrmacht would topple most of the nations of Western Europe, Shirer predicted that “the Dutch will be easy pickings for the Germans. Their army is miserable. Switzerland will be a tougher nut to crack, and I doubt if the Germans will try.”² While the Swiss would put closer to a fifth of their population under arms during the war, rather than a tenth, the key to why Switzerland escaped Nazi occupation while others succumbed is revealed in these observations.

What was Switzerland’s secret? Why did a state with a German-speaking majority choose to reject the siren songs of Nazism and the pan-European fascist movement which proved enticing to large portions of the populations of neighboring countries? Where did a small nation find the resolve and strength—military and spiritual—to resist against overwhelmingly larger and more powerful foes?

One answer lies in two words which describe Switzerland’s national military doctrine: armed neutrality. Yet that alone is not sufficient, for an equal—perhaps greater—part of the story is that Switzerland’s long tradition of democracy,

together with the racial, religious, ethnic and linguistic tolerance inherent in her decentralized federal state, gave the Swiss a fierce determination to resist any threats to their independence, particularly in the form of ideologies wholly foreign to the Swiss experience. Other European nations were characterized by centralized governments often headed by elites with the power to surrender their sovereignty to Hitler, either with a short (even token) resistance or no fight at all. By contrast, in Switzerland, sovereignty began with the individual, not the central authorities. And every man kept a rifle for the defense of his home, his family, his canton and, finally, Switzerland herself.

This book describes how Switzerland's war-time mobilization and armament—rooted in the centuries-old policy of active, armed neutrality—effectively deterred invasion by the most powerful and aggressive totalitarian state in modern European history. As such, it fills a void on a subject not covered in English-language publications and contributes to the understanding of the military history of the period before and during World War II. Memories dimmed by the passage of over half a century, certain revisionists today denigrate Switzerland's military preparedness as mythical. They are wrong. As the sources utilized for much of this book demonstrate, during the war many Americans and Britons saw Switzerland as a heroic island of democracy in a sea of Axis tyranny.

The book begins with a brief account of Switzerland from its founding in 1291, including her medieval warrior tradition, and continues through the modern era, from Napoleonic times to the period following World War I. It discusses the Swiss institutions of federalism and a citizens army that deeply influenced the development of similar American institutions.

Our primary focus, however, is on Switzerland's political and military efforts to defend her independence during the period 1933–45. Switzerland was immediately threatened when Hitler came to power in 1933. The threat did not abate until the final defeat of the German Wehrmacht in 1945. This is the first publication in English to give a year-by-year account of Switzerland's preparations to resist a direct Nazi attack and to combat fifth column subversion. This is also the story of the Nazi abhorrence of Swiss democracy and the reciprocal hatred—by most Swiss—of Nazism. It is the story of Swiss determination to avoid being swallowed up in the German Reich—a fate which would have meant the extinction of Swiss identity and culture, the extermination of large numbers of political dissidents who had fled to Switzerland, and the almost certain death of 50,000 Jews, both natives and refugees, who lived in

Switzerland during the war. (This fact attains added meaning when one considers that within Germany and Austria only 28,000 Jews survived the war.)

Switzerland was the only country in Europe that had no single political leader with the authority to surrender the people to the Nazis. On Swiss soil there were no Jewish victims, no Gestapo jurisdiction and no slave labor for the German war machine. Every man in Switzerland had a rifle in his home. Switzerland was the only European country which proclaimed that, in the event of invasion, any announcement of surrender was to be regarded as enemy propaganda, and that *every* soldier must fight to the last cartridge and then with the bayonet.

The Swiss, by their timely and prudent decision to mobilize in anticipation of conflict, deterred invasion and occupation. As a consequence, Switzerland was, for the duration of the war, a strategic stumbling block in the heart of Europe, complicating significantly Axis, and in particular, German, movements on land and in the air. By contrast, most of the other countries of Europe failed to forestall invasion and long-term occupation, thereby vastly increasing the cost of the war in lives and treasure. Many of these countries surrendered to Hitler without armed resistance or after brief fights, following which the standing armies were ordered to lay down their arms. One consequence of this widespread collapse was the ceding to Germany of naval and air bases along the Atlantic, Mediterranean and North Sea coasts—providing a significantly expanded scope of operation for German naval and air power.

Much has been made in recent years of what are described as Swiss accommodations to Germany during World War II, particularly in banking practices. These accommodations—a direct, if regrettable, consequence of encirclement—merit serious and detailed treatment. The media focus on international banking transactions, however, has resulted in a distortion of the historical record that misrepresents the true Swiss experience during the war. The extraordinary and courageous efforts of the Swiss military to prevent invasion and preserve a haven in which individual rights were protected, and in which thousands of refugees and escaped prisoners of war found respite in the midst of the savagery of World War II and the Holocaust, have been ignored or forgotten.

The Swiss, with a long and vigorous tradition of academic and press freedom, have not run from their historical demons, as readers of the Swiss press and current historical scholarship know. It is important that others who judge Switzerland not run from the reality of Switzerland's dogged, successful

resistance to tyranny during a time in which every surrounding country failed the first test of sovereignty. Even when completely encircled by Nazi Germany and its allies, the Swiss remained defiant of the New Order in Europe, their citizens army inspired by the simple two-word concept: “no surrender.” This book is an effort to render justice to Switzerland’s heroic resistance to Hitler during World War II. It would be difficult to find a more enduring democracy in the world than Switzerland, or one that has faced greater challenges to its continued existence.

* * *

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Prologue

Companions of the Oath

IT IS JULY 25, 1940. GENERAL HENRI GUISAN, COMMANDER OF the Swiss Army, has summoned 600 of his highest officers to a jagged mountainside in central Switzerland near Lake Lucerne overshadowed by Alpine peaks—the Rütli Meadow.

During the preceding weeks, France, the Netherlands and Belgium have fallen to the forces of Nazi Germany, and the British Army has evacuated the continent, leaving its heavy equipment behind. Denmark and Norway had succumbed to German arms a few months before, Poland the preceding fall. Austria and Czechoslovakia were swallowed up by the Third Reich through bloodless coups, wrought by intimidation, during the previous two years. Fascist Italy threatens Switzerland's southern border.

Surrounded by totalitarian aggressors and occupied lands, the Swiss stand alone.

General Guisan faces his officers, who are arrayed in a semicircle before him. Urging them to prepare for total resistance to aggression that could come from any direction, he says:

I decided to reunite you in this historic place, the symbolic ground of our independence, to explain the urgency of the situation, and to speak to you as a soldier to soldiers. We are at a turning point of our history. The survival of Switzerland is at stake.¹

The General had chosen his site well to deliver this call to resistance. For history and tradition tell that in this spot, the Rütli Meadow, the Swiss Confederation was formed on August 1, 1291. On that date, leaders of the three Alpine cantons of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden, who had successfully defended their democratically governed communities from foreign invasion, came together to form an alliance for mutual defense. They called themselves the

Eidgenossen— Companions of the Oath—and vowed to help each other in fighting any enemy who threatened their independence.

The history of Switzerland's armed neutrality in the modern era, including the Swiss' valiant defense of their homeland in World War II, cannot be divorced from the record of her men-at-arms since that first meeting at the Rütli Meadow more than seven hundred years ago. For centuries, Swiss fighting men earned a reputation as the most ferocious in Europe, and their dominance of the battlefield, combined with their refusal to live under the rule of foreign kings, became a unique example in Europe of the successful defense of a nation's freedoms.

In the centuries after 1291, Switzerland would grow from the original 3 to 26 cantons and half-cantons. Switzerland today consists of an ethnic mix of 72 percent German speakers, 20 percent French, and 6 percent Italian—with 1 percent of Swiss, primarily in the mountainous southeast, speaking Romansh, a survival of ancient Latin combined with Italian and a trace of an ancient and once widespread Celtic tongue. Surrounded today by Italy, Austria, Germany, and France, Switzerland occupies a strategically important position in the heart of Europe. Nevertheless, with one brief interruption during the Napoleonic period at the turn of the nineteenth century, Switzerland has successfully maintained her integrity and defended her borders against foreign aggressors. At every stage of her military history, Switzerland would use her terrain to military advantage.

Switzerland is a landlocked, 41,293 square kilometer country, about the size of Maryland. The Alps in the south and east constitute 61 percent of the country, the Jura mountains in the northwest another 12 percent. Most of the remainder, the Swiss Mittelland (Plateau), is a flat area from Lake Geneva in the southwest to Lake Constance in the northeast. While the Plateau is the most vulnerable part of the country, it is dotted with natural barriers of rivers, lakes, and streams. The majority of the land—the mountains—constitutes a natural fortress, centering on the Alpine Redoubt, or *Réduit National*.

The first detailed account of the people who inhabited Switzerland in ancient times describes the Helvetii, a large Celtic tribe against whom Julius Caesar launched his 10-year Gallic War, known to generations of schoolchildren who learned Latin from reading Caesar's account of his campaigns in Gaul. (Today, multi-lingual Switzerland's stamps and coins are marked "Helvetia," and the country is known formally as the "Confederatio Helvetica," the Swiss Confederation.) The ancient Helvetic tribe Caesar described was at the time

attempting to migrate to western Gaul (modern France) to escape Germans who were threatening their homeland. Caesar claimed to have killed three-quarters of the Helvetii before ordering the survivors back to their original land to serve as a buffer against the warlike German tribes living beyond the Rhine.²

The familiar legend of William Tell exemplifies Swiss resistance to foreign domination and cultivation of the martial spirit. Today, Tell is portrayed on the modern 5-franc piece and occupies a place as a Swiss folk hero similar to that of Robin Hood in English-speaking countries. Immortalized by Schiller in his 1804 play (written to encourage resistance to Napoleon's occupation of Europe), the feats of William Tell bear a striking resemblance to earlier tales from Scandinavian mythology (although archaeological evidence from Tell's time demonstrates that a number of castles in the area of Tell's exploits were burned or destroyed). Yet the reality behind the story illustrates both the fierce determination of Swiss to maintain their freedom and independence and their proud tradition of marksmanship.

Tell's story takes place just before the Alliance of 1291. According to an early American account, Governor Gessler of Uri, a puppet of the then-occupying Austrians, "placed a hat on a pole at Altdorf, and gave strict orders that every one should pay that hat the same honour as if he were present himself."³ When Tell repeatedly passed by Gessler's hat without taking off his own, he was condemned to shoot an apple off the head of his six-year-old son at 120 paces; the alternative was death for both father and son. In a remarkable display of archery skill, Tell succeeded in hitting the apple and sparing the boy.

The less familiar remainder of the story equally illustrates Swiss virtues of independence and resistance to foreign invasions. After the shooting of the arrow, Gessler asked Tell why he had another arrow in his quiver. Tell responded that, had he injured the child, he would have sent the remaining arrow into the governor's heart.⁴

The governor condemned Tell to life imprisonment for his insolence, but Tell escaped while being transported across Lake Lucerne in a boat. After Gessler's own boat landed, "in the way to his castle he was waylaid by Tell in a narrow road, who placed the reserved arrow in his heart."⁵ This instigated a rebellion in which the Austrian overseers were deposed, and the three cantons of Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden swore loyalty to each other—the very event recalled by General Guisan six and one-half centuries later in the face of the Nazi threat.

Tell's famous deeds have lived on in the hearts of those who love liberty, not least the founders of the American republic. John Adams, the second President of the United States, devoted a chapter to Switzerland in his *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States of America* of 1787. Noting that the arsenal at Zurich supposedly contained William Tell's bow and arrow, Adams quoted from a poem about Tell: "Who with the generous rustics fate, / On Uri's rock, in close divan, / And wing'd that arrow, sure as fate, / Which fixed the sacred rights of man."⁶ Drawing an analogy to the American Revolution and the process of uniting thirteen states into one nation, Adams noted that the canton of Uri, birthplace of William Tell, "shook off the yoke of Austria in 1308, and, with Switz and Unterwald, laid the foundation of the perpetual alliance of the cantons, in 1315."⁷

That latter year was the date of one of Switzerland's most inspiring victories, the Battle of Morgarten, in which the Austrian invaders were routed and Swiss independence restored. One thousand four hundred Swiss peasants ambushed 20,000 Austrian knights and infantry in a narrow passage, showering them with rocks and driving them into a lake where many drowned. Hapsburg deaths numbered 2,000 to only 12 Swiss.⁸

The three cantons which had joined as "companions of the oath" then took their alliance a significant step further and established a permanent Swiss Confederation—the beginning of the nation of Switzerland. The original grouping of the three cantons grew over the course of the fourteenth century to include Lucerne, Zurich, Glarus, Zug and Bern, encompassing much of modern central and northern Switzerland.

Yet the foreign threat to Swiss independence—and bold Swiss resistance—continued. In 1339, feudal lords from southern Germany and Fribourg sent 12,000 soldiers against the Bernese, who fought back with 6,500 infantrymen. At the Battle of Laupen, the Bernese foot soldiers defeated the enemy's armored cavalry in open terrain, a first for Swiss warriors and a precedent for all of Europe. Until that time, the mounted knight had reigned supreme on the battlefield, and foot soldiers had been considered militarily—as well as socially—inferior to knights.⁹

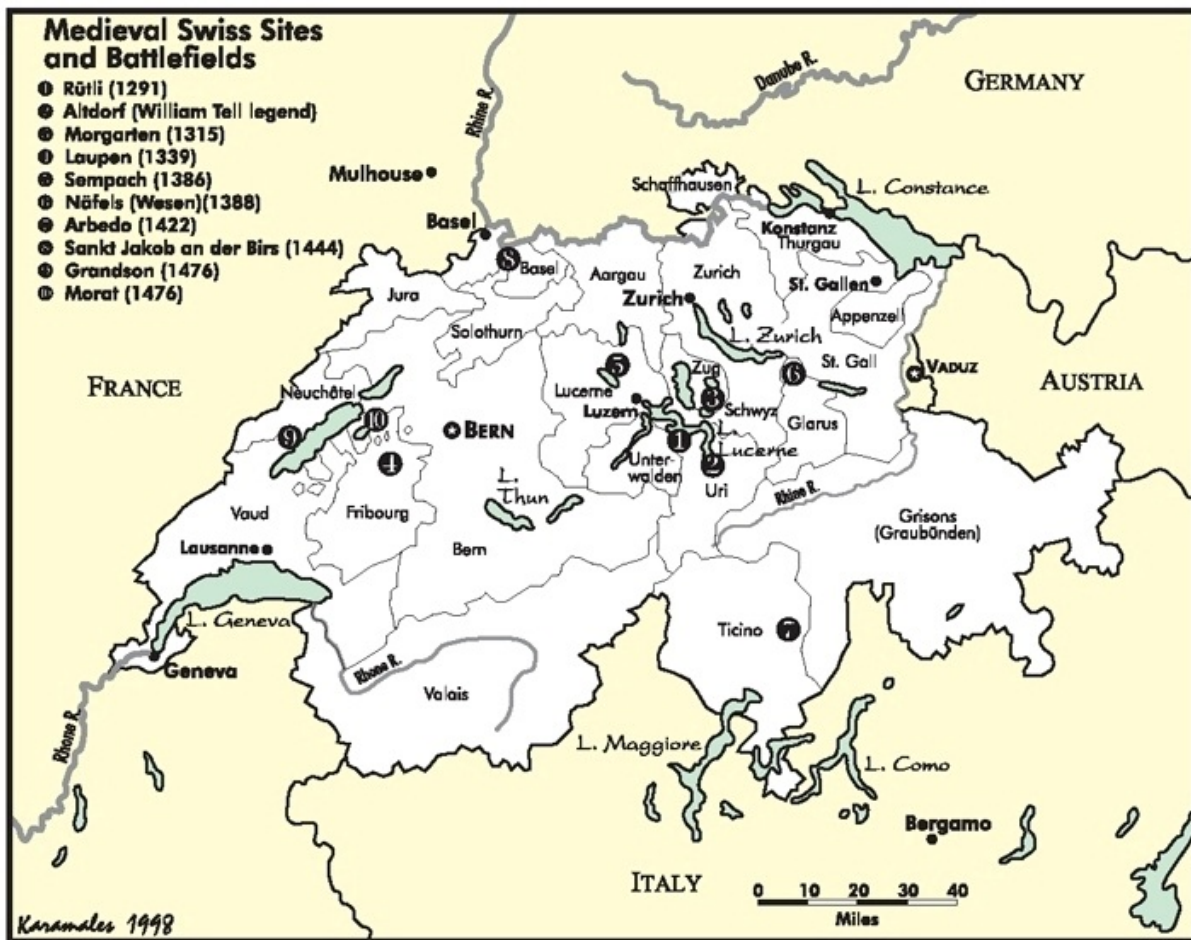
At the Battle of Sempach in 1386, Duke Leopold III of Austria sent 4,000 armored knights against a 1,300-man Swiss peasant force armed only with halberds and pieces of wood on their arms to fend off blows.¹⁰ Folklore has it that during the battle a Swiss fighter named Arnold Winkelried held onto a great

number of enemy lances, which had been thrust into his body, long enough to allow his comrades to drive through the Austrian lines. The battle ended with half the Austrian force dead on the field (including the Duke himself) to 200 Swiss casualties.¹¹ Winkelried lives on in Swiss history as one of the Confederation's greatest heroes.

In 1388, the Austrians invaded again with a force of 15,000 men but were soundly defeated at the Battle of Näfels by about 650 Swiss, who rolled stones upon the invaders from the summit of a mountain and then “rushed down upon them with such fury, as forced them to retire with an immense loss.”¹² The Austrians lost 1,700 men. The Swiss lost only 55—a ratio of almost 30 to 1.

The Swiss perfected the concept of a well-organized citizenry that could be called out for service at short notice. The ability of the Swiss militia to mobilize immediately would continue to be its distinguishing characteristic over the centuries, right up through World War II. The ruthlessness of the Swiss in battle and their courage was noted throughout Europe. Their fierceness and willingness to fight to the death in defense of their homeland deterred many potential aggressors.

In the Burgundian War, Switzerland defeated the most powerful army in Europe, led by Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy. In 1476, Charles led 20,000 soldiers across the Jura Mountains and persuaded Bernese troops in the Grandson castle to surrender. All 412 Bernese were then hanged or drowned.¹³ The Swiss mobilized immediately and at the ensuing Battle of Grandson sent the Burgundian army into retreat with heavy losses.



In the two centuries following the origins in 1291 of the “Companions of the Oath,” Swiss warriors won victory after victory against overwhelming odds in conflicts with surrounding monarchies.

Charles spent four months preparing an army of 23,000 men for revenge. The Swiss strengthened the defenses at the town of Morat (Murten), through which an invader would have to pass en route to Bern. When Charles laid siege to Morat, the Confederates mobilized an army of 25,000. The Swiss launched a surprise attack, killing 10,000 of the enemy and sustaining losses of only 410. The Swiss took no prisoners, but Charles the Bold managed to escape, only to be killed by a halberd-wielding Swiss the following year at the Battle of Nancy.¹⁴ After Morat, the Swiss infantry was the most renowned in Europe.

Strong defense of the Swiss homeland and the position of Switzerland at the geopolitical crossroads of Europe led to another concept unique to the Swiss military tradition—neutrality. At the Diet of Stans in 1481, the Confederation

accepted the advice of the politically influential Swiss monk Niklaus von Flüe (more commonly known as Brother Klaus) to remain neutral during foreign conflicts. Neutrality would deny potential aggressors a *casus belli*, a reason for war, against Switzerland and would thus itself serve to deter foreign aggression. Further, the Swiss came to see that neutrality was, indeed, necessary to maintain their independence and to ensure unity in a decentralized political society such as the Confederation. It would take another generation before the concept of Swiss neutrality would be truly realized. The threat from abroad, however, would recur throughout Swiss history, including in the twentieth century.

As Swiss freedom continued to be threatened, the Swiss developed new military tactics to deter foreign invasion. The Swiss pike square— thousands of men massed together with long pikes and halberds— ruled supreme on European battlefields. Cavalry could not penetrate it, and the pike square could outpush opposing infantry formations.

The attempt in 1495 by the Holy Roman Empire's Diet of Worms to impose a common penny tax on the Swiss and to subject them to the jurisdiction of an Imperial Chamber of Justice sparked a conflict that would complete the winning of Swiss independence from the Holy Roman Empire. To counter the Empire's heavy infantry, which threatened invasion from what is today southern Germany, the Swiss built fortifications all along the Rhine River and stayed at the ready for immediate mobilization—a tactic they would repeat in World War II. With the Empire's defeat at the Battle of Dornach, the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian recognized the independence of the Swiss Confederation in 1501. Other cantons joined the Confederation, which by 1513 comprised a total of thirteen.¹⁵

The Swiss defeat at Marignano, near the Italian city of Milan, at the hands of the French in 1515, prompted Switzerland to adopt a policy of permanent armed neutrality, with no imperialist or territorial ambitions. The contemporary Florentine writer Niccolo Machiavelli, author of *The Prince* (1532) and a keen student of military affairs, described the battle thus: "if they [the Swiss] did not win the day as they had done at Novara [in 1513, when the Swiss beat the French], they fought valiantly for two days, and, though routed, got away with half their forces."¹⁶ While the Swiss performed bravely, after the battle they finally adopted a foreign policy which allowed only for defensive wars.

Further, a policy of neutrality was the most logical course within a Confederation of disparate languages, ethnicity and traditions. The decentralized political system of the cantons, under which no leader from one canton was

allowed to dominate the others, meant that aggressive wars could not easily be undertaken by the Confederation as a whole.

Neutrality, of course, could only be maintained by a well-armed citizenry. Machiavelli wrote that “the Swiss are well armed and enjoy great freedom.”¹⁷ On his travels through Switzerland, the Florentine observed her citizens army, which he found to be the worthy descendant of the militia of Republican Rome sixteen centuries earlier. As Machiavelli noted, the Swiss were “masters of modern warfare,” but their armed citizenry made them superior only at defense, not aggression:

[W]hen states are strongly armed, as Rome was and as the Swiss are, the more difficult it is to overcome them the nearer they are to their homes: for such bodies [militias] can bring more forces together to resist attack than they can to attack others. . . . The Swiss are easy to beat when away from home, whither they cannot send more than thirty or forty thousand men; but to defeat them at home where they can muster a hundred thousand is very difficult.¹⁸

By the early 1500s the evolution of Swiss military doctrine, from reliance on the “irresistible” pike square in the open field to once more adopting a strategy of defense, had thus come full circle. This should not be surprising given the small size and limited resources of Switzerland in comparison to her neighbors. Consider Machiavelli’s description of the tactics used by the Swiss and their ability to maintain their freedom despite their modest economic conditions:

since they are poor, yet anxious to defend their liberties against the ambitions of the German princes . . . the Swiss are obliged to engage an enemy on foot, and therefore find it necessary to continue their ancient manner of fighting in order to make headway against the fury of the enemy’s cavalry.¹⁹

Though modern Switzerland is prosperous, the essential military situation has not changed: a small country in Europe facing potential foes far larger and more populous. As this book will discuss, the Swiss adopted a sophisticated defensive posture in World War II relying on the terrain of the country and the abilities of her well-trained shooters to repel foes. The reliance on a citizens army, rather than a standing army, required that ordinary Swiss constantly practice their marksmanship and military discipline, another tradition of long

standing continued to this day.

A citizens army depends for its success on the cohesion of its units and the absolute devotion of each soldier. During World War II, the Swiss had no tolerance for soldiers convicted of espionage for the Nazis or sabotage. Death sentences were handed down for such activities. Machiavelli had written centuries earlier of the Swiss harshness toward soldiers who expressed fear or deserted from the ranks.

After their defeat at Marignano in 1515, the Swiss would no longer stray outside their borders, but would concentrate solely on the defense of Switzerland. In 1647, in the “Defensional of Wyl,” the Swiss federal army took over defense of the borders from the cantons. The Treaty of Westphalia of 1648, which ended the European Thirty Years’ War, recognized Switzerland’s independence and confirmed her separation from the Holy Roman Empire.²⁰

Following Switzerland’s adoption of a national policy of armed neutrality, Swiss troops continued to enhance their reputation as fighters in the service of foreign monarchs, as mercenaries. It became a status symbol among European royalty to have their persons protected by Swiss Guards. When the Parisian mob came for Louis XVI at the Tuileries in 1792, no Frenchman came to his defense. His 600-man regiment of Swiss Guards, however, fought back against overwhelming odds, and nearly all were massacred. In 1848, the Swiss Constitution prohibited any new contracts for service in foreign armies, and in 1859, all mercenary service was prohibited.²¹ Over the centuries, roughly one million Swiss had served as mercenaries. Today, as the last vestige of what was once a widespread practice, 90 Swiss soldiers continue to guard the Pope at the Vatican, their colorful uniforms a reminder of an even more colorful military tradition.

The Swiss example of a well-armed citizens army, instead of the standing armies typical of the European kingdoms, attracted the attention of English and American political observers in the eighteenth century, including many of the founders of the American republic. In 1771, the *Boston Gazette* drew a direct analogy to British rule in America using the example of the Austrian occupation of Switzerland and the patriotic resistance of William Tell. The newspaper’s concluding remark and its application to the British was clear: “Was there not a cause, was it not high time to exterminate such instruments of cruelty?”²²

In its *Appeal to the Inhabitants of Quebec* of October 26, 1774, the Continental Congress asked their northern neighbors not to let religious

differences prevent them from pursuing unity. The *Appeal* stated:

The Swiss Cantons furnish a memorable proof of this truth. Their union is composed of Roman Catholic and Protestant States, living in the utmost concord and peace with one another and thereby enabled, ever since they bravely vindicated their freedom, to defy and defeat every tyrant that has invaded them.²³

In 1778, Johann R. Valltravers, a political leader from western Switzerland, wrote to Benjamin Franklin: “Let us be united, as two Sister-Republicks.” He proposed a “lasting Foundation of Friendship, and of mutual good offices between the two Sisters, the 13 republican states of N[orth] America, and of Switzerland.”²⁴ The term “Sister Republics” would stick and was frequently used in nineteenth-century America.

Once the American Revolution was won, the Swiss experience would figure prominently in the political debates that took place just before the Constitution was adopted. In his *A Defense of the Constitutions* (1787), a survey of ancient and modern republics and other political models, John Adams discussed the governance of the democratic Swiss cantons and noted two common institutions among them: the right to vote on laws and the right to bear arms. Thus in the canton of Bern, “every male of sixteen is enrolled in the militia, and obligated to provide himself an uniform, a musket, powder and ball; and no peasant is allowed to marry without producing his arms and uniform.”²⁵

George Mason, a delegate to the Constitutional Convention who was best known for his authorship of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, proposed that the office of President under the new constitution should consist of three persons rather than just one. He conceded that a single person as President had the advantages of unity and secrecy, especially during war. Yet that was also a principle of monarchies, which had been defeated when they invaded republics. Republics without a single leader had advantages too: “Every Husbandman will be quickly converted into a Soldier, when he knows & feels that he is to fight not in defense of the Rights of a particular Family, or a Prince; but for his own. . . . It is this which preserves the Freedom and Independence of the Swiss Cantons, in the midst of the most powerful Nations.” This Swiss-like reliance on the individual soldier fighting to defend his home and liberties was also the secret of the success of the Americans in the Revolution.²⁶ Ironically, Mason’s proposal

was similar to the Swiss executive institution of the Federal Council, which was adopted in 1848 and continues today.

Patrick Henry, whose Revolutionary-era speech with the words “give me liberty or give me death” won him the reputation as America’s foremost orator, eloquently praised the 500-year history of Switzerland, which “braved all the power of France and Germany,” while retaining its “independence, republican simplicity and valour.”²⁷ He continued:

Compare the peasants of Switzerland with those of any other mighty nation: You will find them far more happy— for one civil war among them, there have been five or six among other nations—Their attachment to their country, and to freedom—their resolute intrepidity in their defense; the consequent security and happiness which they have enjoyed, and the respect and awe which these things produced in their bordering nations, have signalized them republicans. ...Let us follow their example, and be equally happy.²⁸

From its beginnings, the United States had a healthy regard for the Swiss example of a decentralized federal state, guarded from invasion by a well-armed and well-trained citizens army. In 1789, in response to the public debate over ratification of the U.S. Constitution, the first Congress proposed the Bill of Rights, which became part of the Constitution in 1791. Two provisions of the Bill of Rights bear the imprint of Swiss influence. The Second Amendment declares: “A well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.”²⁹ The Tenth Amendment provides: “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited to it by the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” These declarations of popular sovereignty and federalism, inspired in part by the Swiss model, remain part of the United States Constitution today. History supported the position of those who argued that the democratic and decentralized character of Switzerland made her militarily stronger, rather than weaker.

Switzerland’s history of standing unconquered by foreign aggressors since 1291 has not, however, remained unbroken. When the revolutionary energy of France, then Europe’s most powerful nation state, became harnessed to the ambition of one of history’s most charismatic leaders, the map of Europe was redrawn. The Swiss cantons found themselves forced to become a “protectorate

of France.” This unhappy experience with Napoleon would live long in Swiss hearts and minds and provide a backdrop both to the fierce Swiss determination to resist the Nazis and to the type of warfare the Nazis could have expected had they invaded the country.

It began in May 1797. After scouting out the country to plan an invasion, Napoleon demanded that the mountain passes be opened to French troops. The Swiss refused the demand. Napoleon decided to invade.³⁰

Then—just as the Nazis would do a century and a half later—the French Directory (the Napoleonic government) launched propaganda barrages and promoted rumor-mongering against Switzerland as part of a campaign to reduce the Swiss will to resist. The clarion calls of “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” emanating from Paris found receptive ears among some Swiss, particularly in the French-speaking cantons. The last vestiges of aristocracy and feudalism, argued Swiss radicals, should be swept into the dustbin of history. A revolutionary, Peter Ochs, accepted Napoleon’s invitation to draft a new constitution for Switzerland. Before long, Geneva and parts of the Jura were occupied by French troops. Vaud was taken without a shot being fired. Lausanne fell on January 28, 1798, without resistance.³¹

The Swiss made a stand on March 5 in a field near the town of Fraubrunnen, where 400 years before they had defeated a horde of English mercenaries intent on abusing Swiss nuns in their convent. While the Swiss put up a brave fight against the French invaders, the rolling farmland was not defensible against Napoleon’s infantry and artillery. Many Swiss who turned out for the fight were simply locals intent on defending their families and homesteads. Most of them were poorly equipped. Women, children and the elderly armed themselves with pitchforks and other farm implements to fight the French.³²

The unique Swiss system of collective security for the cantons had operated successfully from the founding of the country until 1798. In the face of the Napoleonic threat, however, the lack of a single command and superior French weapons and numbers led to Switzerland’s defeat. (Remembering this failure, after 1815 the Swiss would expend great effort to improve both their weapons and their military tactics.) Equally important, massive revolutionary propaganda promising a new and better order in Europe permitted the French to sow disunity among the cantons and achieve their purpose to divide and conquer the country. As a result, in the 1930s and World War II, Switzerland would be vigilant against the threat of Nazi propaganda and subversive activities in the country

and adopt a concept of “spiritual national defense.”

After Napoleon’s victory in 1798, those Swiss fighters who survived disappeared back into their villages and waited for a new opportunity to defeat the invader.³³ On April 12, after the French entered Bern—the first foreign army ever to do so—Peter Ochs proclaimed the Helvetic Republic. A new constitution replaced Swiss traditions of local democratic control with a highly centralized government and an executive dictatorship, the Directory of Five, headed by Ochs. Resistance movements that included thousands of Swiss citizens formed soon thereafter in several cantons, but were crushed by the French.³⁴ Sporadic guerilla warfare continued and thousands of Swiss were killed.³⁵

After Austria and Britain made peace with France in 1802, French occupation troops withdrew from Switzerland. However, the country remained under Napoleon’s heel. The second Helvetic Constitution, more centralist than the first, was promulgated even though the Swiss rejected it in a vote.³⁶ Though Switzerland remained in her degraded state, Swiss fighting men continued to uphold their high reputation for courage. Constantly placed in the forefront of battle, only 700 of the 9,000 Swiss troops forced into French service would return from Napoleon’s disastrous 1812 Russian campaign. At the crossing of the Beresina during the retreat from Moscow, the Swiss bravely stood in the rearguard that allowed the bulk of Napoleon’s fighting strength to escape the converging Russian armies.

In 1813, Switzerland became a battleground again and was overrun by Austrian and Russian troops—although the Swiss greeted them as liberators. It was not until Napoleon’s final defeat at Waterloo in 1815 that the nightmare ended. Departing from neutrality, Switzerland joined the allies and participated in the last military actions against Napoleon.³⁷

While in exile on St. Helena, Napoleon paid tribute to the courage and obstinacy of the Swiss: “The Swiss treated the French as their ancestors had treated the Austrians; but what could they do against the French cavalry and artillery? They hurled themselves upon the cannons like madmen, yielding only to numbers and tactics.”³⁸ In his *Commentaires*, Napoleon warned against campaigns in mountainous areas and described the Alps as a place where one must “make supernatural efforts to cross inaccessible mountains and still find oneself amid precipices, defiles and rocks, with no prospect other than having the

same obstacles to surmount.”³⁹

The period of Napoleonic domination was the last instance in which Switzerland’s democracy and sovereignty were lost to a foreign invader. This occurred only because the Swiss themselves were disunited in the face of a pan-European revolutionary idea and because the small, poorly-armed Swiss forces were crushed by overwhelming French military superiority. After the Napoleonic experience, the Swiss were determined never to allow an invasion again and spent the next century and a quarter building a strong citizens army that anticipated new threats. They would be ready when a new, and far more sinister, military adventurer arose in the 1930s to launch another war against all of Europe.

According to the Swiss concept, the army was “the people in arms.” Passed under the new 1815 Constitution, the general military regulation of August 20, 1817 organized the army of modern Switzerland. It required universal male service in the militia, which was subjected to uniform standards by, and came under the direction of, the Confederation as a whole.⁴⁰ In reaction to the Napoleonic invasion of Switzerland, patriotic shooting clubs sprang up. The Swiss Shooting Federation (in German, the *Schweizerischer Schützenverein*, or SSV) united the local groups in 1824. Article I of its constitution stated the organization’s purpose:

To draw another bond around the hearts of our citizens to increase the strength of the fatherland through unity and closer connections and at the same time to contribute according to the capacity of each of our members, to the promotion and perfection of the art of sharpshooting, an art beautiful in itself and of the highest importance for the defense of the confederation.⁴¹

The SSV began to hold local, regional, and national shooting festivals, “Helvetic assemblies” designed to engender a stronger Swiss national feeling. The organization was heir to the centuries-old tradition of shooting festivals, about which records had been kept from the fourteenth century. It promoted a culture of marksmanship in the community and was an essential component of continued training for citizen soldiers.⁴²

In the 1847 Sonderbund War, a separatist revolt in seven rural Catholic cantons was defeated by larger, more urbanized Protestant cantons. The war

lasted only 25 days and took only 98 lives.⁴³ The victory against the Jesuit traditionalists horrified the old order in Europe and inspired those seeking a stronger centralized government. Reformists proceeded to draft a liberal constitution to replace the post-Napoleonic Pact of 1815. By a vote of almost seven to one, the citizenry adopted the proposed constitution.

During the years 1856–57, Kaiser Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia prepared to mobilize as many as 150,000 soldiers to march on Switzerland over a border dispute. The Swiss Federal Council positioned 30,000 troops at the border, instructed reserves to stay in readiness, and fortified the Rhine against a possible attack. A German observer remarked: “No Swiss, but a stranger dare say it, that this militia was worth half a dozen standing armies.” The possible war sparked an international crisis that was eventually resolved in Switzerland’s favor through diplomacy.⁴⁴

In 1866, Prussian Prime Minister Otto von Bismarck suggested to the Italian Ambassador that the French-speaking parts of Switzerland and Belgium could be given to France to compensate for territorial expansion by Prussia and Italy.⁴⁵ That same year, in a war using newly designed rifles, the Prussians soundly defeated Austria. Seeing a need during this period to design a rifle that would be superior to that of the Prussians, in 1866 the Swiss Federal Assembly approved funding to develop a repeating rifle. In response, Frederic Vetterli designed a repeating turn-bolt rifle with a tubular magazine holding 12 metallic cartridges that was in use from 1867 to 1889.⁴⁶ The Swiss adopted a new repeating rifle in 1889, using a straight-bolt system that allowed faster firing than the German Mauser rifles. The newer model carried 12 rounds of the Swiss-designed 7.5mm cartridge.⁴⁷

For most of the nineteenth century, France would be seen as the greatest danger to Swiss independence and security. However, as time went on, Switzerland’s neighbor to the north once again began to appear more threatening. Particularly after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71—during which Switzerland mobilized to prevent the Prussians from invading to pursue the fleeing French—the Swiss came to fear the new Second Reich in Germany. The enduring expression “hatred of the Germans” first appeared in Switzerland at this time.⁴⁸ The feeling of ill-will was reciprocated: one German writer of the time wrote that “for centuries, Switzerland has hung from our body like a paralyzed limb and sucks our juices without itself moving for them. To cut it off

would be damaging to the limb and destructive to the body; it will again survive only through close association with the body.”⁴⁹ Tensions between Germany and Switzerland increased in the late nineteenth century as German Social Democrats who had fled to Switzerland smuggled socialist newspapers back into Germany.

The perception of a new German threat convinced the Swiss to unify the armed forces in the federal system in 1874. The Federal Constitution provided that military instruction, armament, and equipment be in the federal, not cantonal, domains, and Article 18 stated that “Every Swiss is liable to military service.” Rather than the citizen providing his own arms, as had traditionally been the case, the new constitution provided that “servicemen shall receive their first equipment, clothing, and arms without payment. The weapon shall remain in the hands of the soldier, subject to conditions to be determined by Federal legislation.”⁵⁰

During this period, in sharp contrast to the increasing centralization of power in other states in continental Europe, in Switzerland the federal government was becoming more responsive to the wishes of individual citizens. The 1874 Constitution introduced the referendum, under which a petition signed by 30,000 citizens would require a popular vote on an existing law. Under the 1891 amendment, the initiative was established, granting 50,000 signatories the power to demand a vote on new legislation they endorsed.⁵¹

After a series of reforms, by 1912 the Swiss Army included 281,000 men and could call on an additional 200,000 auxiliary troops. Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany visited Switzerland that year. As the Kaiser observed Swiss army maneuvers, Swiss President Ludwig Forrer told his guest that “we have the resolute intention of protecting our independence against any attack on this [land], our dearest possession, and of upholding our neutrality against anyone who fails to respect it.”⁵² In a conversation depicted on a contemporary postcard, the Kaiser queried what the quarter of a million Swiss Army would do if faced with an invasion of half a million Germans. A Swiss militiaman replied, “Shoot twice.”⁵³

During the period just before the Great War, Americans were intensely interested in Swiss marksmanship culture. General George W. Wingate expressed the sentiment as follows:

Switzerland has no regular army, but depends for her defense on her riflemen. Though poor, she spends annually large amounts in developing them, both in and out of the schools. Out of a population of but three million—less than that of the City of New York in 1904—she had 3,656 rifle clubs with a membership of 218,815, who shot twenty-one million cartridges with the army rifle.⁵⁴

These words were uttered the year after the Swiss had developed two new infantry rifles to replace the model of 1889. The Schmidt- Rubin Infantry Rifle Model 1911 had a 6-round detachable magazine and used the more powerful Model 11 7.5mm cartridge. The Karabiner Model 1911, a handy carbine version, was also adopted. Both used the fast-acting straight-pull bolt. Over 300,000 Model 1911 rifles and carbines were manufactured and distributed to the populace.⁵⁵

In 1911, American Colonel George Bell noted that Swiss soldiers marching in parades were not impressive to watch, but these soldiers had all the essential skills to defend their country. He wrote:

Any nation, however powerful, will pause before invading Switzerland, for, combined to this preparedness, there is a Spartan patriotism and valor, inherited from ancestors who had no fear of death, and a love of country unsurpassed by any known people, and this army, or nation in arms, before being killed or annihilated by sheer force of numbers, will inflict terrible losses, as, while the Swiss believes in peace, and desires it above all else, his good sense tells him this is best assured by preparedness at all times.⁵⁶

When the “Great War” broke out, on August 1, 1914, with combatants on all borders of Switzerland, the Federal Council ordered mobilization of the entire army. Some 450,000 men answered the call. Switzerland’s Parliament elected Lt. General Ulrich Wille, distinguished by his complete faith in the abilities of the citizen soldier, to the rank of general.⁵⁷ On August 4, the Federal Council reaffirmed that Switzerland would maintain “the strictest neutrality vis-a-vis the belligerent States”⁵⁸ in the widening conflict.

Known as the “occupation of frontiers,” Swiss strategy during World War I was a strong border defense by three divisions, backed by a reserve of three more divisions, with four brigades in the southern mountains.⁵⁹ The border

troops were concentrated at the northwest corner of the country to protect the frontier against *both* France and Germany.⁶⁰

As they had in previous conflicts, the outnumbered Swiss placed great emphasis on superior military training and equipment. The army was supplied with Maxim machine guns and updated artillery. Both aviation and anti-aircraft defenses were introduced.⁶¹ Although the Italians briefly contemplated a march through Switzerland,⁶² both they and the Germans decided to respect Swiss neutrality. The French continued to fear the possibility of a German attack on France through Switzerland until the very end of the war and discussed the concept of a joint defense with the Swiss in the event of a German invasion. These talks, which took place during the last stages of the war in 1917–18, were the precursor of similar joint plans in 1939–40.⁶³

The concept of armed neutrality served Switzerland well in World War I as it had for centuries. Despite her location in the center of the continental European powers fighting the war, Switzerland successfully preserved her strict neutrality and avoided becoming a battlefield.

Trade was vital to the existence of landlocked Switzerland. As a neutral she exercised her right under international law to trade with both groups of combatants, and she disregarded the objections of each military bloc against trade with the other. Surrounded by war for only the third time in her history, the nation could not afford to play favorites. Neutrality did not lead to prosperity during World War I—Switzerland faced shortages of food and other commodities.

At the outset of the war, many German-speaking Swiss sympathized with Germany, and French-speaking Swiss supported France. Over time, however—and especially prompted by Germany's invasion of neutral Belgium—the Central Powers were seen more and more to represent anti-democratic forces contrary to the Swiss tradition of individual liberty and democratic government.

In 1916, the U.S. Senate published a report entitled *The Military Law and Efficient Citizen Army of the Swiss*. Perhaps the most telling item in the report was the observation of American Attaché Eric Fisher Wood about French soldiers: “The only shooting that they had ever done was gallery shooting at a range of about 40 yards, and they were singularly poor even at this.”⁶⁴ Further, the German soldiers “shoot poorly from an American standpoint, but do better than the French.”⁶⁵ That same year, Julian Grande, in his book *A Citizens'*

Army: The Swiss System, wrote that Switzerland had remained out of the Great War because “the Swiss Army, or part of it, is always mobilized, and its military value is well known to all the belligerents, none of whom are anxious to encounter the resistance of an army of 500,000 trained soldiers, all good marksmen.”⁶⁶

For a great power, or a country whose geographic position makes her unassailable, a declaration of neutrality is relatively cost-free. For a small country strategically located in the heart of Europe, however, the cost of neutrality was higher and needed to be earned by strength of arms and resolve to resist aggression. From the fall of Napoleon to the fall of the Kaiser, with every succeeding generation the Swiss renewed their commitment to the principles of local defense and democracy that had served the country well over the centuries. Little could anyone have predicted, however, how well the model would serve Switzerland when she found herself surrounded not merely by combatants in a general European war, but by the forces of one of the most aggressive totalitarian states in history.

Chapter 1

FROM 1933 TO THE EVE OF WAR

ADOLF HITLER WAS NAMED CHANCELLOR OF GERMANY ON January 30, 1933. Immediately, a reign of terror began. The Nazis attacked Social Democrats, Socialists and Communists. Their animosity toward Jews, Slavs, gypsies, homosexuals, the mentally ill and persons with birth defects or handicaps quickly became evident. The rights to assemble and to a free press were taken away.¹ As an essential component of preventing any armed resistance, the Nazis searched homes and seized firearms from private citizens on a wide scale.²

After the fire at the Reichstag (Parliament) in Berlin the following month, random massive searches and seizures were authorized; “serious disturbances of the peace” were punishable by death. Nazi thugs attacked members of the democratic parties and hauled them off.³ By early March, Hitler was an absolute dictator. The Parliament had ceased to exist as a true legislature and the regional German states were taken over by the central authority.⁴ The government became an instrument of terror.⁵

In neighboring Switzerland, the press reacted negatively against the new German regime with such articles as “The Dangers of the Hitlerite Dictatorship” in Geneva’s leading newspaper, the *Journal de Genève*. The *Journal* began to run a regular column on the subject of Nazi Germany featuring snippets about police actions against political opponents, who seemed invariably to be described as “Communists.”⁶

From early in the Nazi regime, the military threat to Switzerland was plain to see. Ewald Banse, a Nazi military theorist and geographer who advocated barbaric methods of warfare,⁷ had published *Raum und Volk in Weltkriegen* (*Space and People in World War*) in late 1932. The Nazis appointed him Professor of Military Science in February 1933 and in July established the German Society for Military Policy, in part to promote Banse’s ideas.⁸

Banse frankly asserted that a war against France, Germany's historic enemy, could be favorably waged only by attacking through the neutral nations of Belgium and the Netherlands in the north and through Switzerland in the south.⁹ A key invasion path led through the Jura range and the Bellegarde (Geneva) Gap.¹⁰ "Swiss neutrality, in fact, is of service only to the French, and not to us," Banse asserted.¹¹

Banse rightly anticipated, however, that Switzerland would be a far harder nut for any foreign enemy to crack than the Netherlands. Topographically, the Jura contained lower mountains and valleys; even the central plateau, with its hills, streams and lakes, afforded "the chance of a stubborn defense against foreign invasion." As for the Alps, these were high mountains full of great rock masses, precipices and valleys—all watered by rushing torrents and topped by snowy pinnacles.¹² Such terrain would impede the movement of large forces.¹³

Despite its majority German-speaking population, Banse used Nazi racial theories to describe the Swiss as an inferior amalgamation: "Like Belgium and the United States of America, Switzerland has no people, but merely a population made up of different races."¹⁴ There were Germans, French, Italians and Rhetians. As for the majority:

The German Swiss imagine that in conjunction with the three other racial elements which speak foreign languages they constitute a single nationality, and they dig an artificial trench between them and ourselves, which is deeper and wider than Lake Constance [part of the German-Swiss border]. This conception, which they uphold with all the impartiality of the Eastern race, is the intellectual basis of the Confederation, which would otherwise have no reality, since the Latin elements have no such deep conviction.¹⁵

Banse expressed great resentment against the German-speaking Swiss for what he rightly perceived as their dislike of the kind of Nazi political ideology he espoused. He wrote:

From the military point of view, therefore, the character of the German Swiss is the decisive factor. . . . Its decisive features, however, are a calculating materialism, unlimited self-reliance and a tendency to criticism, not to say faultfinding. The latter tendency is directed mainly toward their German kinsfolk

across the Rhine, and reminds us of the pelican which pecks its own breast. . . . This childish dislike needs to be taken very seriously indeed and is an important fact fraught with possible military consequences, being of itself equivalent to a strong army corps, and much more dangerous than the anti-German feeling of the Alsatians, since it is based upon the belief, doubtless justified in the Middle Ages but long since obsolete, that liberty and equality—those most sacred of human possessions—are at stake.¹⁶

While most of the world paid little attention to the disturbing nature of the new German regime, the Swiss were repelled by Nazism. On May 12, 1933, the Swiss Federal Council (the collective government of the country, from whose membership one Federal Councillor is selected to serve as Federal President each year) prohibited the wearing of “Hitlerite” uniforms and insignia and subjected violators to imprisonment or deportation.¹⁷ On July 9, Federal Councillor Rudolf Minger, a farmer who headed the Military Department in the years from 1930 to 1940, declared in the ancient Roman amphitheater at Windisch in northern Switzerland:

Never will our people agree to weaken our democracy; it will defeat dictatorial ideas from whichever side they come. Never will our people accept a German-style *Gleichschaltung* [conformity]. In Swiss fashion we will hold in order our Swiss house. For this purpose we do not need extra shirts nor extra flags; the white cross in the red field will suffice. The Swiss will also defend the right to utter his opinion freely. . . . We will ever hold dear our federalist attitudes and be happy our people encompasses different languages and races. This is the best guarantee that our nation will, in times of war and of great international tensions, not be seduced by irresponsible political temptations.¹⁸

For the Swiss, the “armed” in armed neutrality was not merely a matter of maintaining a strong national defense force, but imposed responsibilities on the individual citizen. The 1933 edition of the manual issued with the rifle given to every Swiss male on reaching military service age stated:

In combat, I have my rifle to overcome the enemy. It is the symbol of the independence and force of my fatherland, Switzerland, which I love and which I want to defend all the way to the last drop of my blood.¹⁹

The Swiss rifle “bible” went on to explain that a man must make it a pleasure to maintain his rifle. It was to be stored in a closet at home.²⁰ One was to practice constantly in both prone and kneeling positions and should be an active member of a shooting society. These voluntary shooting societies were considered an important element in the defense of the country.²¹

To fire accurately, the manual asserted that one should not shoot fast. Instead, one should pull the trigger slowly, using intelligence and judgment, and remember: “The conqueror always has another cartridge in his rifle.”²² The trigger was to be pulled only if the target would be hit. After each shot in combat, one should pause and observe. One had to shoot more accurately than the enemy and skillfully use the terrain.²³ Furthermore, each soldier was required to be engaged in marksmanship activities outside service until past age 40. This was a military duty one was obliged to fulfill each year with his own rifle and in a shooting society.²⁴

The SSV, or Swiss Shooting Federation, was the backbone of the armed citizenry, which the *New York Times* termed in an August editorial “the army in civil life.” The SSV’s strong opposition to totalitarianism of both right and left was clear: “We want to think Swiss and to remain Swiss. Away with all foreign behavior. We need no brown, green or red uniforms or shirts; we marksmen know only one uniform and that is our field-gray, our honorary dress.”²⁵

While Swiss rifle shooting matches were conducted at the standard 300 meters, soldiers were trained in marksmanship at 50 to 300 meters and even shot at 400.²⁶ These were very long distances compared to the relatively short ones from which infantrymen typically fired at one another during the world wars. But the ability to snipe at such distances in mountain terrain would have given the Swiss a great advantage in combat with the Germans, who were only trained to shoot at 100 meters.

Hugh Wilson, American Ambassador to Switzerland from 1927 to 1937, described the Swiss citizen soldier: “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.”²⁷

Hitler would in time be able to conquer most of Europe and much of Russia, but the armed Swiss population was an unappetizing potential conquest for the

much larger German Army. In Switzerland, every man was trained with a rifle and was used to shooting accurately at 300 meters. No other European country offered this kind of disincentive to aggression.

On August 9, 1933, Nazi police trespassed on Swiss soil at Basel to search for Communist leaflets.²⁸ Nazi demonstrations near the border later that month were making the Swiss very uneasy. Large crowds gathered in support of Swiss democratic institutions and the army.²⁹ Nazi meetings, though well advertised in the German-speaking Swiss cantons, drew few enthusiasts. The *New York Times* observed the political climate in Switzerland:

The decline of Hitlerism can be ascribed to two main causes. First, there has been a revival of Swiss patriotism as a consequence of psychological errors in the German Nazi propaganda. The Swiss also feel that the Nazi movement may at any moment threaten their independence.³⁰

In its September 12 issue, the *Journal de Genève* reported Swiss sentiment as follows: “The attitude of Berlin toward Vienna proves to us that Hitlerism is an article of export. . . . Swiss independence counts for no more beyond the Rhine than does Austrian autonomy. No one need therefore be astonished if Swiss opinion remains agitated and anxious in the presence of the evolution of the Third Reich.”³¹

The *Petit Parisien* published an article in September by the English journalist “Augur” (the pen name for M. Poliakoff) entitled “A Plan for the Invasion of Switzerland Preferred by the German General Staff.”³² It created a sensation in the international press and was, of course, carefully analyzed in the Swiss newspapers. Augur was described as a well-informed political commentator.³³

The theme of the plan was “Geneva, Doorstep to France.” It expressed a low opinion of the ability of the Swiss Army to resist, arguing that its soldiers were good but lacked training in modern armaments and equipment. Arms and munitions factories were located predominantly in the north, near Germany, and could be readily destroyed. To avoid a decisive defeat as early as the first day, therefore, the Swiss Army would withdraw to the mountains of central Switzerland, where it would be cut off from France. The wives and children of the battalions from the northern districts would remain in the hands of the

Germans as hostages, which would undermine the troops' morale, for fear of reprisals.³⁴

Without encountering any serious opposition in the northern Swiss plain, the German Army would then march right to the Jura. The German forces would rush to the south of Belfort, France, under its fortifications, and the main army would quickly march alongside the Jura, its right flank protected by the Lake of Neuchâtel. The initial goal to reach was the Léman Line, close to Geneva. Geneva was the gateway to France and particularly important for the seizure of Lyons, France, with its surrounding arms and munitions factories.³⁵

Augur asserted that the precise information contained in the aforementioned German plan established its authenticity. The *Journal de Genève* commented, however, that even if the plan were real, it could be merely a technical study such as general staffs would routinely compose, as opposed to a plan intended for actual use.³⁶ The plan could also have been a fabrication intended to incite hostility against Germany and its rearmament or to create support in France for fortifying the region of Lyons.³⁷

Two conclusions were in order, according to the *Journal*. First, the Swiss people had the right to know if this invasion plan, which threatened their security and independence, was real. The Federal Council was urged to investigate the subject thoroughly.³⁸ Second, the very fact that an eventual violation of Swiss neutrality was being publicly discussed showed the necessity of maintaining a strong national defense. In 1914, no army invaded Switzerland because her army was sufficient to deter every belligerent. In 1933, all precautions had to be taken so that the troops received modern equipment that inspired confidence in their capacity to resist.³⁹

In Germany, Reich Defense Minister von Blomberg called the article by Augur "highly imaginative nonsense."⁴⁰ On September 26, at a League of Nations meeting in Geneva, Swiss Foreign Minister Giuseppe Motta "categorically explained to Nazi Propaganda Minister Goebbels that such an idea would be totally absurd. In Germany, no rational person would have in mind jeopardizing the existence of the Swiss Confederation."⁴¹ Goebbels reassured him that Germany wanted nothing more from the Swiss than friendship.⁴²

Despite Goebbels' lack of credibility, the French did have an interest in publicizing the supposed invasion plan, because their Maginot Line stopped near

the Swiss border. Any improvement in Swiss defenses would in effect become an extension of the Maginot Line and further secure the French southern flank. Subsequent Swiss defensive preparations, combined with the rugged Swiss terrain, would, in 1940, encourage the Nazis to attack more vulnerable armies and easier terrain.⁴³ In fact, it could even be said that the Swiss in essence extended the Maginot Line eastward from its southern tip near the French-Swiss border all along the border with southern Germany to Austria. The fortifications and infantry positions essentially reached all the way from France to the Sargans fortress in eastern Switzerland, which pointed its guns toward Austria.⁴⁴

On October 10, 1933, Swiss Defense Minister Rudolf Minger cited the reported German invasion plan to justify increased appropriations for armaments. The Parliament voted a credit of 15 million francs (\$4.5 million) as the first installment of a multi-year budget of 100 million francs (\$30 million).⁴⁵ This was a sharp upward turn. For years, following the horrors of the Great War, and with the Socialist Party's opposition to militarism, military budgets had steadily declined.⁴⁶

On October 14, Hitler announced that Germany intended to withdraw from the League of Nations and the Disarmament Conference. The *Journal de Genève* asserted: "The thunderbolts hurled on Saturday by Berlin have quite naturally provoked an explosion everywhere. It is an explosion of indignation, of inquietude . . . and of distrust toward Germany."⁴⁷

On October 18, the Federal Council responded to Germany's withdrawal from the League by resolving that "there should be no doubt anywhere concerning the will of Switzerland to defend her neutrality and her capacity to do so."⁴⁸ The Council was expected to adopt Minger's proposal to increase appropriations to purchase arms for the infantry, as well as airplanes.⁴⁹ On November 16, the equivalent of \$39 million was appropriated for new rifles, machine guns and artillery.

Swiss commanders planned increased defenses at the German border, just as Belgium was instituting along its own border with Germany.⁵⁰ In view of their military preparations, it was questioned whether the two countries were truly neutral; however, the more important question was whether Adolf Hitler would respect the international treaties under which their status was guaranteed. According to an article in the *New York Times*, the Germans would attack France through Switzerland, "crossing the Rhine upstream from Basel and penetrating

to France along what tacticians call the Corridor of Bel-fort.”⁵¹ While the route through Belgium was easier, analysts observed, the Swiss route would offer a greater element of surprise.⁵²

The issue of Swiss defense, said the *Times*, was “singularly acute since the advent of Hitlerism, and there are numerous Swiss nationals who are asking whether Switzerland’s neutrality would be respected if her territory became strategic to another conflict.” Fortifications were being constructed on the Rhine.⁵³ Federal President Edmund Schulthess stated, “Our people are schooled by the ages in democracy and do not allow themselves to be greatly influenced by propaganda.”⁵⁴

As the war scare continued, on December 14 the Federal Council approved 82 million francs in military spending.⁵⁵ Defense Minister Minger stated:

The 300,000 Swiss subject to mobilization will hold from valley to valley, from mountaintop to mountaintop, from river to river. . . . Whoever raises the slightest doubt about this fools himself badly. Any belligerent who tries to cross Switzerland will have to reckon with the entire Swiss Army.⁵⁶

Besides Switzerland, there was another German-speaking nation in Europe: Austria. On the first page of *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler had declared that “Common blood must belong to a common Reich” (“*Gleiches Blut gehört in ein gemeinsames Reich*”).⁵⁷ He referred to Austria and Germany as “two German states which we of the younger generation at least have made it our life work to reunite by every means at our disposal.”⁵⁸ Hitler told the Reichstag on January 30, 1934, in a speech marking his first year in power, that what was happening in Germany “will not halt at the frontier posts of a land which is German not only in its people but in its history as well, and which was for many centuries an integral part of the German Empire.”⁵⁹

Switzerland would be Hitler’s goal after he conquered Austria, argued G.E.W. Johnson in the June 1934 issue of *North American Review*. He wrote that a “slugging contest that is now being waged between the two Austrian-born Chancellors: Hitler, the ‘little corporal’ of Berlin, and Dollfuss, the ‘Millimetternich’ of Vienna, to decide whether or not Germany is to eat Austria for breakfast.” The Swiss feared that if Austria were “served up for breakfast, it

will be Switzerland's turn to furnish the lunch." After all, the Nazis claimed to "voice the aspirations not alone of the sixty-five million Germans who live in *Deutschland*, but of the eighty million 'Germans' who comprise *Deutschtum* [the greater German Empire]." ⁶⁰

Like a "restless swarm of termites," wrote Johnson, the Nazis "bored from within," to subvert regions with a German-speaking majority: Danzig, the Saar, Austria and Switzerland. ⁶¹ Their intentions, based on kinship of blood and speech, were to incorporate Switzerland within a Greater Germany by an appeal to the historic past. ⁶² During the Middle Ages, Switzerland had been part of the Holy Roman Empire, the "First Reich" in Nazi terminology, of which Hitler's was the Third. The Nazis now were proclaiming that they intended to "expand Germany's boundaries to the farthest limits of the old Holy Empire, and even beyond." ⁶³ None other than Professor Ewald Banse, responding to Swiss criticism of his geographical textbook expounding German claims to Switzerland, stated:



“Greater Germany” as typically depicted in Nazi propaganda in 1935. Most of Switzerland was to be absorbed into the Third Reich with smaller portions being swallowed up by Italy and France. (Adapted from Rings, *Schweiz im Krieg*, 65.)

Quite naturally we count you Swiss as offshoots of the German nation (along with the Dutch, the Flemings, the Lorrainers, the Alsatians, the Austrians and the Bohemians). . . . Patience: one day we will group ourselves around a single banner, and whosoever shall wish to separate us, we will exterminate!⁶⁴

Sentiment in Switzerland held that “the moment that Austria succumbs to the Nazi boa constrictor, Switzerland is marked as the next victim to be strangled in the coils.”⁶⁵

In contrast with the beginning of the Great War, when many Swiss were divided along ethnic lines—French and Italian speakers leaning toward the

Entente and German speakers sympathizing with the Central Powers—the Swiss were remarkably united from 1933 on in their distaste for the racist and anti-democratic bent of the Nazis. Switzerland proved that French-, German-, and Italian-speaking citizens could live together harmoniously. Almost alone among the European nations, Switzerland remained immune to what Johnson termed “the infective virus of Pan-This and Pan-That.”⁶⁶ Zurich’s leading newspaper, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, admonished its readers that the National Socialist revolution in Germany demonstrated the need for “the spiritual defense of our country.”⁶⁷

At this time, the views of Nazi sympathizers could also be heard, if only from a tiny number of Swiss. Theodor Fischer, who headed the pro-German League of National Socialist Confederates, stigmatized Switzerland as a “vassal state of France under Jewish control.”⁶⁸ That group called for abolition of the Swiss Parliament and cantons and a centralization of all power in the hands of the President.⁶⁹

Jean Marie Musy, Swiss Minister of Finance, warned in a May 10, 1934 speech in Geneva that “Switzerland will either remain a democracy or cease to be Switzerland! . . . The racial ideal can never be the basis of Swiss nationality!”⁷⁰ Two days later, the Federal Council banned the wearing of uniforms by all political parties.⁷¹

As Hitler’s rule continued, the Swiss became increasingly repelled not only by National Socialism’s rhetoric but by its actions. “The Night of the Long Knives,” on June 30, 1934, during which one Nazi paramilitary organization, the SS, assassinated the leadership of another, the SA, further revealed the regime’s criminality. Hitler was consolidating his personal power through murder. The democratic Swiss, always wary of German strength, particularly abhorred what the swastika had come to represent. German-speaking Swiss, perhaps because they could more easily understand exactly what the Nazis were saying, became more vehemently anti-Nazi than the French Swiss,⁷² and a war of words took place in Swiss and German newspapers. While the Swiss press criticized the Nazis and their domestic actions in Germany, the Nazi press attacked the Swiss, who, they claimed, were too inferior or self-absorbed to appreciate the benefits of the New Order.⁷³

On July 25, 1934, Austrian Nazis murdered Austrian Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss, leader of the clerical-fascist government. Supplied with arms and

explosives from Germany, Nazis terrorized Austria and blew up buildings.⁷⁴ After the murder of Dollfuss, Italian troops moved into the northern Italian Alps near the Swiss border. Switzerland served notice that she would not tolerate violations of her neutrality.⁷⁵

On July 26, at the Fribourg marksmanship competition, Federal President Marcel Pilet-Golaz reaffirmed that Switzerland was determined to defend her frontiers and that “the capacity of defense is the first condition of our security.”⁷⁶ Defense Minister Minger told the competitors:

Events abroad have reawoken Switzerland’s old defiance and the feelings for justice and liberty have been renewed. The Swiss people will never allow themselves to be robbed of the right to freedom of expression and will never bow to a dictatorship, from whichever side it may come. In target shooting outside military service all marksmen strive towards the same aim: the promotion of our defense in the interests of all the Swiss people. . . .⁷⁷

It was reported on July 27 that the annual maneuvers of the First Division of the Swiss Army would be advanced due to the recent seizure of explosives being smuggled from Germany to Austria on Lake Constance.⁷⁸

In mid-November 1934, four Swiss Nazis, members of the National Socialist Confederates, stood trial in Bern for promoting racial hatred. They had circulated the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” a notoriously anti-Semitic document originally produced by Tsarist Russian intelligence, which the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities, suing as a complainant in the action, noted was a complete fake and was subject to confiscation.⁷⁹ The trial strained relations between Switzerland and Germany. The testimony at trial and the trial court’s decision confirmed the fraudulent character of the “Protocols.”⁸⁰

The largest German-speaking Nazi group in Switzerland was the National Front, which approved of Hitler’s liquidating Socialist and Communist groups but distrusted what it believed to be the Third Reich’s aggressive designs.⁸¹ To oppose Nazism, Swiss socialists and left liberals organized a “Kampfbund” (“Fighting Group”). More broadly, in response to the influence of fascist ideas throughout Europe, a public debate was proceeding about whether federal power should be curtailed. Some Swiss believed the power of the executive, the Federal Council, should be extended; others wanted more influence vested in the voters’

legislative meetings on the local level, like the centuries-old *Landsgemeinden*.⁸²

Fear of the German Nazis soon prompted increased military preparations, including enhanced fortifications at the Rhine. Now even the Socialists were voting for military appropriations.⁸³ Also, Parliament extended the recruits' first year of basic military education by 23 days for infantrymen and 13 days for artillerymen. In a vote on February 23, 1935, the referendum against this bill initiated by the Communist Party was rejected by a majority. Along with other political parties, many Socialists favored the extended service as a necessity to defend democracy against the Nazi threat.⁸⁴ Rumors of German plans for sweeping through Switzerland near Basel to attack France south of her line of forts helped to defeat the referendum.

Even if the primary intention of a belligerent nation was only to "pass through" Switzerland to attack its enemy, the Swiss were under no illusion that such a move would be less dangerous than an actual occupation. According to the SSV marksmen's organization, what could have happened in the Great War served as a warning for the present: "If the Germans had come, we would not have been able to expel them from our country again. . . . Had a French invasion occurred, the Germans would have played the 'rescuer' of Switzerland. As a gesture of thanks they would have demanded that we become a part of the German Reich."⁸⁵ In just a few more years, Hitler would indeed "rescue" a number of small countries.

During this period, the small countries of Europe were making sharply varied expenditures for military purposes. This table sets forth average annual military expenditures in selected countries in the years 1934–35:

*Military Expenditures, 1934-35*⁸⁶

Country	Expenditures (in millions of Swiss Francs)
Belgium	162
Denmark	53
Finland	92
The Netherlands	132
Norway	52
Austria	83
Switzerland	95

As these figures show, there would not necessarily be a direct relation between high expenditures in this period and the ability of the small neutrals to resist Nazi attack a half decade later. The figures for Denmark and Norway were the lowest, and predictably these countries would fall easily to the Nazis in 1940. But so would Belgium and the Netherlands, both of which spent more than Switzerland.

However, comparisons of the raw expenditures do not tell the full story. Spending on defenses modeled on World War I tactics would not help much in the 1940 blitzkrieg era. Moreover, expenditures for ordinary standing armies would be inherently higher per soldier than those for the Swiss-style citizens army because of the full-time pay to the soldiers, barracks and other costs. By contrast, because her army was primarily comprised of citizen soldiers receiving little or no pay and living at home, Switzerland's expenditure figure is deceptively low.

On March 16, 1935, Hitler renounced the Versailles Treaty and announced the rearming of Germany. On May 21, he gave a speech in which he promised peace; the borders of France and Poland would be considered inviolate, and Germany would never interfere in the internal affairs of Austria, much less undertake an *Anschluss*.⁸⁷

During this period, Germany tripled its guards along the Swiss frontier and strictly controlled travelers and goods.⁸⁸ Giuseppe Motta and Johannes Baumann, members of the Federal Council, drafted additional measures to suppress Nazism in Switzerland for submission to the Federal Parliament at its upcoming June session.⁸⁹ Meanwhile, Switzerland began regular air raid drills.⁹⁰ Bern considered protesting to Berlin about violations of Swiss air space by Luftwaffe squadrons in training.⁹¹

On June 1–2, the Swiss voted against an initiative to adopt New Deal-type programs like those enacted in the United States. The measures were intended to fight the depression with governmental borrowing, spending and centralization.⁹² Although Switzerland, along with the rest of Europe and America, had fallen into grave economic difficulty in the 1930s, the people voted overwhelmingly against the measures, agreeing with the Federal Council that they might lead to a socialist state.⁹³ The proposal had also been opposed as something that would transform grass-roots Swiss democracy into a

parliamentary dictatorship.⁹⁴

In 1935, a member of the National Front—Robert Tobler, from Zurich—was elected to Parliament for one year. He was the only Nazi elected to Parliament for the entire period of the Third Reich.⁹⁵ A country wary of the potential for a “dictatorship by a parliament” was not a fertile field for National Socialist ideals.

United States President Franklin Roosevelt reacted to the rise of Nazism with the policy preference, expressed at the beginning of 1936, of “a well-ordered neutrality to do naught to encourage the contest.”⁹⁶ The Swiss had the same policy of neutrality but, unlike the Americans, were already doing everything possible to prepare for what they perceived as the coming onslaught.

During 1936, Defense Minister Minger continued to gain approval for major rearmament programs. Also, the Federal Council established the Federal Police to counter pro-German and Italian fifth column activity. Before that time, criminal enforcement had been a matter solely for the cantons.⁹⁷ Although fifth column activity in Switzerland was surprisingly small for a country with a majority Germanic population—less, in fact, than in any other country targeted by Nazi Germany—there was still a small number of Nazi sympathizers. (Switzerland also had a small Communist Party, which followed the Soviet line.) The pro-Nazis needed to be watched closely in the event that they attempted to facilitate espionage.

On February 4, 1936, Wilhelm Gustloff, the official leader of the German Nazi Party in Switzerland, was shot to death with a revolver by David Frankfurter, a Jewish medical student who wanted to “strike a blow at the régime of Adolf Hitler” and “avenge persecution of Jews in Germany.”⁹⁸ Germany gave Gustloff a state funeral and demanded an investigation that would identify Frankfurter’s possible co-conspirators.⁹⁹ The German Foreign Office found that “Switzerland is incapable of maintaining political order within her boundaries,” and a semi-official German paper blamed the deed on “the anti-German baiting by the Swiss press.”¹⁰⁰ Hitler’s own newspaper in Berlin demanded the death penalty, but the Swiss Constitution prohibited execution for political crimes, and the canton of Grisons, in which the crime took place, had long since abolished the death penalty.¹⁰¹ Frankfurter was sentenced to only 18 years imprisonment. He was pardoned after the war and emigrated to Israel.

On February 18, 1936, the Federal Council ordered the immediate

suppression of all Nazi organizations in Switzerland.¹⁰² This measure had great popular support. Hitler's organ in Berlin, the *Völkischer Beobachter* (*People's Observer*), reacted: "The government at Berne has struck at German-Swiss relations in a most painful fashion."¹⁰³ German Nazis blamed the Swiss law on Jews and leftists.¹⁰⁴ The German Foreign Minister lodged a formal protest, and the German embassy took over the task now banned by the Swiss: developing a network of agents.¹⁰⁵ The Swiss Parliament sought legislation to withdraw citizenship from naturalized foreigners who failed to sever political connections in their former countries.¹⁰⁶ The possibilities for fifth column activity in Switzerland would continue to be restricted by every legal means at the government's disposal.

Hitler had long been planning the reoccupation of the demilitarized Rhineland, along Germany's border with France. This took place on March 7, 1936.¹⁰⁷ In reaction to the remilitarization of the Rhineland, Switzerland began construction of a line of blockhouses on her northern border and readied for a surprise attack by a motorized force along the Rhine.¹⁰⁸ Swiss leaders anticipated that the coming war would involve new methods of aggression; for instance, the SSV marksmen's group advocated increased shooting skills so that as many paratroopers as possible could be shot and killed while still in the air.¹⁰⁹

Meanwhile, Americans were caught in the dilemma of whether to stay out of Europe's troubles or recognize the unique nature of the Nazi threat. On July 9, addresses were delivered in Charlottesville, Virginia, by Brigadier General John Ross Delafield of New York and Hugo E. Prager of Zurich. General Delafield warned:

It is fundamental in all fighting that he who strikes first wins, unless his opponent is prepared. Democracies seldom strike first. The case of dictatorships is very different. They can and do. They can plan and prepare for attack in secret, until the blow is about to be struck. The American people do not realize this distinction.¹¹⁰

Prager responded that Switzerland "realized the distinction only too well,"¹¹¹ noting that neither the Alps, "a great ally in the past," nor the

traditional, “almost sacred” neutrality of his country could any longer be relied upon under conditions of modern warfare and the prevailing state of mind in Europe. “What counts,” he said, “is the certainty that a possible aggressor will encounter real obstinate resistance.”¹¹²

President Roosevelt, in remarks on August 14, urged that “we shun political commitment which might entangle us in foreign wars; we avoid connection with the League of Nations.”¹¹³ While the United States and Switzerland were co-neutrals, the critical difference was that the former was large and an ocean away from Germany; the latter was small and bordered Hitler’s dictatorship.

Swiss Federal President Albert Meyer urged the public to purchase subscriptions to a national defense fund, noting that the country’s neutrality and independence were more endangered now than in the Great War.¹¹⁴ He added: “Our militia is the flower of our people, but armaments are necessary for our defense. As an example, Ethiopia speaks eloquently.”¹¹⁵ Italy had attacked and conquered poorly armed Ethiopia in 1935 to begin an occupation that would last until 1941. Mussolini’s Fascist regime in the south, in addition to Nazi Germany to the north, threatened the Swiss democracy. In response to Meyer’s call, the national defense fund was oversubscribed by more than 40 percent!

Switzerland’s preparations for war were analyzed by *The Literary Digest* in early 1937. Seeking to avoid being overrun like Belgium in 1914, the “‘Isle of Peace’ . . . is fortifying her frontiers to the tune of war rumbles,” the article began.¹¹⁶ When the inevitable war comes, “whoever moves the opening gambit will find Switzerland no easy checkmate.” A Swiss general staff member was quoted, giving a frank analysis:

When war comes, we will be unable to mobilize our entire Army. The Germans will probably destroy our strategic railroad centers, Aarau and Olten, within forty-eight hours. Hence, for our border defense, we shall have to rely strongly on the native population, and we are therefore preparing them for just such an emergency. It is utterly impossible for us to defend the city of Basel, because it is right under the guns of the new German fortress Isteiner Klotz. Our entire strategic problem boils down to this: Can we hold the line for ten days? After that, the French will have moved up and closed the gap.¹¹⁷

Ironically, it would be the French who were defeated easily while the Swiss

held out the entire war.

In March 1937 it was reported that Geneva would soon test its air raid defenses. The same newspapers which a few days before had printed Hitler's promise to respect Swiss neutrality were now filled with advertisements for items needed for the house and car during war.¹¹⁸ A new Swiss law required that all buildings and autos be prepared by April 1 for a blackout, that roofs be made safer against incendiary bombs, including the removal of combustible materials from attics, and that cellars be readied with living and emergency supplies. The League of Nations palace and the world headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross (known as the ICRC) in Geneva were included in the preparations.¹¹⁹

An analysis of Europe's neutrals in the *Christian Science Monitor* in April noted:

The more one gazes at contemporary Europe, with its diplomatic rivalries, embattled nationalisms, oppressed minorities, class struggles and militant dictatorships, the more one is constrained to render homage to the success of Swiss ideals. Here is a staunchly united land comprising not merely 22 self-governing units but also inhabited by a population of diverse racial origins, speaking four distinct languages and professing two traditionally antagonistic faiths.¹²⁰

A Zeppelin airship flew over Swiss troops during maneuvers near Schaffhausen on the Rhine on April 28, 1937. The Swiss considered it an intentional provocation by the Germans.¹²¹

On June 13, the canton of Geneva voted to outlaw the Communist Party and authorized the government to outlaw other parties affiliated with foreign organizations.¹²² Such laws would be applied to Nazis as well. A minister in Bern was quoted in August as stating: "The Germans are already treating Switzerland as if she were conquered territory. Switzerland is to come within the Nazi *Gleichschaltung* [forcing into line]. This is the Nazi aim, and by devious methods the Nazis are trying to familiarize the Swiss with the idea."¹²³ By then, there were allegedly some 500 Gestapo agents in Switzerland conducting espionage to obtain Swiss military secrets and spying on German refugees.

In 1935 a new rifle, the K31 carbine, was introduced into the Swiss army,

even as the Germans were adopting a new design of their own, the Mauser 98k, which became their standard service rifle throughout the war. Not surprisingly for a nation in which marksmanship was (and is) the national sport, the Swiss design was far superior to the German in terms of accuracy, weight, handling and ease of loading. The advantages of the Swiss model became more evident at longer distances, and even the Swiss 7.5mm bullet had a better aerodynamic shape and weight combination than its German counterpart, giving it more accuracy and a greater range. Almost 350,000 units were produced by 1945, and the K31 remains in wide use today in target matches. Had the Germans attempted an invasion during World War II, they would themselves have been the targets of Swiss snipers armed with this superior rifle, firing from rugged mountain terrain.¹²⁴

More important than material preparations was the cultivation of the Swiss national spirit, expressed with the term *geistige Landes-verteidigung* (*défense nationale spirituelle* in French), meaning spiritual, ideological, or moral national defense. Federal Councillor Philipp Etter even authored a book with that title.¹²⁵ The primary attributes of this philosophy were “united community, the intrinsic value of democracy, and reverence for the dignity and freedom of the person.”¹²⁶ National defense was seen as wholly dependent on the virtue and character of each citizen:

The armed defense of the country is a primary and substantial task of the state. The mental defense of the country falls primarily not on the state but on the person, the citizen. No government and no battalions are able to protect right and freedom, where the citizen himself is not capable of stepping to the front door and seeing what is outside.¹²⁷

The meaning of “spiritual national defense” evolved as the threat to Switzerland’s existence grew. This concept of moral dedication to defense of the homeland and democratic ideals was Switzerland’s answer to National Socialism, and the term applied to the distinctly Swiss military, economic, political, and cultural philosophy.¹²⁸

Beginning in 1933, Switzerland expended large sums of money and human effort to arm herself and to have the capacity to resist a Nazi invasion. Though many Swiss spoke German, they had no desire to give up their unique Swiss

liberty to join Hitler's increasingly menacing Reich.

Chapter 2

1938

Anschluss of Switzerland?

A KEYSTONE OF NAZI DOCTRINE WAS THE REUNIFICATION OF the German “Volk” into the Reich, regardless of existing national boundaries. Following World War I, the Austro-Hungarian Empire had been dissolved, and Austria had been established as a predominantly Germanic state. Some public sentiment both there and in Germany favored an *Anschluss* (Union) between the two countries, though this annexation was explicitly forbidden by the Treaty of Versailles. For Hitler, who had already renounced the World War I surrender agreement, *Anschluss* became a foreign policy imperative. The new Chancellor of Austria, Dr. Kurt von Schuschnigg, thought he could protect his country’s sovereignty by appeasing Hitler. Nazi criminals in prisons were freed and Nazis were appointed to high office.¹ Not for the first time, appeasement failed and German plans to force an *Anschluss* progressed.

Franz von Papen, Nazi Minister to Austria, summoned Schuschnigg to a meeting with Hitler on February 12, 1938 at Berchtesgaden, the Führer’s mountain retreat near the Austrian border. Hitler’s harangue to Schuschnigg about Austria’s shortcomings culminated in thinly veiled threats to overpower the smaller nation. After several hours, German Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop appeared with an ultimatum. Schuschnigg was told that the “agreement” must be signed without further discussion. All the top ministries would be given to Nazis, and the military forces and economies of the two countries would begin a merger process.² Hitler told Schuschnigg: “You will either sign it as it is and fulfill my demands within three days, or I will order the march into Austria.” Schuschnigg finally signed and promised to persuade the Austrian President, the ultimate authority, to sign.

Schuschnigg arrived in Vienna the next morning and found President Wilhelm Miklas, who balked. The government was a single-party dictatorship,

and free elections had not been held since 1933.³ In the next few days, Schuschnigg maneuvered to avoid acceding to the Führer's demands, backed by growing military threats. However, the Chancellor was anxious to avoid violence and decided that the Army and the Militia of the Patriotic Front (the dictatorship's party) should not resist.⁴ Despite his capitulation, Berlin also demanded that Schuschnigg resign. In a radio broadcast to the nation announcing his resignation, Schuschnigg declared: "President Miklas has asked me to tell the people of Austria that we have yielded to force since we are not prepared even in this terrible hour to shed blood. We have decided to order the troops to offer no resistance."⁵ Field Marshal Hermann Goering and Austrian Nazi collaborator Arthur Seyss-Inquart meanwhile faked a telegram from the provisional Austrian government requesting the intervention of German troops to prevent bloodshed.⁶ Hitler entered his native Austria on March 12 and was greeted by enthusiastic crowds.⁷

Thus Germany, with a population of sixty-six million, annexed Austria, a nation of seven million.⁸ Not a shot was fired in the *Anschluss*.

Switzerland immediately reinforced her guards along the Austrian frontier. Now two-thirds of her borders—820 of 1,180 miles—were with the German and Italian dictatorships. Switzerland had only four million people, but she was committed to democracy and independence. Federal Cabinet members remained in Bern over the weekend. *The New York Times* commented:

A grave view of the situation was taken here partly because of the methods Chancellor Hitler used, which are strongly condemned even by those who think Austria is a special case, and partly because of what these methods and Hitler's program for unifying the whole "German race" foreshadow not only for Czechoslovakia but for Switzerland.

The immediate effect of this, it is pointed out, is to make Switzerland a democratic peninsula in a politically autocratic and economically autarchic league. . . . The danger of a German attack on France via Switzerland is believed to be greatly increased thereby.⁹

On March 13, the total *Anschluss* law was proclaimed in Austria, complete with plans for a farcical plebiscite to be held in the future. The new President,

Seyss-Inquart, announced: “Austria is a province of the German Reich.” On the 14th, Hitler was in Vienna.¹⁰

The day Hitler paraded through the Austrian capital, there appeared in bookshops throughout the city maps which showed the territories “belonging” to the Reich. German-speaking Switzerland was included.¹¹

That same day, however, the German ambassador in Bern assured the Swiss Minister of Foreign Affairs that the Führer had no ambitions regarding Switzerland. Just days later, though, the newspaper *Frankfurter Zeitung*, in a statement that would have required Propaganda Minister Goebbels’ approval, asserted that “no branch of the German race has the right or the possibility of withdrawing from the common destiny of all the Germans.” Another German publication chimed in: “Austria has had the experience of what can be called *Verschweizern* [“Swissing”], meaning the tragedy of a people which has been made to believe that they were a nation while in reality they were only part of a community of the same language.”¹²

Simultaneously, Switzerland was flooded with a special, reduced-cost edition of the magazine *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, filled with photographs showing the enthusiasm with which the German troops had been welcomed in Austria.¹³ During the same period, Field Marshal Goering published a map of the Reich which included most of Switzerland. The Swiss frontier was called “the boundary of the internal separation of the German people,” and German-speaking Swiss were called “exiled citizens of the German Reich.” The materials were incorporated into a school text, and the Swiss filed a formal protest in Berlin.¹⁴

That year, German writer Christoph Steding published *The Reich and the Illness of European Culture*, a “scientific” work promoting racism and totalitarianism. He depicted Swiss neutrality and neutrality in general as a moral defect based on weakness of will. According to his theory, neutrality embodied rootlessness and the refusal to recognize destiny.¹⁵

Because of her weak political and military structure, Austria could be conquered without bloodshed in a few days as a result of one meeting lasting several hours between Hitler and Austria’s Chancellor, a few telephone calls, some meetings within the Austrian ruling elite, and the announcement that the armed forces would not resist. A few leaders could surrender the country and guarantee that no armed resistance would occur.

In Switzerland, in contrast, no leaders had sufficient authority to surrender the nation. The Swiss Army was not subject to the commands of a political elite who might order it not to resist. Instead, both political and military power were decentralized and dispersed right down to the locality and the individual household. This system made capitulation much less likely and guaranteed that any invasion would be met with resistance at thousands of separate points. Nearly a million citizens, many in places where tanks could not go and the German air force could not be effective, would resist individually or in small groups, taking rifle shots at the invader.

The elimination of independent Austria led to a strengthened will to resist as well as additional defensive measures in Switzerland. The Swiss accelerated completion of their fortifications from Basel all the way to the Italian Tyrol. Mines were laid under bridges across the Rhine and on roads running to the frontiers.¹⁶

Meanwhile, Swiss fascists, a tiny minority of the population, advocated swallowing up cantonal power in a strong central government with a national Führer.¹⁷ The call fell on deaf ears, especially in rural areas where the citizens had practiced pure democracy for centuries.¹⁸

Basel's *National Zeitung* newspaper described the fifth column activities and methods of subversion that had succeeded in Austria. It commented:

The Nazi *coup* in Austria had hardly been carried out when the Austrian border patrols were provided with huge books containing complete lists of former Austria's citizens, alphabetically arranged, in which "traitors" were distinguished from those who were to be permitted to pass the border. Why should we believe that we Swiss have been spied upon a lesser extent—that a blacklist of patriotic Swiss has not also been prepared? . . .

So it is imperative that we keep our eyes and ears open. Today every Swiss citizen must solemnly resolve to spot those agents of *Anschluss* and resignation, whether they are old citizens or new ones.¹⁹

In fact, Nazi agents were conducting espionage and planning fifth column activities. German intelligence operatives at a training center called the *Panoramaheim* (Panorama House) in Stuttgart taught the arts of subversion and bomb-making to those few treasonous Swiss saboteurs and fifth columnists they

could identify. To counter these activities, the Swiss military organized the counter-spy SPAB (*Spionage-Abwehr*).²⁰

When the Swiss Parliament opened its spring session on March 21, the following declaration was read on behalf of the Federal Council:

On March 13, the federal state of Austria, with which Switzerland maintained cordial relations of good neighborliness, ceased to exist as an independent state. This historical event, which took place before our eyes, is of immense importance. The wish to unite the peoples of Germany and Austria was not a new aspiration; it had already given rise to armed conflict in the last century; that wish has now been realized. . . .

None [such wish] threatens our democratic institutions, which are essential to the life of the Confederation and of its 22 cantons. It is Switzerland's secular mission in Europe to guard the passage over the Alps in the interests of all. It is the unanimous and unshakable will of the Swiss people to accomplish this mission and to assure the respect of its independence at the price of its blood. . . .

The Swiss people are united in the determination to defend at any cost, to the last breath and against anyone, the incomparable country which is theirs by God's will.²¹

Every member of Parliament, except two Communists and the sole pro-Nazi, agreed with the following statement, which was read in German, French and Italian by deputies who represented the majority and also the Socialists:

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 their blood. . . .

The Swiss people are prepared to consent to the sacrifices necessary for their national defense, but the military armament of the county would be useless if it did not rest on the spiritual and moral forces of the whole people.²²

Before the Austrian *Anschluss*, Switzerland had feared attack from the

northeast and had positioned her troops accordingly.²³ Now an attack could come from the east as well.

On April 29 the Federal Council, believing that membership was inconsistent with absolute neutrality, determined that changed circumstances required Switzerland to withdraw from the League of Nations. The Council declared:

Swiss neutrality has a specific character which distinguishes it from any other neutrality. It is one of the essential conditions of the internal peace, of the union, and hence of the independence of a nation composed of elements which differ in language and culture. . . . The maintenance of this centuries-old institution is as precious for Europe as for Switzerland itself. It is neutrality which has held together for centuries peoples of different race, language and religion.²⁴

The Council of the League of Nations acceded to Swiss requests that the Swiss no longer participate in League sanctions, declaring that: “The unique position of Switzerland has resulted in her perpetual neutrality founded on a secular tradition and the recognition of human rights.”²⁵ Underlying Switzerland’s withdrawal from the League, of course, was the combination of her growing appreciation of the German threat and her diminished view of the ability of the League to influence developments. Switzerland would instead rely on her own strength to defend her borders.

Accelerated defense preparations in Switzerland continued.²⁶ With talk of war ever present, many feared a German invasion of France through the region of the Jura, around Basel. While Basel, near the German border, would be hard to defend, the general staff noted that an invader would subsequently have the entire Swiss citizens army of probably 400,000 on its left flank. To repel German attack, according to the *New York Times*, the Swiss took the following measures:

1. Military service was extended. “There is no standing army in Switzerland, but every able-bodied man must serve for a time in the militia.”
2. The Swiss negotiated with an American manufacturer to buy new fighter planes.
3. “The supply of tanks is being increased, although tanks are of little use in mountainous terrain,” as the *Times* reported.
4. Swiss soldiers took home their guns and uniforms after their terms of duty

each year. The frontier guards placed munitions caches in their villages, machine-gun emplacements, land mines, etc.

5. The large Swiss gold supplies were moved inland. Because of fear that Germany might make a bold grab for this gold, bullion was removed from the vaults of the national bank at Zurich to be stored in vaults near the Gotthard Pass in the Alps and near Bern.
6. The frontier was strengthened near Austria.
7. New pillbox fortresses were built along the Italian frontier.

The report further noted that the pro-Nazi National Front had essentially died out. It had held 10 of 120 seats on the Zurich Municipal Council, but lost them all in the election held after the German annexation of Austria. The *Times* article concluded: “Switzerland is the oldest republic in the world. It has a tradition of six centuries as the hub in a revolving wheel of war. Armies have been coming to grief in its mountains since the defeat of Charles the Bold at Murten.”²⁷

In 1938, the Swiss Army was organized into three army corps, including nine divisions (three of which were specially-trained mountain divisions), and three mountain brigades. Troops who resided near the borders would defend the frontier while the general army mobilized.²⁸

“The purest democracy in Europe, if not in the world” was the subject of an August 1938 *New York Times* analysis, stating:

Switzerland, an island of liberty and harmony in a sea of dictatorship and discord, has been a citadel of peace through stormy centuries. But it has not been a wholly passive peace. The Swiss are ready to fight, if need be. They demonstrated that last Spring when the Nazis seized Austria. Grimly the Swiss waited for the next move, in their calm, undramatic way—with loaded rifles and fixed bayonets.²⁹

While Hitler and Mussolini ruled a combined 120 million people, the Swiss numbered but 4 million, a few more people than resided in the state of Missouri. Its land area was less than a third of New York State. Zurich, its largest city, numbered 300,000, about the same as Columbus, Ohio. “Yet,” said the *New York Times*, “the merits of the Swiss Confederation among the world’s democracies are far out of proportion to its size and population or the ranking of its cities. It is a land of hard work and frugal habits, of justice and cleanness and

tolerance, of the very essence of live-and-let-live. There one finds no extremes of wealth or poverty, no billionaires, no paupers.”³⁰

On August 24, the Socialist Party in Basel obtained enough signatures for an initiative to ban the National Socialist Party and its propaganda. It obtained the highest number of signatures ever gained for an initiative.³¹

Contemporary Review reported that the German press had no success in frightening the Swiss people with Bolshevist conspiracy theories or in generating anti-Semitism. Swiss courts penalized authors of propaganda who asserted that various Swiss personalities were “being paid by Jews” and who argued that Switzerland was under the influence of “international Jewry.”³²

Although the Swiss people as a whole opposed the racist doctrines of National Socialism, the Swiss government was, regrettably, unwilling to grant unlimited asylum to political refugees or free emigration to German and Austrian Jews. The liberal entry policies which had existed since 1933 were curtailed in October 1938 by the Federal Police Department under Heinrich Rothmund, who accepted a suggestion by German officials that a “J” stamp be added to identify Jews on German passports. The police chief’s role was not made public until 1954, at which time the Swiss public was outraged. On behalf of the nation, Federal President Villiger issued a public apology in 1995.³³

Czechoslovakia, another country in the threatening shadow of Nazi Germany, resembled Switzerland in that her people consisted of an ethnic and linguistic mix. Despite promises made when the country was formed at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, however, Czechoslovakia had not adopted a federal system of Swiss-like cantons. The Sudeten Germans—German-speakers in the western part of the country near the German border—had a number of grievances against the highly centralized government. They were thus ripe for Hitler’s attention and would be handed over to the Nazis with only the signatures of a few Prague politicians on a scrap of paper.³⁴ In 1938, the perception grew that the British were willing to let the Sudetenland be ceded to Germany, even though it meant the complete loss of border fortifications for that part of the country which remained.³⁵ On September 15, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain promised Hitler to promote the cession.³⁶ Despite treaties protecting the territorial integrity of Czechoslovakia, Britain and France told Czechoslovakia’s representatives that the country must accede to Hitler’s wishes.³⁷

By then Hitler was emboldened, and world crisis loomed. President Roosevelt announced that the United States would remain neutral in the event of war and would not participate in the ongoing negotiations regarding Czechoslovakia.³⁸ He nevertheless appealed to Hitler and Czech President Eduard Benes' not to break off talks and asked other governments to make similar appeals. The Swiss Federal Council, on September 28, urged Hitler and Benes', "with deep emotion," to find a peaceful solution.³⁹

After the Führer received another appeal from President Roosevelt, the German minister in Bern, Otto Carl Köcher, asked the Swiss Political Department whether Switzerland authorized Roosevelt to speak on her behalf and whether the Swiss felt threatened by Germany. The Federal Council answered the first question in the negative, but replied to the second that Switzerland relied for her independence on respect for her armed neutrality, which Germany had recognized. Berlin was displeased.⁴⁰

Chamberlain and the French premier, Edouard Daladier, again acquiesced to Hitler, at Munich on September 29–30, 1938. Backed by Britain and France, under the Munich accord finalized on the 30th, Germany demanded that Czechoslovakia give up 11,000 square miles of her richest and most defensible territory along with 3.5 million citizens. The transformation was arranged after the Western powers dictated the terms. President Benes' conferred with his military and political leadership, concluded that resistance was futile and that surrender to the *Diktat* was his only alternative. What was left of the country then became known as "Czecho-Slovakia." A pro-German government was installed.⁴¹

Wilhelm Keitel, Chief of the German High Command, would later testify at Nuremberg that "we were extraordinarily happy that it had not come to a military operation because . . . our means of attack against the frontier fortifications of Czechoslovakia were insufficient. From a purely military point of view we lacked the means for an attack."⁴² Similarly, Field Marshal Erich von Manstein admitted that "there is no doubt whatsoever that had Czechoslovakia defended herself, we would have been held up by her fortifications, for we did not have the means to break through." In fact, the German Army General Staff opposed a European war and was plotting to overthrow Hitler had they been ordered to attack Czechoslovakia at that time.⁴³

Germany was not then prepared to go to war against a coalition of

Czechoslovakia, Britain, and France; however, Hitler's ability to bluff foreign leaders had earned the Third Reich another bloodless victory.⁴⁴ Chamberlain gave the Führer what he wanted. The Western powers betrayed Czechoslovakia, the leaders of which then gave up without a fight.

The Swiss, however, were not demoralized. The decentralized Swiss state did not lend itself to the tactics Hitler had used on Czechoslovakia and Austria. Bluffs and intimidation against Switzerland's grass-roots democracy only made the Swiss more determined to preserve their independence and way of life.

While the world celebrated the Munich accord, with its promise of "peace in our time," and the Pope expressed joy that war had been avoided, Federal President Johannes Baumann said at the closing of the Swiss Parliament on that fateful September 30 that the accord "should not prevent us from executing and completing measures of a military, political, economic and spiritual order which our country needs to guard its independence and freedom."⁴⁵

The Germans did, in fact, have further goals. On October 11, General (later, Field Marshal) Keitel telegraphed Hitler that Czechoslovakia could be finished off "in view of the present signs of weakness in Czech resistance."⁴⁶ This would be accomplished just a few months later.

Shortly after Munich, German newspapers began referring to Switzerland as a country that was detaining populations which did not belong to her.⁴⁷ On November 4, Federal President Baumann called a meeting of police chiefs to eliminate increasing Nazi activity in Switzerland.⁴⁸ On the 10th, seeking evidence of espionage, police squads raided the headquarters of the Swiss Socialist Workers Party and the Peoples League, which were small but active fascist groups.⁴⁹ Over 100 Nazi agitators were arrested. Baumann declared that evidence was found that the groups had maintained direct relations with Germany.⁵⁰

The *Kristallnacht* (Night of the Broken Glass) pogroms of November 9–10 in Germany sent shockwaves through Switzerland.⁵¹ The pretext for the attacks against Jews and Jewish property was revenge for the shooting of Ernst vom Rath, a Secretary of the German Embassy in Paris, by a Polish Jew. Berlin police announced the disarming of the Jews for what was called a new plot of the Jewish world conspiracy against National Socialism.⁵² The Swiss press did not lose sight of the parallel with the 1936 shooting of Swiss Nazi Wilhelm Gustloff

by a Jewish medical student and the manner in which the Nazis used the incident to condemn all Jews and spread anti-Semitism.⁵³

Newspapers all over Germany published an article on November 9 declaring the need to disarm the Jews due to the Paris shooting. Yet this pretext was a sham: the confiscations of arms in Berlin had already been going on for several weeks, netting 2,589 swords, knives, and clubs, 1,702 firearms, and about 20,000 rounds of ammunition. A Berlin publication stated: “The provisional results clearly show what a large amount of weapons have been found with Berlin’s Jews and are still to be found with them.”⁵⁴ The names of Jews with firearm licenses were available to the police under the Nazi *Waffengesetz* (Weapons Law) signed by Hitler and SS Reichsführer (Interior Minister) Wilhelm Frick earlier that year and previous laws.⁵⁵ On November 10, newspapers in both Germany and Switzerland reported a document entitled “Weapons Ban for Jews” in which SS chief Heinrich Himmler decreed: “Persons who, according to the Nürnberg law are regarded as Jews, are forbidden to possess any weapons. Violators will be transferred to a concentration camp and imprisoned for a period of up to 20 years.”⁵⁶

The seizure of firearms from Jews gave the Nazis assurance that their attacks would not be resisted. The Nazis then proceeded to smash, loot and burn Jewish shops and temples.⁵⁷ Throughout Germany, thousands of Jewish men were taken from their homes and arrested.⁵⁸ The property destruction was carried out by wrecking crews under the protection of uniformed Nazis or police.⁵⁹ The Swiss press took note of the widespread disarming of the Jews and the anti-Semitic attacks.⁶⁰

The Regulations Against Jews’ Possession of Weapons (*Verordnung gegen den Waffenbesitz der Juden*) were promulgated by Interior Minister Frick on November 11, the day after *Kristallnacht*. The regulations stated that “Jews . . . are prohibited from acquiring, possessing, and carrying firearms and ammunition, as well as truncheons or stabbing weapons. Those now possessing weapons and ammunition are required at once to turn them over to the local police authority.”⁶¹

The *Kristallnacht* rampages prompted Swiss cantonal and federal authorities to clamp down on Nazi hooligans, whose activities were banned.⁶² The average Swiss, who kept a rifle at home for militia service and shooting matches, could

not have lost sight of the significance of the Nazi seizures of firearms before attacking the Jews. Indeed, Switzerland was the only country in the world where every Jewish male, like every other citizen, was issued a rifle.

The *Völkischer Beobachter* (*People's Observer*), National Socialism's chief newspaper, warned Switzerland on December 2 to curb her press in its treatment of Germany.⁶³ The Berlin paper asserted: "If, therefore, small democratic States continue their indirect warfare against us they run the danger that of necessity we will one day legally consider them enemies, despite their neutral position, on the same basis as the world organizers of direct warfare."⁶⁴

The next day, the Swiss responded. Giuseppe Motta, on behalf of the Federal Council, warned German Minister Köcher that Nazi agents in Switzerland must halt their activities. He also expressed "extreme displeasure" over remarks said to have been made repeatedly by Germans along the Swiss-German border that the two countries must become one.⁶⁵

In addition, on December 5 the Federal Council prohibited the publication of misinformation that endangered the Confederation, ridiculed democratic principles, or excited hatred against any group based on race, religion, or nationality. It authorized imprisonment of anyone who attempted to overthrow the constitutional regime of the Confederation or of the cantons. The Council was also empowered to dissolve any group that violated these prohibitions. Not surprisingly, the prohibitions were criticized as contrary to the principle of a free press.⁶⁶

Geneviève Tabouis, writing in the Parisian newspaper *L'Oeuvre* on December 8, substantiated beliefs widely held in Switzerland:

It is reported that Herr von Bibra, counselor to the German Embassy at Berne, has recently received a secret order telling him particularly to encourage the National Socialist movement for the attachment of the German Swiss to the Reich. . . . By virtue of this order, Herr von Bibra has secretly received the title of "Special Commissar for the Attachment of Switzerland."⁶⁷

As counselor to the German legation in Prague until late 1935, Bibra was instrumental in the spread of Nazi influence in Czechoslovakia. It was reported that Gestapo chief Himmler ordered Bibra to work toward the partition of Switzerland between Germany and Italy.⁶⁸ By the end of the year, the Swiss

government instructed its Attorney General to prosecute members of Nazi organizations for attacks against the security and independence of the Swiss Confederation.⁶⁹

In December, the obligation to serve in the Swiss militia was extended to age 60.⁷⁰ Further, the Swiss Parliament approved an increased armament program that was expected to cost 350 million Swiss francs.⁷¹

Hitler got a scare from a would-be William Tell in late 1938. A Swiss theology student, Maurice Bavaud, attempted to shoot Hitler on three occasions, actually getting very close to the dictator. Of all the assassination plots and attempts against Hitler during the entire Third Reich, Bavaud's was one of the few that almost succeeded. He was caught and executed in 1941. It was one more reason for the Führer to hate the Swiss.⁷²

The Swiss concept of "spiritual national defense" was embodied in the December 1938 message of the Federal Council on national purpose. Authored by Federal Councillor Philipp Etter, the message noted the origins of Switzerland in the area around the St. Gotthard Pass in the Alps, the source of the Rhône, the Rhine, and the Ticino rivers. This mountain pass both separates and unites the three leading cultures of continental Europe—French, German and Italian—linking Switzerland to all three.⁷³ It continued:

For the very reason that we reject the concept of race or common descent as the basis of a state and as the factor determining political frontiers, we gain the liberty and the strength to remain conscious of our cultural ties with the three great civilizations. The Swiss national idea is not based upon race or biological factors; it rests on a spiritual decision.⁷⁴

The message added that Switzerland's federalism allows various cultures to live in harmony:

The Swiss federal state is an association of free republics: it does not swallow them, it federates them. The cantonal republics maintain their individuality, and thereby they are the sources and pillars of our intellectual wealth, the strongest bulwark against intellectual uniformity. Our Swiss democracy has been built up organically from the smaller units to the larger units, from the township to the canton, and from the canton to the federal state. Next to federalism and

democracy, Switzerland is based upon respect for the dignity of the individual. The respect for the right and liberty of human personality is so deeply anchored in the Swiss idea that we can regard it as its basic concept and can proclaim its defense as an essential task of the nation.⁷⁵

While this was a special message from the Federal Council, the concept of “spiritual national defense” was not mandated by law, in the way National Socialism imposed ideology from above, but rather expressed the historic tradition of the Swiss people. The concept was promoted not only by the government but by various social institutions and organizations.⁷⁶

The Swiss Army is imbued with democratic principles. No generals exist other than as appointed by the Parliament in time of war and only a very small number of soldiers are full-time professionals.

In the 1930s, Henri Guisan was a full-time colonel from the French-speaking part of the country. He was bilingual and commanded a German-speaking army corps before commanding a French-speaking corps.

Colonel Guisan originally presented his *Our People and Its Army* as a lecture to the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich on October 9.⁷⁷ When later published as a booklet, it was so well received that many people said that, should Switzerland ever need a general, this was the man.⁷⁸ Indeed, Guisan would later be elected commander-in-chief of the Swiss Army when the war came.

For Guisan, “a people defends itself in two ways: by its moral force, expressed by its patriotism, and by its material force, represented by its army.” Switzerland, he pointed out, originated in a military alliance: “the treaty of August 1, 1291 is nothing other than an offensive and defensive pact against the exterior enemy.”⁷⁹ On the slopes of Morgarten in 1315, “the young army of Confederates” routed the army of Leopold I, and “Swiss tactics had been born.”⁸⁰ Then there was Sempach in 1386, where 1,500 mountain dwellers crushed the army of the Archduke Leopold III. After Marignano (1515), one of the few Swiss defeats, Francis I, of France, said: “I overcame those that only Caesar had been able to overcome!”⁸¹

The Swiss, said Guisan, had always been “united enough to withstand all the storms that shook Europe.” Obligatory service was imposed for the defense of the people. “For a long time it was the only communal institution of the cantons, the expression of confederate solidarity. The army represents, therefore, national

unity, the binding element, not only in theory but in reality.”⁸² Guisan reflected:

What distinguishes the military tradition of Switzerland, is, above all, the persistence with which its essential principles maintained themselves in the course of its history. . . . In effect, the necessity “to be ready” at any instant required a mobilization and a quick concentration at the threatened points. Each citizen had his equipment, his arms, in his residence.⁸³

Reflecting on Swiss history, Guisan emphasized some of the specific ancient martial customs. In Appenzell, a young man at his confirmation received a sword and could not marry unless he possessed a Bible and arms.⁸⁴ In Zurich, one was invited to a marriage by firing a pistol in front of the guest’s house.⁸⁵ The day of recruitment was and remained a festival day, including processions with flags and music. “Today again,” Guisan emphasized, “being capable of service is a physical certificate of health; our girls know it well!”⁸⁶

In Geneva, since 1400, the military exercises of archers, crossbow shooters, arquebusiers, and elite bodies on which the state could rely embodied the very spirit of the city. All classes of the population were represented.⁸⁷ The best shooters won trophies and cash and led parades while carrying their arms.⁸⁸ At festivals, the ancient military influence was clear, and Guisan recounted colorful local traditions. Great battles had continued to be celebrated annually for over 500 years. The warrior spirit exhibited itself in the arts, literature, and architecture.⁸⁹

For Guisan, the army was the incarnation of the federal republic. He wrote bluntly: “The people is the army, the army is the people.” The people loved their army because they rediscovered themselves in it.⁹⁰ “Under the uniform, the social differences equalize themselves,” he said, “the preconceived judgments disappear. Under the uniform, there is neither rich, nor poor, worker, employer, urbanite, or country person, there is only a soldier, a man who serves his country!”⁹¹ The common experiences brought the people together. Beginning with recruit school and continuing regularly throughout life, the soldiers were united. The army was education for citizenship.⁹²

In the army, one learned that there was “neither Swiss German, nor Swiss French, nor Swiss Italian, and that there was only one Switzerland, the one of

our fathers, united, strong and vigilant.” But this strength was based on diversity. “If federalism is the safeguard of the country, unification would be its loss!” The cantons therefore retained their particularism, and the army regiments their unique characteristics. Guisan insisted, “It would be as vain to want to unify Switzerland as to attempt to level her mountains!” The very differences in fact promote national cohesion.⁹³

Guisan explained Switzerland’s unique marksmanship culture:

While traversing Switzerland on Sundays, everywhere one hears gunfire, but a peaceful gunfire: this is the Swiss practicing their favorite sport, their national sport. They are doing their obligatory shooting, or practicing for the regional, cantonal or federal shooting festivals, as their ancestors did it with the musket, the arquebus, or the crossbow. Everywhere, one meets urbanites and country people, rifle to the shoulder, causing foreigners to exclaim: “You are having a revolution!”⁹⁴

Guisan waxed religious, and even mystic, in describing military exercises in the Alps. Troops climbed to the summits in a form of “military worship”; at the top, the “rustic pulpit,” rifles were stacked and the flag fluttered. “In this eternal, unchanging framework, in this sublimity of nature, one feels more than elsewhere the stability and continuity of the historic mission of our army.”⁹⁵

Men aged and died and governments changed, but the traditions and army endured. “Small army, yes, but made strong by the traditions that she has in her heart and in her blood.” On the other hand, values which had to be jealously preserved had lately been confronted by spiritual confusion, uncertainties, foreign influences contrary to the national spirit, and the “various mystical racists”⁹⁶—an obvious reference to German National Socialism.

Guisan recalled the army’s readiness to defend Switzerland against the horrors of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, the Great War of 1914–18, and the Moscow-inspired insurrectionist threat in 1918.⁹⁷ The Swiss Army thereafter withstood proponents of disarmament, pacifism and Bolshevism.⁹⁸

When Guisan made those reflections, European tension was increasing: after the rise of the Nazis and Germany’s rearmament had followed the occupation of the Rhineland, the plebiscite of the Saar (returning it to Germany), the civil war in Spain, the annexation of Austria and then, in September 1938, the annexation

of Czechoslovakia, which brought “us within two fingers of war.”⁹⁹ Anxiety was growing despite Switzerland’s neutrality, which could only be maintained by an army capable of resisting attack.¹⁰⁰ The League of Nations had failed, and Hitler had bluntly declared that he recognized only rights that could be defended.¹⁰¹

According to Guisan, absolute neutrality and a strong army were inseparable. Switzerland was in a strategic position that those who sought to dominate the continent would envy. The nation would continue to exist only if it was strong enough to defend itself.¹⁰²

The Swiss people understood defense needs and favored the modernization of armaments despite the great expense. The army was stronger than ever. The border troops were ready for a surprise attack. “The true Swiss defense,” said Guisan, “is where the soldier, protected by fortifications and barricades, defends his cottage, his farm, his earth. He knows each rock, each tree, each path.” He emphasized that the moral element predominates and that all citizens needed to participate.¹⁰³ “The army is like a factory of the nation in arms.”¹⁰⁴ Guisan concluded that national defense rested not just on weapons but on reason and faith. The people had to be prepared to bear the trials of modern war and “to resist to the end.” They needed to use the “greatest harshness against the fellow travelers in ideologies inconsistent with our democracy, against the agents of every foreign dictatorship.”¹⁰⁵

“The moral preparation of a people is as necessary as the material preparation, and means the mobilization of the spirit.” Guisan insisted that “the oldest soldierly people in Europe must know neither defeatism nor fear; dignity forbids it!” What were dictatorships, with their mystical theories, compared with Swiss patriotism?¹⁰⁶ Responding to Guisan’s challenge and the evocation of their ancient heritage, as the fateful year of 1939 approached, the Swiss continued to prepare for the military challenge they now believed was imminent.

Chapter 3

1939

Hitler Launches World War II

AT THE BEGINNING OF 1939, THE SWISS VIEWED THEIR GIANT neighbor to the north and east with a wary eye. Ominous signs indicated that their concern was fully justified.

Before unleashing the German Army to cross a neighbor's borders, the Nazis characteristically turned up the heat on their intended prey by launching a series of press attacks. Accordingly, the Swiss were distressed when, in early January, a spate of vehemently anti-Swiss articles suddenly appeared in the state-controlled German press. These articles asserted that criticism of the Nazis by Switzerland's (uncensored) press was incompatible with neutrality and warned the Swiss government to suppress the criticism. One of the leading Nazi organs, the *National-Sozialistische Monatshefte*, castigated Switzerland's policy of welcoming political refugees from Germany. The Swiss minister in Berlin, Hans Frölicher, was instructed to discuss the attacks with German authorities.¹

On January 30, a few hours before the start of Hitler's annual Reichstag speech, this one marking the sixth anniversary of his coming to power, the apprehensive Swiss government announced an ordinance giving it the power to mobilize the militia without further notice. As it turned out, the Führer's speech did not single out Switzerland as the next target of the Reich; the bulk of his oration merely stressed the military might of Germany and Fascist Italy.² Nevertheless, during the winter of 1938–39, General Franz Halder, chief of the German General Staff, instructed Major General Eugen Müller to prepare a study on whether advantages would be gained by an incursion into Switzerland in the event of a French-German war. Weighing the factors of terrain and potential Swiss resistance, Müller recommended against a Swiss invasion at that time.³

Responding to the perceived threat, the Swiss shooting associations, among

others, continued to encourage the strongest measures of preparedness. A rifleman from a mountain canton exhorted the people to resolve “to give our hearts and our blood” to defend the country against any attempted foreign takeover. He continued:

We owe it to our ancestors, who always appreciated freedom and independence as the highest value. But we owe it also to those who will live after us, and to whom we wait to bestow our fatherland whole. . . . May the spirit of the Rütli especially beckon us riflemen, the spirit who goes through our history like a red line and which Schiller put in these words: “We must trust to God on high and never be intimidated by the power of man. It is better to die than to live in slavery!”

This parallel to the famous oration of Patrick Henry was characterized as “spiritual national defense” of the highest quality.⁴

Meanwhile, to the east, Nazi agents were stirring up the Slovaks against the Czechs. On March 11, General Keitel drafted an ultimatum for Hitler under which Germany would acquire Bohemia and Moravia, the western, Czech portion of the country (the modern Czech Republic). The Czechs were admonished not to resist the military occupation.⁵ That same day, as the Slovak cabinet met, five German generals burst into the meeting and ordered them to declare Slovakia’s independence at once. Slovak Premier Monsignor Tiso and Deputy Prime Minister Ferdinand Durcansky were summoned to Berlin. On March 13, the Führer dictated the terms.

Czechoslovak President Emil Hácha requested an audience with Hitler, however by the time he arrived in Berlin with his Foreign Minister, German troops had already occupied several Czech locations. Hitler informed Hácha that a full invasion was imminent and that “resistance would be folly.” Hácha was instructed to warn the Czech people not to resist and was told the surrender must be signed immediately.⁶ Hácha telephoned the Czech cabinet in Prague advising capitulation.

The meeting with Hitler had gone on only three-and-a-half hours before Hácha signed the prepared document placing the fate of the Czech people and country in the hands of the German Führer. Just two hours later—it was now 6:00 A.M. on March 15—German troops occupied Bohemia and Moravia. There was no resistance.⁷ Meanwhile, Tiso had returned home, and on March 16

telegraphed Berlin asking for German protection and declaring independence.⁸ The German occupation of Slovakia began.

Thus, Czechoslovakia ceased to exist. The population and armed forces offered no resistance. Britain and France had guaranteed the sovereignty of the country at Munich the previous autumn, but now did not lift a finger in response.⁹

Nazi occupation authorities immediately imposed repressive conditions on the former Czechoslovakia. The *London Times* announced: “All popular gatherings were forbidden; and weapons, munitions, and wireless sets were ordered to be surrendered immediately. Disobedience of these orders, the proclamation ended, would be severely punished under military law.”¹⁰ It is still remembered today, some sixty years later, that on the first day the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia they put up posters in every town ordering inhabitants to surrender all firearms, including hunting guns.¹¹ The penalty for disobedience was death. Lists of potential dissidents and other suspects had already been prepared, and those persons disappeared immediately.¹²

The takeover of Czechoslovakia—a multi-ethnic state only a short distance away—was deplored in Switzerland, whose press called for preservation of national unity at all costs and the cessation of all internal differences and strife.¹³ Federal Councillor Hermann Obrecht, in a speech on March 15 to the New Helvetic Society, reacted to the *Anschluss* of Austria and the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia with the warning: “Those who honor us and leave us in peace are our friends. Those, on the other hand, who seek to attack our independence and our political integrity will be met with war. It is not from Switzerland that one goes on pilgrimages to foreign lands”¹⁴—a reference to the “pilgrimages” to Hitler undertaken by national leaders who would then surrender their countries to the Führer.

In a broadcast to the Swiss people on March 18, Federal President Philipp Etter discussed the profound repercussions caused by the entry of German troops into Czechoslovakia and by its disappearance as an independent state. He said that “each citizen is resolved bravely to make all possible sacrifices to conserve for our country its independence and liberty in the midst of the danger of the present hour.”¹⁵

Meeting on March 20, the Swiss Parliament reaffirmed its declaration of the previous March, when German troops occupied Austria, that the Swiss were

ready to defend the nation's inviolability "to the last drop of blood." Federal President Etter told Parliament that Switzerland had nothing to add to this declaration since her determination to defend her neutrality and independence was well known to neighbor states.¹⁶

Finance Minister Wetter announced in Bern on March 22 that increased defense costs would triple the national debt, which would now amount to about 1,000 francs per capita. The citizens, though, would gladly bear the burden if they secured the right "to live in their immemorial liberty and in their modest but comfortable Swiss home."¹⁷

Military Department head Rudolf Minger told Parliament on the same day: "Today all preparations for war mobilization, with or without sudden attack, are in readiness. The arrangements for protecting the frontier will function automatically; there will be no need of waiting for a general's orders."¹⁸ Minger's statement reflected the habit of the nearly invincible Swiss armies of the late medieval period to go into battle without an overall leader or general—the men themselves simply knew what to do. The centuries-old military practice of a well-armed citizens army could still effectively defend against a twentieth-century war of total aggression.

Preparing for an attack, the Swiss intensified work on fortifications along the Rhine and in the cantons bordering the former Austria. Heavy artillery, machine guns and ample stocks of munitions were concentrated in those areas. At Zurich, Schaffhausen, Basel, and other large industrial centers, anti-aircraft batteries were moved into position. Most households had gas masks. Mines under all bridges and roads leading into Switzerland were still in place from the Munich crisis, and there was now twenty-four-hour surveillance at all of these roads and bridges.¹⁹

On March 25, the frontier reserves were called out to guard the German border.²⁰ The next day, it was reported that large bodies of German troops—as many as 200,000—were being massed around and beyond Lake Constance. "Switzerland Puts Great Trust in Her Minute Men's Ability to Hold Border,"²¹ read a caption in the *New York Times* on March 27. The newspaper reported that a general mobilization had not yet been ordered, explaining:

the Swiss have a special defense force, which, like the Minute Men of American revolutionary days, is always ready for service. The purpose of this force is to

delay an invader's advance for twenty-four hours to give the regular army time to assemble. All men in that corps keep their equipment, including arms and ammunition, at home and each knows where to go and what to do in an emergency. In a test in September the entire force reported within two hours after the alarm.²²

Meanwhile, the Swiss Federal Government authorized the Military Department to call up in the course of the year all men aged 36 to 48 for six days of training.²³ Then, on April 4, the government instructed the population to stockpile at least two months of food.²⁴ It obtained large quantities of foodstuffs for army use, and, when invasion seemed imminent, moved these to fortified emplacements in the Alps.²⁵

Not wanting the Führer to outdo him, the Italian Duce ended the independence of Albania in April.²⁶ To the Swiss it was clear that neither of their totalitarian neighbors—the Nazis in the north and east and the Fascists in the south—had any respect for the rights of small nations.

A letter printed in a leading Swiss newspaper expressed the common sentiment of militant resistance as follows:

One must arm everybody who is capable of carrying arms and one should shoot everybody who wants to destroy our country. It would be good to make these greedy people understand that the government of each canton has the right to call up troops itself. That means that if the entire Swiss Government were taken prisoner or surrendered, resistance would not yet be broken.²⁷

Several letters in the women's section in the same newspaper concerned "the urgent desire of Swiss women to learn to shoot to get arms in order to defend themselves against invaders. Swiss women, it is pointed out, have fought and they sometimes decided the victory." One letter stated: "Some people ask that we shall be ready to go into the basement in order to be quietly buried. No. Everyone a rifle in her hand and shoot the bandits."²⁸

A Swiss journalist from Geneva noted the democratic tradition of the local assemblies (*Landsgemeinde*), in which the citizens, each carrying a sword as a symbol of liberty, assemble and make the laws. He added:

Each man in Switzerland bound to do military service has his gun at home hanging on the wall to the great amazement of foreign visitors, who cannot understand that a free state allows free citizens to have their arms at home.

One thing is sure: The Swiss would use these guns; they would shoot and would not let their country fall into the hands of an enemy without defending their land with utmost readiness to give their lives for freedom. There would be few democrats in our country who would not repeat the famous words of the American hero, Patrick Henry.²⁹

During 1939, the United States was, of course, neutral. On April 4, Secretary of State Cordell Hull denied that regulations were in force that dealt with German trade. American policy was based on equal treatment for all nations, and German participation in this policy had accordingly been invited.³⁰ In March, American exports to Germany were \$6.5 million, and imports from Germany were \$5 million, both increases from the previous month.³¹

As U.S. Congressional hearings at that time recognized, international law sanctioned free trade by neutrals during wartime. Contraband of war, including arms and munitions, exported from a neutral was subject to search and seizure on the high seas by a belligerent. However, a neutral government incurred no liability by permitting the manufacture and shipment of such articles. In other words, international law permitted private firms in a neutral country to make and export arms to a belligerent, but the arms could be seized by another belligerent after export.³²

Anticipating a long war and wishing to obtain long-term agreements to secure food and raw materials from the United States, in April and May 1939 Swiss representatives met with Secretary of State Hull and State Department officials. The Americans thought war could be avoided and resisted the Swiss attempt to obtain binding contracts for a supply of American goods.³³ When the Swiss persisted, the Department responded that it could not make commitments until pending neutrality bills were decided in Congress.³⁴ Finally, the Swiss were successful in obtaining contract options, and when the war broke out in September they were able to obtain large amounts of food and raw materials to store for the coming emergencies.³⁵

Later in the year, after the war began, President Roosevelt called for an end

to legislation prohibiting the export of arms to belligerents. Arms were embargoed, but the raw materials of which they were made were not. Roosevelt urged that an end to the embargo would increase arms manufacture in the United States and thus would give employment to thousands of Americans as well as contribute to the national defense. Under “the normal practice under the age-old doctrines of international law,” the President explained, in the event of a European war, “the United States would have sold to and bought from belligerent nations such goods and products of all kinds as the belligerent nations, with their existing facilities and geographical situations, were able to buy from us or sell to us.”³⁶

The June 1939 issue of *Travel* magazine included a feature article on the Swiss.³⁷ The Swiss militia, it said, “the best defensive force in Europe,” was “an army of sharpshooters who have competed for marksmen’s prizes from boyhood, trained to shoot downward from a terrain high up, able to dodge a massed air attack, too, as no troops could do whose home ground is less pitted and precipitous.”³⁸ An official in Bern conveyed the idea that “the dictators who had just finished the erasure of a small democracy in the east of Europe—one whose army stood and did not fire—must not therefore conclude that a non-standing army in the west is likewise a non-firing one.”³⁹

Travel magazine reported that the citizens of the Swiss cantons were “so indifferent to national concerns that to the average man the name of the president of the Federation remains unknown, yet so cohesive in a crisis that only the great Napoleon violated, and in vain, the frontiers that have stood since the Dark Ages.” There was a saying: “National liberty grew from individual liberty in Switzerland. Nothing lasted that was imposed from above.”⁴⁰

The national Shooting Festival (*Schützenfest*), which remains the largest rifle competition in the world, was held in Lucerne in June in conjunction with the world championships of the UIT, or International Shooting Union. Federal President Etter, author of the concept of “spiritual national defense,” spoke at the event, stressing that something far more serious than sport was the purpose of their activity. His comments demonstrated the connection between national defense and the armed citizen:

The Swiss always has his rifle at hand. It belongs to the furnishings of his home. . . . That corresponds to ancient Swiss tradition. As the citizen with his sword

steps into the ring in the cantons which have the *Landsgemeinde*, so the Swiss soldier lives in constant companionship with his rifle. He knows what that means. With this rifle, he is liable every hour, if the country calls, to defend his hearth, his home, his family, his birthplace. The weapon is to him a pledge and sign of honor and freedom. The Swiss does not part with his rifle.⁴¹

Rudolf Minger, who had pushed through the country's immense defense buildup after Hitler came to power, also spoke. Noting the presence of the best rifle competitors from 19 foreign countries, Minger declared that the "foreign guests must see that the Swiss people are still martial and strong, and ready at any time to sacrifice everything for the maintenance of their freedom and independence."⁴²

At that 1939 festival, Switzerland won the service rifle team competition for the world championship.⁴³ A Swiss also set a new world record in pistol. In the Free Rifle event, the Swiss team used rifles based on their standard army-issue carbine, the K31, and came in third, behind Estonia and Finland.⁴⁴ Count Hermann Keyserling, an apostle of Nietzsche, wrote at this time that in Germany "it is recognized that aristocracy has a higher value. But in Switzerland, plebianism is the ideal."⁴⁵ In a shooting war, the Swiss plebeian would have been quite a match for Nietzsche's *Übermensch*.

Secretary of State Cordell Hull, in a speech to the United States Senate on July 14, 1939, recalled the historic American avoidance of "entangling alliances" and insisted that "both sides agree that, in the event of foreign wars, this nation should maintain a status of strict neutrality."⁴⁶

United States policy also strictly limited the immigration of refugees. In mid-May 1939, a boat of 930 German Jews tried to land in Cuba. The U.S. State Department attempted to facilitate their entry. Cuba refused. The State Department did not offer to allow the refugees to enter the United States, and they were thus forced to re-cross the Atlantic.⁴⁷

Despite official Washington's standoffish attitude toward the whole subject of Europe, at least some politicians were willing to acknowledge Switzerland's evolving militance in the face of growing threats to her independence. On August 2, 15,000 people joined in celebrating Switzerland's 648th anniversary at the World's Fair in New York City. On that occasion, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia described Switzerland as "a bulwark of democracy in Europe,"⁴⁸ adding:

When people are suppressed in the different parts of Europe, when hope is gone in the Mediterranean, when the future is dim in the Balkans, when air raids threaten other sections, the people look to Switzerland as the hope of Europe. . . . We have so much in common. We have learned so much from the glorious history of your country. You were a free country before America was discovered.⁴⁹

Returning from a visit to Switzerland, the Lord Mayor of London referred to Switzerland's army as "the oldest militia in Europe. . . . The system is one which helps to ensure that the Swiss Army can mobilize more rapidly than any other army in the world." He recommended the Swiss model for England.⁵⁰

In Switzerland herself, fortifications continued to rise. Numerous forts were built along the German border and, "for appearances' sake," two were erected on the French border. In the summer of 1939, the world had yet to witness the devastating power of a German blitzkrieg, but the Swiss were already intent on employing their resources to make any invasion exceedingly costly.⁵¹

On August 19, it was reported from Basel that the heightened anti-Swiss propaganda campaign and the uncommonly large German troop concentrations in southern Germany during the preceding few weeks had prompted the Swiss to further strengthen garrisons along the German and Italian frontiers. One German rumor making the rounds at the time was that homes of German citizens in Basel had been ransacked by Swiss mobs. Though patently false, this was the same type of propaganda lie that had preceded Hitler's aggression in such places as the Sudetenland. Over 20,000 motorized German troops were concentrated in the Black Forest, just north of the Swiss border, within easy striking distance of Basel.⁵²

Meanwhile, Hitler was using the status of the Baltic port and "Free City" of Danzig, which was ruled locally by Nazis, as a pretext to justify an aggression against Poland.⁵³ In June, the Führer had approved a secret military plan to eradicate Poland's army and to occupy the country.⁵⁴ On August 23, the Nazi and Soviet governments shocked the world by announcing a non-aggression pact, signed by Foreign Ministers von Ribbentrop and Molotov. Little did the world know, until after the war, of the two parties' secret protocol for carving up Poland and eastern Europe between them.⁵⁵ Yet, by seeming to free Germany from concern with the totalitarian behemoth to its east, the pact alarmed the

Swiss and made them even more determined to prepare for war.

With total war rapidly approaching after the Nazi-Soviet pact, it is instructive to compare how the small neutral countries of Europe were preparing for the coming storm. The following table includes the populations and the numbers of men under arms for selected European countries during the period 1937–39. The “peace army” includes those on active duty or on maneuvers; in some cases this service was only seasonal. The “war army,” for all countries except Switzerland, was purely theoretical. It included the number of soldiers who could be mobilized given sufficient time. As events in early 1940 would demonstrate, a small country could be taken over in a few hours, before a mobilization order could even be issued. In the case of Switzerland, the figure for the “war army” was real, in that every soldier already had all equipment at home and could begin fighting at any time. In this sense, it may be said that Switzerland’s “war army” was really the same size as her “peace army.”

Men Under Arms, 1937-39⁵⁶

Country	Population	“Peace Army”	“War Army”	% Pop.
Belgium	8,276,000	100,000	650,000	8
Denmark	3,764,000	4,000-10,000	150,000	4
Finland	3,762,000	30,000-100,000	300,000	8
Netherlands	8,640,000	39,000	400,000	5
Norway	2,884,000	18,000-30,000	110,000	4
Switzerland	4,183,000	25,000-36,000	400,000	10

The last column shows the percentage of the population included in the “war army.” As will be seen, during the war Switzerland would mobilize as many as 850,000 soldiers and local defense troops, which would raise her proportion of men under arms from 10% to 20% of the population. The low number of men under arms in Denmark, the Netherlands and Norway corresponded with their subsequent inability to resist invasion.

Finland effectively resisted the Russians in 1939. The Finns, like the Swiss, were by reputation a nation of riflemen. But Belgium, with the same proportion of men under arms (albeit under the hypothetical “war army”), was unable to resist the Germans in 1940. In addition, Belgium (like the Netherlands) had colonies which could distract from its national defense in Europe. Switzerland, of course, had no colonies.

The above data are taken from a 1937 Austrian publication and a 1939 German publication, respectively, using the 1939 data when available. The statistics changed little if at all between those two years. As is obvious from these sources, those planning the expansion of the Third Reich were well informed of which countries were weak militarily and which were stronger.

In the last week of August, with her citizen soldiers undergoing summer training, Switzerland had nearly 100,000 men on active service.⁵⁷ On August 25, several units of elite frontier troops were called to their posts.⁵⁸ On the 28th, the Federal Council decreed mobilization of an additional 100,000 troops.⁵⁹

On August 29, the Federal Council proclaimed a state of active service throughout the country, automatically invoking the far-reaching provisions of the military code. Civilians who committed certain offenses were to be tried by military courts. These offenses included incitement to desertion from the army, demoralization of the army, spreading false information to countermand military orders, and violation of military secrets.⁶⁰

On August 30, anticipating that general war was imminent, the Swiss Parliament unanimously elected Colonel Henri Guisan as commander-in-chief of the army. The appointment of this French Swiss had been agreed on since the Munich crisis of 1938. Reflecting the country's anti-militarist tradition, in peacetime the highest rank in the army was colonel, but in wartime Parliament was empowered to elect the commander-in-chief, with the rank of general. Guisan had been Commander of the III Corps and was a native of the canton of Vaud in French-speaking western Switzerland. Colonel Jakob Labhart, from a German-speaking area, was appointed Chief of the General Staff.⁶¹

As general, Guisan would represent the ordinary citizen-at-arms. During the course of the war, this common man and inspirational military leader would come to symbolize the Swiss spirit of resistance.⁶²

At that time, the militia included all males aged 20–60 and had female volunteers for special duties. The Elite troops were aged 20–36, the Reserve were in the 36–48 age group, and the Home Guard were aged 48–60.⁶³ Frontier guards were put in place, explosives installed in bridges, and the air force called out—it had 150 obsolete Swiss airplanes and 50 Messerschmitt Me-109 fighters purchased from the Germans.⁶⁴ The Me-109, an aircraft similar in overall performance to the British Spitfire, was the mainstay of the Luftwaffe fighter arm. The Germans would soon come to regret their sale of these 50 planes to the

Swiss.

On August 31, together with its call for a general mobilization, the Federal Council issued a formal declaration of neutrality similar to that which it had issued at the beginning of World War I.⁶⁵ The declaration began:

The international tension which has motivated the Swiss Confederation to take military measures obliges it to declare anew its unshakable will not to depart in any way from the principles of neutrality which have for centuries inspired its policy and to which the Swiss people are profoundly attached. . . .⁶⁶

The National Exposition, popularly called the “Landi,” was taking place at this time in Zurich. It demonstrated Swiss values, unity in diversity and readiness to meet future challenges. An area called the “Höhenweg” was an elevated path under the open sky over which, in a breathtaking display, hung 3,000 different flags representing every Swiss city, town and village. Large numbers of Swiss found reassurance and solidarity at the Exposition.⁶⁷

An English visitor to the National Exposition heard such statements as: “There’ll be no talk of a ‘Munich’ here” and “If anyone attacks us, we will know how to repel the invader.”⁶⁸ While a year earlier an occasional voice would defend the Führer, today he symbolized evil to virtually everyone in the country. “The Third Reich, from being disliked, has come to be hated. Hitler is generally regarded as a war-obsessed politician, self-perjured and a trickster, a bully given to sudden and unprovoked attacks on his smaller neighbors.”⁶⁹

On September 1, 1939, Hitler launched World War II in Europe by invading Poland. For the first time, the world witnessed the tactics of blitzkrieg—lightning war—in which tanks would slice into and surround an enemy’s front and planes would swarm behind the enemy lines as mobile artillery. The Poles fought bravely, but within a week it was clear that strategic points of their front had been irreparably broken and their major units had been outmaneuvered by German armor.

Despite the Nazi threat that had been evident for years, Poland was woefully unprepared for war. In some cases, orders to give out ammunition to riflemen or artillerymen had not been issued. In one telling incident, the commander of a unit found only enough cartridges to kill himself and his horse.⁷⁰ Much of the Polish air force was caught by surprise and destroyed on the ground by German

bombers. As the Wehrmacht closed in on Warsaw, already terror-bombed by the Luftwaffe, the Polish government surrendered.⁷¹ To preclude civilian resistance, the Nazis conducted house-to-house searches for arms.⁷² Persons found in possession of firearms in defiance of the invaders were executed.⁷³

On the morning the German invasion of Poland began, a telegram in Switzerland at 11:00 A.M. announced that the entire Swiss armed forces were mobilized. Recalls one soldier, “We grasped our sharpened bayonets, sharpshooting ammunition, and Totentäfelchen [dog tags], and swore to sacrifice life and limb for the defense of the fatherland and its Constitution.”⁷⁴

Switzerland faced two threats against which the country would have to defend herself. The first was the fear of a German attempt to incorporate Switzerland forcibly into the Third Reich or to invade in conjunction with the Italians to divide the country among themselves. The second threat—more immediate now with the advent of general war in Europe—was that a belligerent would invade a portion of Switzerland in an attempt to reach an enemy’s territory more quickly.

By September 3, when Britain and France declared war on Germany, 435,000 Swiss—out of a mere 4.2 million people—were mobilized. Most were stationed in the north in anticipation of a German-French war in which those powers would attempt to outflank each other by violating Swiss neutrality.⁷⁵ The Swiss could mobilize quickly because every man had his arms and equipment at home. By contrast, in France, aside from its standing troops, it took weeks to mobilize the reserves.⁷⁶

Recalling Hitler’s threat in *Mein Kampf* to seize new territories in the East, the *Journal de Genève* commented:

Bound to his adventure but prisoner of his method, Chancellor Hitler must push to the brink; the plenipotentiary of Warsaw not coming to Berlin to receive the Diktat that was put to Mister Hácha, the German troops were launched against Poland to impose the dictator’s will.⁷⁷

On September 17, the Russians moved into Poland to occupy the territory agreed upon in the Nazi-Soviet Pact.⁷⁸ The cynical secret protocol between Hitler and Stalin to divide Poland was not then known, and many Polish officers surrendered their units intact to the Soviets, thinking Stalin had moved his army

forward to prevent further German aggression. Eight thousand of these Polish officers would later be found buried in mass graves in the Katyn Forest near Smolensk; thousands of others in Soviet custody were never heard from again.

The blitzkrieg which crushed Poland in just 20 days led General Guisan to intensify his planning for the expected attack against Switzerland. The Swiss now made plans in the event of “Case West,” in which the French would invade en route to Germany, and for the more likely event of “Case North,” in which the Germans would loop down into Switzerland under the Maginot Line.⁷⁹ On the 18th, the Federal Council authorized the army high command to reduce the age for military training from 20 to 19. The first year of military training entailed 88 days.

On September 21, General Guisan rejected a request by political leaders for partial demobilization so that soldiers could return to their farms. Concentrations of foreign troops on the border still required the army to prepare for “any eventuality.”⁸⁰ At the same time, economic pressure from the warring parties began—Switzerland depended on France and Italy for foodstuffs and on Germany for fuel.⁸¹

That same day the normally reserved lower house of Parliament cheered Federal President Etter when he warned that Switzerland was ready to resist any invasion. Europe had recognized Swiss neutrality in the Treaty of Vienna of 1815 only “on condition we defend it ourselves.” Pointing out that the army was “entirely mobilized on the first day of this war,”⁸² Etter added that if “war extends to our country, it will find us ready—men, women, soldiers, civilians, old and young, all of whom swear to give their life to their country, preferring death rather than slavery.”⁸³

The next day, September 22, Swiss anti-aircraft batteries fired on two or more German planes flying over Schaffhausen, Switzerland’s northernmost canton, and also fired at two French warplanes near Basel.⁸⁴

As reported from Paris on September 23, the French anticipated German flanking movements over and below the Maginot Line via Belgium and Switzerland. The Swiss mountains would be difficult to pass through, but one possible route included the Basel Gap, where Germany, France and Switzerland meet. Since Napoleon’s fall and the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1815, France had honored its pledge not to build fortifications within three leagues (nine miles) of Basel. While the Maginot Line did not reach the Swiss border,

the gap was protected by works set up further west, including the strongly fortified position of Belfort.⁸⁵

Another possible invasion route was through Switzerland's Aare Valley, located east of the Jura Mountains. German military writers had frequently spoken of a blitzkrieg through the Aare Valley, beginning by crossing the Rhine over the nineteen bridges between Basel and Schaffhausen and thrusting southwest to Geneva and into France.⁸⁶

It was reported on September 25 that a thousand veteran sharpshooters, all over 60, asked General Guisan to accept them in the army for auxiliary service. The General thankfully wired the group that they could do as they desired. Leaders of the sharpshooters' organization declared that almost all of their 3,000 members would serve if Switzerland were attacked.⁸⁷

A large map published in the *New York Times* on October 1 illustrated possible German invasion routes through the neutral states of the Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland. The Dutch had a unique military strategy involving the flooding of the lowlands, which would turn them into swamps, and the placement of fortifications behind the inundated areas.⁸⁸ Their plan, however, would not be executed when the Germans attacked.

The *Times* map showed invasion routes under France's Maginot Line at the Basel Gap, and another route southwest into Switzerland under the Jura and then past Geneva toward Lyons in France. While the Swiss had no Maginot Line, the country was filled with field fortifications, artillery positions, tank traps, hidden concrete-covered trenches and machine-gun nests. Bridges were mined and road obstacles were in place.⁸⁹

As the French and Germans engaged in artillery duels on the Rhine-Moselle front, German troops massed near the Swiss frontier between Basel and Schaffhausen and also at Vorarlberg. On October 3, all Swiss army leaves were canceled and fortifications were strengthened.⁹⁰

Operations Order No. 2, which General Guisan issued on October 4, 1939, described critical positions in the north that must be held, and then asserted that the fight would be to the death:

At the border and between the border and army position, the border troops and advance guard persistently delay the advance of the enemy. The garrisons at the border and between the border and the works and positions making up the

defensive front *continue resistance up to the last cartridge, even if they find themselves completely alone.*⁹¹

The order also provided that obstacles of all types and destruction of bridges would slow down the advance of the aggressor.⁹²

This astonishing order—that the Swiss militiaman *must* fire every cartridge and, implicitly, fight to the death without surrender—was in sharp contrast to the policies of other European countries, which surrendered to Hitler either with a command that their troops not resist, or after a short fight.

The October 4 plan of General Guisan and General Staff Chief Labhart was to mass infantry along a line of rivers, lakes, and mountains parallel to Germany. Modern artillery was in short supply, so nineteenth-century 84mm and 120mm pieces were put in place.⁹³ Most importantly, the individual marksman with his rifle was the key element. There was no reserve—it would be a fight to the finish.⁹⁴

In front of the massed riflemen was a chain of blockhouses and forts built between 1934 and 1939, with machine guns, anti-tank obstacles, minefields, and artillery. This chain ran through the Alps in the south and east, along the Rhine River and through the Jura Mountains toward Geneva. The main line of resistance, utilizing the lakes and mountains as natural barriers, would stop the German panzers.⁹⁵

Britain and France had declared war on Germany, but, unprepared, they failed to open an aggressive front. Their window of opportunity to attack while the bulk of the Wehrmacht was occupied in Poland closed by the end of September. After the Polish capitulation the major elements of the fully mobilized German Army were quickly moved to the west. Britain at this time had only 158,000 troops in France.⁹⁶ By October 10, Hitler was pushing for an offensive against the unprepared Allies, although his cooler-headed generals advised him that, in view of the lateness of the year, it would be better to wait until spring.⁹⁷

British military leaders told newspaper correspondents in London on October 20 that the Allies foresaw a German offensive on the Western Front supported by 1,500,000 troops. They anticipated that the Germans might attack through Belgium, the Netherlands or possibly Switzerland in order to avoid a frontal assault on the Maginot Line.⁹⁸

American war correspondent William Shirer, then stationed in Berlin, wrote in his diary after returning from a visit to Switzerland: “The country has one tenth of its population under arms; more than any other country in the world. . . . They’re ready to fight to defend their way of life.” He had asked a Swiss businessman on the train “whether he wouldn’t prefer peace at any price (business is ruined in a Switzerland completely surrounded by belligerents and with every able-bodied man in the army) so that he could make money again.” The Swiss replied: “Not the kind of peace that Hitler offers.” When the train crossed the Rhine from Switzerland into Germany, Shirer described the eerie sight: “the same unreal front. Soldiers on both sides looking but not shooting.”⁹⁹

Despite the extremely dangerous situation, the French decided that the deteriorating weather would suffice to stall the Germans, and on October 29 demobilized 100,000 men. On the same day, the Swiss increased their military preparations. The General Staff shifted troops to meet a new situation created by the concentration of German forces between Constance and Munich and around Freiburg. Agricultural leaves for Swiss peasant soldiers were canceled, and troops on leave were recalled to the Basel area. Then early snows arrived to assist the Swiss defenses. Three to four feet of snow blocked most Alpine passes, and the Jura highlands, which extended into France, became impassable.¹⁰⁰

The Germans continued to mass troops along all borders with Switzerland, from the region near France all the way to the Tyrol by Italy.¹⁰¹ Sixty to a hundred Wehrmacht divisions were reported to be concentrated along the Western Front. Switzerland continued to be discussed as an invasion route, but Allied observers believed that the Swiss Army could make a successful defense.¹⁰²

At the recommendation of General Guisan, on November 10 the Federal Council called up an unannounced number of troops. Since the army’s full mobilization at the beginning of the war, some units had been released and various leaves approved, always with the understanding that the troops would be recalled immediately if the army was needed at full strength. The next day, the Federal Council empowered General Guisan to call all able-bodied men whenever he decided that the defense of the nation required it. Previously, orders for full mobilization required the government’s approval before they could be issued.¹⁰³

Meanwhile, the Führer narrowly escaped an assassination attempt which

might have spared the world what was to come. Georg Elser, a private citizen, placed a bomb at the Bürgerbräukeller in Munich on November 8, but Hitler finished his speech early and left before the explosion. Elser was apprehended while attempting to escape over the Swiss border.¹⁰⁴ The German press trumpeted that Elser's tracks led to Switzerland, alarming the Swiss of a possible retaliatory action by the Nazis. These polemics coincided with the further build-up of German troops in southern Germany and the Black Forest.¹⁰⁵

"Something's in the wind," wrote William Shirer from Berlin. "Party gossip about a mass air attack on England. A drive through Holland and Belgium. Or one through Switzerland."¹⁰⁶

On November 20, Hitler told his generals that they had little to fear from the United States, because it was neutral, and that "I shall attack France and England at the most favorable and earliest moment. Breach of the neutrality of Belgium and Holland is of no importance."¹⁰⁷

Nor, to Hitler, was that of Switzerland. There had been repeated violations of Swiss neutrality by German aircraft and anti-aircraft fire, which had wounded Swiss border residents. German planes had even staged a "pamphlet bombing" over Switzerland, dropping propaganda leaflets. German Minister Otto Köcher apologized for these events.¹⁰⁸

In November, the French High Command warned General Guisan that they anticipated a German attack proceeding through Switzerland. When the French brought up troops near Basel, Guisan feared that the French intended to invade first. He warned them that the Swiss would resist invasion by *any* party. Guisan soon learned from Swiss intelligence that Hitler had postponed the offensive.¹⁰⁹

In the north, the Soviet Union attacked Finland on November 30, 1939, and Hitler officially approved of the deed, although his true feelings were doubtless more complex.¹¹⁰ The Swiss were encouraged by the resistance of the Finns from the Mannerheim Line and their forests against Russian armored attacks.¹¹¹ The Finns demonstrated that a small population could, in fact, successfully resist a strong aggressor.¹¹² Swiss journalist August Lindt, who would later advocate radical measures for Swiss resistance, reported on the action at the Finnish front.¹¹³ Like the Swiss, the Finns were known as a nation of riflemen and skiers.

Through the winter of 1939–40, the period known, except in Finland, as the

“Phony War,” Swiss defenders dug into what became known as the “Army Position.” The Army Position anticipated resistance in the north from the Austrian border to an area near the Maginot Line. If defeated there, the Swiss forces would retreat south into the Alps for their last stand.¹¹⁴ From the *Réduit National* (literally, the “National Redoubt”) or mountain fortress, centered on the St. Gotthard massif, the Swiss could control the transportation routes across the Alps.¹¹⁵

On December 28, General Guisan ordered the formation of a new army corps to be ready before the border foothills were cleared of snow in the spring. This would be the fourth corps, and it would consist of 100,000 men under the command of Colonel Labhart. As Chief of the General Staff, Labhart had authored the reorganization, which, along with the extended eligibility for service from 48 to 60 years, had increased the size of the Swiss militia to 600,000. Virtually everyone was considered fit to serve—even the blind, who listened for planes in anti-aircraft units.¹¹⁶

As 1939 ended, *Contemporary Review* recalled Machiavelli’s statement, “the Swiss are most armed and most free,” along with Napoleon’s dictum, “Nature destined Switzerland to become a League of States; no wise man would attempt to conquer it.”¹¹⁷ During that winter, many French, Britons and even Germans retained hope that Europe could still be spared a major conflagration on the level of 1914–18. To the Swiss, however, the point was moot. If the Allies and the Reich did call off their war, unallied Switzerland would remain as much threatened from the Nazi behemoth as ever.

Switzerland had the largest percentage of soldiers in the world compared to overall population—600,000 soldiers in a country of 4 million. That number would continue to grow in the years to come. Just as important, and heard everywhere inside Switzerland, was the slogan *geistige Landesverteidigung*, the concept best expressed in English as “spiritual national defense.”¹¹⁸ Evoking the nation’s proud heritage of freedom and independence, and the utter determination of the average Swiss to defend his homeland, the term became a rallying cry for the nation as it faced the most powerful threat in its history.

Chapter 4

Spring 1940

All Fall But One

NEW YEAR'S DAY, NORMALLY A HOLIDAY OF HOPE AND CELEBRATION, was in 1940 an occasion for the people of Europe to wonder what horrors awaited them. Nazi Germany no longer disguised its aggressive designs in diplomatic language, historical rationales or covert intimidation. After the invasion of Poland, questions of national supremacy were referred to the battlefield. During the winter, German U-boats had slid out into the Atlantic to wreak their havoc in the cold seas. The British were pouring strength into the continent to support the defense of France. The French continued to work on their Maginot Line, correctly assuming the enemy would not dare a frontal assault. The German General Staff, in secret as always, laid out its specific plans for conquest. The question on the minds of the Allies at this point was when the Nazis would strike next, and where.

In London, *The Times* quoted military analysts who predicted that if the Germans attempted to outflank the Maginot Line through Switzerland, their thrust would not succeed. An attack through the former Austrian border, between Ragaz and the eastern end of Lake Constance, would require crossing the Rhine, which was protected by forts and pillboxes. The next logical target would be Appenzell and St. Gallen, mountainous cantons with few roads, where small forces might pin down a more numerous enemy. If the invaders made it to the open regions east of Zurich, they would be confronted by Lake Zurich and the Limmat River, the banks of which were fortified.¹

If the Wehrmacht made it past these obstacles, it would find itself at the Swiss Plateau, which extends 100 miles southwest to the Lake of Geneva. Only 40 miles at its maximum width, the hilly area containing forests and rivers (the Reuss, the Aare and the Sarine) was flanked by two mountain ranges: the Alps on the south and the Jura on the north. A large army might squeeze through, but without room for maneuver and exposed along the way to Swiss troops who

would fight from the Jura and the Alps as well as from the fortifications along the rivers. If the invaders reached Lake Geneva, French forces would be waiting at the fortifications on the Haute Savoie and in the Jura Mountains.²

Confronting the Germans would be a 600,000-man-strong Swiss Army, said *The Times*, “well armed and so abundantly equipped with machine guns, infantry guns and other automatic weapons that it possesses the highest relative firing power on the Continent.” The French would back up the Swiss troops.³

By early 1940, the Swiss could mobilize 650,000 men on short notice, a number that would continue to rise in succeeding years.⁴ The German General Staff estimated that it would take forty days to cross Switzerland and that “it would be necessary to oppose five Germans to one Swiss to achieve that result.”⁵ It was common knowledge that the Swiss would mount a stubborn defense. *The Times* reported: “All able-bodied men are individually trained to be defenders of their native mountains. Like the Finns, they are a nation of marksmen and of skiers.”⁶

The “Winter War” in Finland demonstrated that a small, armed country could defend itself against superior numbers. The Finns learned their shooting skills from the Swiss, who now had much to learn from the Finns. In Switzerland, large numbers of women began to practice marksmanship skills.⁷

When the Military Department found it necessary to restrict the issuance of practice ammunition to 24 cartridges per civilian shooter, the Swiss Shooting Federation expressed concern. The campaigns in Poland and Finland had devoured enormous amounts of ammunition. However, as noted at that time by National Councillor Valloton in a meeting of the Swiss Parliament, the value of the Finnish Army’s shooting effectiveness consisted not in mass fire but in single shots. Finnish army commander General Field Marshal von Mannerheim asserted in an interview: “Rifle shooting has played an important role in this war. Our best shooters had special tasks. Look after shooting in Switzerland!”⁸ Rudolf Minger, head of the Swiss Military Department, stated:

We learn from the fate of the Finnish, a small but heroic people. . . . A military mission should be sent to Finland. Concerning shooting in Switzerland, I can assure you we stand on the ground that individual shooting is very important. Everything is adjusted to it.⁹

“The offensive seems imminent,” wrote correspondent William Shirer on March 1. “From what I saw in the Netherlands, the Dutch will be easy pickings for the Germans. Their army is miserable. Their famous defensive waterline is of doubtful worth.” (Dutch military plans called for flooding areas to bog down tanks, not anticipating air attacks and paratroopers.) By contrast, Shirer continued, “Switzerland will be tougher to crack, and I doubt if the Germans will try.”¹⁰

In deepest winter, when an invasion was unlikely, many Swiss soldiers had been released to go back to their homes and jobs. On March 4, however, Switzerland advanced a scheduled remobilization. Bavarian and Austrian formations were moving into areas opposite the Swiss frontier from the Rhine to Lake Constance.¹¹ Additional mobilization orders were issued as increased German troop concentrations were reported. Switzerland called up 400,000 men in response to the build-up.¹²

Meanwhile, the Swiss press expressed skepticism regarding both Anglo-French and Nazi professions of goodwill toward neutrals, although Switzerland was regarded as distinctly sympathetic to the Allies.¹³ Swiss papers also continued to provide their own analyses of German public opinion.

For instance, the *Basler Nachrichten* (*Basel Evening News*) opined on February 9 that Germans blamed the Nazis for their suffering.¹⁴ Hitler had lost popularity because he exposed Germany to armed conflict.¹⁵ In Bavaria, the paper argued, anti-Nazi sentiment was engendered by traditional animosity toward the Prussian mentality: “All this does not imply that Germany is ready for a revolution. Civilians are disarmed, and so powerless.” Some Germans thought Germany would profit from defeat, which would destroy Nazism and Prussian militarism, while others thought victory would generate a military dictatorship and then a monarchist restoration. Germans longed for, it was asserted, the return of legality, freedom and human dignity.¹⁶ The ongoing analysis in the uncensored Swiss press of German domestic sentiment, accurate or not, was closely followed by the Nazi leadership in Berlin, Goebbels in particular.

Propaganda Minister Goebbels demanded that the press and even the public opinion of neutrals must be truly “neutral”—in other words, never critical of National Socialism. The Nazi press asserted that Switzerland granted her citizens a license to abuse Germany. Newspapers in major German cities joined in

waging the campaign of criticism against Switzerland. Elizabeth Wiskemann, in *Fortnightly* magazine, commented: “So systematic has the German press campaign been that it has appeared not altogether unlike the journalistic artillery-fire which is apt to precede a Nazi invasion.”¹⁷

Nazi-Soviet cooperation continued during 1939–40 as Germany traded manufactured goods for foodstuffs and raw materials from Russia.¹⁸ The Germans were also heavily dependent on the import of iron ore from Sweden. In Finland, the Soviet Union continued to take heavy losses as its attacking armies flailed helplessly in the thick northern forests, but during February they finally breached the Mannerheim Line in the south, presenting the Finns with a crisis. In one of the great ironies of the war, the Allies in response prepared an expeditionary force of British, French and Polish troops to aid Finland, a future German ally, in its war against Germany’s future antagonist, the Soviet Union. The Royal Navy prepared to transport troops to Norway, from which point they would march to support the Finns. On March 6, however, Finland sued for peace with Russia and on the 12th agreed to Russia’s terms, the most important of which was the handover of the Karelian isthmus north of Leningrad.¹⁹ Against long odds, the Finns had held out heroically since November 1939.

While the Allied troops earmarked for Finland awaited new orders, Norway now became the focus of attention. The German Navy had already recommended to Hitler that he seize the Norwegian coast, if only to deny the use of its many excellent harbors to the British, who had already violated Norway’s territorial waters in search of German ships. Hitler was reluctant, but after the Allies assembled their expeditionary force and collected its naval transport, he decided there was no other choice. Aside from the advantages the Norwegian coast would offer the German Navy, a potential Allied occupation of Norway would have cut off the Reich’s supply of iron. To facilitate the operation against Norway, and to strengthen Germany’s strategic supply line to Sweden, the Nazis would also occupy Denmark.

At the end of March, a Swiss spy with connections to Hitler’s headquarters warned Colonel Roger Masson, Swiss Intelligence Chief, that Germany would attack Denmark and Norway in April. This information was leaked to the Allied Chiefs of Staff, who discounted it.²⁰ Despite further warnings from dissident German diplomats and military officers, and obvious German troop movements, the governments of Denmark and Norway failed to mobilize and did nothing to prepare for invasion.²¹

On April 9, 1940, at 4:20 A.M. in Denmark and at 5:20 A.M. in Norway, German diplomats gave the ultimatum to these two countries that they agree to become German protectorates. They were told that they needed protection from impending Anglo-French occupation.²² From Copenhagen, a German diplomat telegraphed Foreign Minister Ribbentrop at 8:34 A.M. that Denmark acceded. However, the German diplomat in Oslo reported that Norway would defend herself.

In Denmark, a flat land with no mountain sanctuaries, General and Commander-in-Chief W.W. Pryor recommended resistance. King Christian X and Premier Thorvald Stauning rejected his advice, just as a day earlier they had rejected the General's plea for mobilization. The Navy could have successfully bombarded and possibly sunk passing German ships but did nothing.²³ The King, backed by the government, then capitulated and prohibited any resistance. There was minor fighting, nevertheless. Thirteen Danes were killed.²⁴

At 2:00 P.M., Wehrmacht General Kurt Himer visited the King, who declared that he and the Danish government would work to keep order and to eliminate friction between German troops and Danes. The King's only request was to keep his bodyguard. General Himer answered that "the Führer would doubtless permit him to retain them." The King was relieved, and told the General what a magnificent military operation the Germans had conducted. Denmark became a model state in the Nazis' New Order, until the tide of war changed and resistance was sparked.²⁵

This could not have happened in Switzerland, which had no king and no central authority to negotiate the surrender of the army or the nation. Denmark had a very small army in 1939, numbering only 6,600 men. By 1940, the number had increased to 30,000, but that figure was still hopelessly inadequate.²⁶

By contrast, in Norway the German invaders encountered heroic resistance. Coastal defense forces opened fire, sinking the ship that was transporting the would-be Nazi occupation authorities. Oslo and other major cities fell within a couple of days, but resistance continued and the government fled to the mountains in the north. Vidkun Quisling named himself head of the government, prompting rebellion within the populace.²⁷

Norway had a "king," Haakon VII, but he was elected to his position by the people. Ironically, his brother was Christian X, King of Denmark, who had just surrendered to the Nazis. German Minister Curt Bräuer met with King Haakon

to persuade him to surrender as his brother had done the day before. The King refused, as did the rest of the government. The British Royal Navy was already present in force off the coast and would inflict serious losses on German ships. Allied troops who had been readied earlier for intervention in Finland were disembarking at key points to assist in the Norwegian defense. The German minister was told that “resistance will continue as long as possible.” The three million people of Norway were instructed by a radio broadcast from the King and political leaders to fight the invaders.²⁸

They did so bravely. Unfortunately, unlike the Swiss, the Norwegians were not well armed, nor were they well trained in martial skills. It was reported on April 17 from Norway’s southern front between Kongsvinger and the Swedish frontier that, “owing to a complete lack of arms, ammunition, and organization, the Norwegians have not been able to put up a serious fight.”²⁹ Indeed, following World War I, Norway had pursued disarmament and social programs rather than defense, and was perceived as an easy prey. Though she shared Switzerland’s neutrality, Norway never had the type of citizens army that the Swiss could muster.³⁰ In 1940, her army consisted of only 13,000 soldiers.

After they had reduced Norwegian coastal defenses, the German invaders fought their most difficult battles against the British and French contingents sent to aid in the defense of Norway. However, the Wehrmacht, reinforced with men and supplies flown in on transport aircraft, won a series of sharp clashes. As the Germans consolidated their grip on the country, the last Allied troops were evacuated from Norway in May to help stave off the even larger disaster looming in France.

While the poor training of the small Norwegian Army prevented serious resistance (the King had been evacuated to England where he maintained a government in exile), guerrilla war in the mountains waged by small groups with sharpshooting skills had an effect. Wehrmacht General Eduard Dietl conceded that the Norwegians “fought with excellence, although one clearly noticed their defective training. But the Norwegians were excellent marksmen, and that plays the key role in a war of this type!”³¹ While the Norwegian resistance never became very active, later in the war enough arms to equip 35,000 men were smuggled in on British fishing boat runs.³²

Contrasting reactions of the various neutral countries produced vastly different results. While Denmark had only 30,000 men under arms and Norway an even more meager 13,000, Switzerland could muster 650,000 militiamen

within a day or two. Hundreds of thousands more Swiss had arms at home. Also, Switzerland had undertaken enormous efforts to build a network of fortifications, obstacles and mines. Denmark and Norway had done little.

Still, the Norwegian campaign caused uneasiness in Swiss military circles. The heroic fight of the Finns against the Soviet Union, which incurred losses of 200,000 killed, had created some confidence that Swiss arms could perform at least as well against a numerically superior invader. But the Germans in Norway displayed far more military skill and flexibility than had the Russians against Finland. And Germany, not Russia, was the foreign threat the Swiss would have to confront.

In Poland in 1939, as in nearly all the battles of the Great War, German military prowess had been demonstrated with massed armies and firepower. These were the tactics the Swiss anticipated, for which their trained marksmen and difficult terrain, backed by their mountain positions, would be an antidote. In Norway, however, for the first time in history, air transport had played a major role in an offensive, placing Nazi forces in key positions behind and among the defenses. Further, the Germans had enjoyed no numerical superiority in the initial stages of the campaign but nevertheless had won. Dietl's mountain troops at Narvik had numbered only 4,500 against the Allies' 25,000, until the British, French and Poles evacuated. Though uncowed, the Swiss knew that a German attack on the Swiss Alps and the Jura, employing paratroops, gliders, specially trained mountain divisions and airpower, would be formidable.

In the following months, fearing attack, Sweden allowed the Nazis to transport troops over its soil to Norway. It would later allow the transport across its neutral territory of an entire German army division, to be used in the attack on the Soviet Union.³³

The Swiss press denounced Germany's aggression against Denmark and Norway, leading Goebbels to rant in his diary that the Swiss "are either bought or Jewish."³⁴ Rumors spread that Germany was preparing to attack Switzerland, the Netherlands and Belgium. The Swiss military was prepared for an attack.³⁵ Fifteen Wehrmacht divisions had returned to their positions just north of Switzerland's frontier, where they had been stationed before being withdrawn when Germany invaded Scandinavia.³⁶

On April 18, 1940, the Federal Council and General Guisan issued joint orders for the "general mobilization of the entire army for resistance."³⁷ Reflecting on the lessons learned from the Polish and Norwegian experiences,

they also issued, in an order signed by Federal President Pilet-Golaz and General Guisan, “directions concerning the conduct of the soldiers not under arms in event of attack.”³⁸ Intended also as a warning to foreign countries, this remarkable document was plastered on walls all over the country. The joint order began by describing how the population would be informed of an invasion:

With combat activity at the border or in neighboring countries, there will be ordered the “*war-mobilization in event of attack.*” The proclamation will be communicated through poster, radio, courier, town crier, storm bells, and the dropping of leaflets from airplanes.³⁹

The joint order prescribed the action to take against surprise attack and fifth column subversion:

All soldiers and those with them are to attack with ruthlessness parachutists, airborne infantry and saboteurs. Where no officers and noncommissioned officers are present, each soldier acts under exertion of all powers of his own initiative.⁴⁰

The distinctive Swiss command for the individual soldier to act on his own initiative is an ancient and deeply rooted Swiss resistance tradition which evidenced unique confidence in the ordinary man.⁴¹ Under no condition, the order continued, would any surrender be forthcoming, and any pretense of a surrender must be ignored:

If by radio, leaflets or other media any information is transmitted doubting the will of the Federal Council or of the Army High Command to resist an attacker, this information must be regarded as lies of enemy propaganda. Our country will resist aggression with all means in its power and to the bitter end.⁴²

This astonishing order was broadcast by radio and published in the international press.⁴³ The *New York Times* entitled its report “Swiss Alert for Invasion by Hoax,” and included the subtitle “People Told to Ignore Rumors Questioning Government’s Will to Resist.”⁴⁴ Noting that under the order “the

entire nation would be mobilized in event of an invasion,” the report continued that mobilization upon the announcement of an invasion would be “instantaneous for all men with weapons in their home who are not already in service.”⁴⁵

In Switzerland, there would be no surrender. Every man had orders to fight to the death. And every man was trained with and possessed a rifle. This was the only radically democratic system of national defense in Europe. The Nazis were well aware that invasion meant fighting on every inch of ground (much of which was vertical) in every city and village, in every pasture and mountainside.

Over fifty years later, former Swiss machine-gunner Willi Gautschi remembered the order as natural and ordinary. Any officers present would take charge, but, if not, soldiers would use their own initiative. They kept 48 cartridges at home and had six more loaded in the rifle when on duty. The rifles in the home were visible and easy to operate, and Swiss women would not have hesitated to use them in event of an invasion if the man was not present. While women’s auxiliaries were not armed, many women would have fought in the event of an invasion.⁴⁶

The German minister in Bern, Otto Köcher, reported to the Foreign Ministry in Berlin that the April 18 order “for mobilization in case of a surprise attack . . . is addressed not only to the soldiers, but to the entire population.” He indicated that the Swiss were “deeply shocked by Germany’s military operations in Denmark and Norway,” that “the Norwegian Major Quisling has become a symbol here of internal corruption and treason” and that “spies and traitors have been suspected everywhere in this country.” The Swiss press, he added, was advocating replacement of the Hague Convention on land warfare with “a Swiss national statute on land warfare, which would legally oppose total war with total defense, in which the civilian population would be obliged to take part.” In the citizens army, the German minister noted, junior officers had organized themselves so that if, “in an invasion, a commanding officer showed signs of giving way before overwhelming enemy forces, these officers have mutually pledged themselves to shoot such a commander on the spot.”⁴⁷

The German minister was privy to good intelligence, although much of it could be found by reading the strongest pro-defense newspapers, such as that of the quasi-official SSV shooting federation. Warning of a fifth column and quoting from the no-surrender order, the SSV envisioned a true people’s war with universal participation:

In every Swiss house is a rifle, and every village, even the small villages, has a shooting association. . . . Our marksmen know how to shoot. . . . They want to defend their homes. They have the necessary weapons, if they can get the ammunition. Give our shooters who are in the country the opportunity to defend the nation.⁴⁸

Fearing a paratroop attack, the SSV requested the distribution of more ammunition and the creation of local defense (*Ortswehr*) units in all communities, composed of old men, young boys and women.⁴⁹ Having learned of the Nazi tactics in Denmark and Norway, the SSV also demanded that any Nazis in the Swiss officer corps be eliminated and replaced by those with a pure Swiss spirit, and that, for total resistance, “the weapon of the civilian must also be loaded.” As for traitors in the army, as was seen in Norway, “in our country, we must know where the first shots are to be fired”—that is, at any Swiss traitors.⁵⁰

General Guisan became the symbol of the *Widerstandsgeist*, the resistance spirit.⁵¹ He enjoyed this status because he embodied the determination to resist to the last drop of blood.

The Swiss General Staff announced on April 23 that many Swiss were receiving requests from abroad for various maps and photographs of the country. It forbade compliance and warned of whisper campaigns organized to promote Nazi propaganda, the purpose of which was to divide the Swiss people and encourage defeatism. Rumors were circulated that many Swiss army officers admired the Reich and would assist the Germans in event of an invasion; these stories were spread by Germans under the direction of the German Legation in Bern, which had a staff of over 200, and by fifth columnists.⁵²

The Nazis organized a propaganda campaign attacking the Swiss as being pro-Allies and characterizing the Swiss press as a tool of the Jews. Swiss Intelligence Chief Roger Masson worried that the anti-Nazism of the Swiss press would in itself provoke a German invasion.⁵³ Colonel Rudolf Fueter, head of the military’s press and radio section, countered that the press must defend democracy and independent thought, and that it was “the duty of our press to reject the domestic and foreign policies of the National Socialists clearly and forcefully.”⁵⁴

In anticipation of a German offensive against France through Switzerland,

General Guisan entered into secret defensive plans with the French. Compromising neutrality was extremely risky, because the Nazis could use the fact as a pretext to attack. The Swiss, however, saw such planning as consistent with neutrality. In fact, Defense Minister Minger had previously encouraged Guisan to discuss mutual defense with French military leaders.⁵⁵ These prewar understandings now developed into full-scale plans in which, only if requested by the Swiss, French troops would enter Switzerland and assist in fighting the Germans.⁵⁶

Neutrality ends when a country is attacked, but defense preparations must precede that contingency. Thus, it did not violate the common international understanding of neutrality for Switzerland to make plans for French assistance in the event of a German invasion. A similar agreement need not have been made with Germany, because no French invasion was anticipated.

In April, a Swiss military mission visited the Maginot Line and returned depressed about the lack of preparations of the French, the only major power left on the continent not allied, or otherwise cooperating, with Germany. Once the Germans attacked the French and won, the invasion of Switzerland seemed inevitable.⁵⁷

In the stillness before the storm, a writer for the British *Fortnightly* observed the centuries-old democratic *Landsgemeinde* assemblies taking place in the Swiss countryside. She visited “the assembly of sworded freemen” in Trogen, Appenzell canton, and the citizens’ meeting in Glarus canton. “All pledged themselves afresh to protect their liberty and their laws to the death,” she wrote.⁵⁸ While German troops seemed poised for invasion, “it was evident that the people of Appenzell and Glarus were indulging in quiet defiance of military despotism.”⁵⁹

On May 10, 1940, the German offensive against France was launched in the north, the Germans choosing to disregard the military option of flanking the Maginot Line through Switzerland. On countless occasions, Hitler had promised to respect the rights of the neutral countries. Belgium and the Netherlands had nevertheless been warned of the coming invasion by German Major-General Hans Oster, an anti-Hitler plotter. The Belgians mobilized while the Dutch, who had not taken part in the Great War, still trusted that their neutrality would be respected.⁶⁰ On May 10, Ribbentrop in Berlin summoned diplomats of Belgium and the Netherlands and informed them that German troops would be moving in

to safeguard those countries from an Anglo-French attack. He demanded a guarantee that no resistance would follow. The same message was delivered in Brussels and at The Hague.⁶¹ At dawn that same day, attacks were launched against those countries and also against France.

Though Switzerland escaped becoming the invasion route to France, her territory nevertheless remained under threat. Before daybreak on May 10, Swiss anti-aircraft guns drove away a German bomber that had flown over Basel. A squadron of twenty Luftwaffe planes roared over that city to engage French fighters over the region of Delémont in the west as Swiss anti-aircraft guns blazed away. Twenty-seven bombs were dropped by the Luftwaffe on northern Switzerland, damaging a railway.⁶²

A Swiss squadron of pursuit planes engaged the Luftwaffe, and a Swiss Me-109 from Olten shot down a German Heinkel-111 twin-engine bomber that had flown near Solothurn in the region of Brugg in northeastern Switzerland.⁶³ This was the first of several instances in which the Swiss used aircraft purchased from Germany to shoot down Luftwaffe planes.

A German aircraft believed to be equipped with cameras flew low over the St. Gallen region in eastern Switzerland, the location of new forts on the “Winkelried Line” (named for the hero of the medieval Battle of Sempach) and was driven off by Swiss fighter fire.⁶⁴ The Swiss already had 300,000 soldiers in the Winkelried Line facing Germany, and large forces of crack frontier troops rushed to reinforce them. A general mobilization, beginning at dawn the next day (the 11th), was ordered. The communiqué stated that the army was ready “for any eventuality . . . to face any menace from whatever side it may come.”⁶⁵ It would take the Swiss only one day to mobilize and one more day to get into position.⁶⁶

“The Swiss were calling up every available male,” wrote William Shirer. “When will it be Switzerland’s turn?”⁶⁷ The question became *when*, not *whether*, the Wehrmacht would attack the Alpine republic.

Before and during the Wehrmacht attack on Belgium, the Netherlands and France on May 10, deception maneuvers created the impression that German forces in the Black Forest would also execute an “Operation South” by striking into Switzerland to bypass the Maginot Line. The ploy operated like a gigantic movie set: during the day, German troops would march toward the Swiss border; at night, they would move back. The next day, the same troops would march

toward Switzerland again, giving the impression, day after day, that a gigantic army was moving south. French General Maurice Gamelin thought 30 elite units would encircle his right wing, when in reality there were only 13 German units in the area, mostly reserves. Thus 19 French divisions were uselessly diverted to the south while the Germans attacked in the north.⁶⁸

A personal account of these events was related to the author by Ernst Leisi, who had been a young rifleman in Company I, 74th Battalion, stationed with frontier troops near Lake Constance. Of the 200 men in his company, Leisi believed there was not a single man with Nazi sympathies. One day a soldier came looking pale holding a telegram. German landing craft were preparing on the other side of Lake Constance, and troops were moving toward Switzerland. Parachutists were expected. German troops would march with great noise south, and would then return north at night. This ruse lasted eight days and fooled both the French and the Swiss. The Germans were so meticulous that they would attack on the hour—or at least so the Swiss thought. According to Leisi, the Swiss troops were full of anxiety every time the hour struck.⁶⁹

On May 13, news sources reported that the Swiss were keeping a steady armed watch against any move by the Germans, who had heavy concentrations in the southern part of the Black Forest.⁷⁰ The Swiss suspected that the German intention was to strike between Basel and Lake Constance toward the Rhône Valley of France, and that such a move might bring Italy into the war.⁷¹ Swiss fighters patrolled the frontier skies with orders to shoot down any belligerents who ignored a first warning.⁷²

By now, some 700,000 soldiers between the ages of 20 and 60—nearly 20% of the Swiss population—were mobilized. Boy scouts and aged women were posted in rear areas for support duties.⁷³ Hundreds of families were fleeing from Basel, which was within rifle shot of both the German Westwall and the French Maginot forts.⁷⁴

The same day, it was reported that Mussolini was planning to invade Ticino, Switzerland's Italian-speaking canton on the southern slopes of the Alps.⁷⁵ Italian troops were massed at the border. If the assault had taken place, the Swiss planned to retire to the main Alpine passes, from where they could resist indefinitely against large forces with machine guns and mountain artillery.⁷⁶ The Swiss were concerned that in case of an Italian attack, Germany would seize

the Basel area, creating a diversion at the southern end of the Maginot Line. Even while battling Belgium and Holland, the Germans had sufficient troops to thrust through Switzerland between the Jura and the Alps, all the way to Lake Geneva.⁷⁷ Assuming the Wehrmacht was able to overcome initial Swiss resistance, Germany would then occupy the passes through the Jura into France while the Italian army pursued its own objectives in the south. With Hitler being the primary threat, the argument ran, the Allies would not add to their troubles by declaring war on Italy.⁷⁸

On May 13, the same day these reports appeared, and as German panzers and paratroopers battled in Holland, Hitler issued a secret directive that noted “the power of resistance of the Dutch Army has proven to be stronger than was anticipated.” Savage bombing strikes were ordered, leading to the destruction of the center of Rotterdam with heavy civilian casualties. The city surrendered, soon to be followed by the entire Dutch Army. The Queen and the government escaped to London. On May 14, just five days after the German attack, Dutch Commander-in-Chief H.G. Winkelmann ordered the troops to surrender their arms. He signed the capitulation the next day.⁷⁹

Also on that day, the real German plan was revealed. Despite the feints to the south, and the heavy engagements to the north, the main offensive strength of the Wehrmacht—seven panzer divisions under Guderian, Reinhardt and Rommel—had been cutting through Belgian and French frontier units in the Ardennes Forest to emerge at the Meuse River near Sedan in France. The Germans forced a crossing, and the panzers began their drive toward the English Channel. The French had no strategic reserve.⁸⁰

With the battle for France approaching its climax, the Swiss government ordered that armed local units, composed of men not liable for military service, make themselves ready to protect rear areas in case of paratrooper assaults or German breakthroughs.⁸¹ Wehrmacht artillery and motorized units, meanwhile, were being massed across from Schaffhausen on the Rhine and by sundown appeared ready to attack Switzerland. The Swiss Army worked feverishly on the Winkelried Line fortifications. The front page of the *New York Times* announced: “Thousands of women, boys and aged men volunteered for ‘home-guard’ duty and received rifles and forty cartridges each.”⁸² The Swiss regular army was estimated to include 600,000 men and the home guards 200,000.⁸³ That evening, fear of invasion swept the country. Many were leaving Zurich;

even the American Consul fled Basel.⁸⁴

With hindsight, we see that France was defeated and Britain expelled from the continent as the result of one massive operation, culminating in the panzer dash to the Channel. However, at that time it was inconceivable that the war would not involve other thrusts, fronts or flanking campaigns. The Seventh German Army was headquartered in Freiburg, just thirty miles from the Swiss border and stood in readiness.⁸⁵ German divisions were massed at the Rhine, and the attack on Switzerland was expected early on May 15.⁸⁶

On that May 15, when the German armor went over the Meuse and routed the French at Sedan, General Guisan issued yet another remarkable command to the army. The latest war news demonstrated, he declared, that had the soldiers (he meant the French) resolved to hold fast, they could have stopped hostile advances. Instead, defections allowed the enemy to penetrate through gaps, which quickly widened. Guisan thus recalled the high duty of the individual soldier to resist at his position. The General continued:

Everywhere, where the order is to hold, it is the duty of conscience of each fighter, even if he depends on himself alone, to fight at his assigned position. The riflemen, if overtaken or surrounded, fight in their position until no more ammunition exists. Then cold steel is next. . . . The machine-gunners, the cannoneers of heavy weapons, the artillerymen, if in the bunker or on the field, do not abandon or destroy their weapons, or allow the enemy to seize them. Then the crews fight further like riflemen. As long as a man has another cartridge or hand weapons to use, he does not yield.⁸⁷

Guisan's order to the army was published in the press and restored confidence to the civilian population—much of which was understandably close to panic—that Swiss resistance to German attack would be total.⁸⁸ It informed the Swiss officers and soldiers that no one was authorized to surrender. Most emphatically, it was a stern warning to the Wehrmacht that, unlike its other enemies, the Swiss would die fighting, even if only with the bayonet.

A similar order had been issued on October 4, 1939.⁸⁹ The Swiss military histories treat these orders as nothing unusual. So did Swiss soldiers who commented on the orders in interviews a half-century after the war.

Hans Senn, a lieutenant in the frontier troops who would become a lieutenant

general in the postwar years, commanded a strongpoint behind the Rhine. He and his men had only rifles and machine guns but no defense against panzers. He stated that the soldiers were prepared to follow the order and sacrifice themselves. Senn commented that the individual soldier was skilled but that unit coordination was inferior—a situation which improved as the war continued.⁹⁰

Ernst Leisi, whose unit was stationed at the border, recalls that Swiss soldiers thought they would be dead in a day or maybe a week. No one thought of retreat; even if they were surrounded, surrender was out of the question. Everyone had taken the oath at the mobilization site to sacrifice his life for the country. The no-surrender order expressed exactly what the soldiers felt.⁹¹

Frontier troops had so much ammunition available that they would have been killed before exhausting their cartridges and resorting to the blade. Later in the war, even after the troops in the Swiss Plateau were moved to the mountains, leaving only the border troops to face the Wehrmacht, the order remained the same: Keep fighting, no retreat, no surrender.⁹²

On the same day as these events, May 15, the Swiss Army Command declared that full mobilization had been achieved in record time and that all units were in place, thereby assuring the protection of Swiss neutrality and independence. It was reported that the populace expressed disappointment about the Netherlands' surrender but retained confidence in an Allied victory.⁹³ An expected raid by saboteurs on General Guisan's headquarters did not materialize.⁹⁴

The Luftwaffe continued its violations of Swiss air space, and on May 16 a German bomber near Winterthur was downed by a Swiss fighter.⁹⁵ Two German bombers found flying south of Schaffhausen were chased away by other fighters.⁹⁶

Because of invasion threats, the League of Nations closed its Geneva offices on the evening of May 16. It planned a move to the city of Vichy, France.⁹⁷

"I believe Hitler will bomb Geneva to destruction just out of personal hate for the League and what Geneva stands for," wrote William Shirer from Berlin that day. "Today there are reports of more German activity along the Swiss border. The Nazis may break into Switzerland any moment now." Shirer was worried about his wife Tess and their baby, who were living in Geneva, from which the women and children attached to the American consulate were departing. "The American government has advised Americans in Switzerland to

leave immediately for Bordeaux, where they'll be picked up by American ships.”⁹⁸

On May 19, the Germans moved their armored cars and light tanks away from the Swiss border. This may have been a ruse to trick the French into sending their mountain forces to the battle then taking place in the north, and the withdrawal may have been only a short distance. The Swiss remained fully mobilized and continued anti-fifth column activity.⁹⁹

By May 24, the Allied armies in France and Belgium had been cut in two. Counterattacks against the German “panzer corridor” from the south by General Charles de Gaulle had been repulsed, and Rommel had parried a larger attempt by the British from the north. The British had decided that their only hope was to evacuate their army from the continent. On May 25, King Leopold III of Belgium rejected the demands of his cabinet that he go into exile and continue the struggle as commander-in-chief. He refused, saying all was lost. On the 27th, the King sought a truce with the Germans, who replied that the Führer insisted that weapons be laid down unconditionally. Leopold accepted those terms an hour later.

The King’s surrender allowed the Germans to pour through Belgium and deploy overwhelming strength against the French and British who were falling back to their last remaining Channel port, Dunkirk. The Allies were shocked. Winston Churchill would remark that Leopold made the decision “without prior consultation, with the least possible notice, without the advice of his ministers and upon his own personal act.”¹⁰⁰ The King did not have the constitutional authority to surrender unilaterally, but did so anyway. The Belgian Army had fought heroically.¹⁰¹

Hitler was able to conquer much of Europe by bluffing the central authority of various countries into capitulation. In some cases, after a few meetings and threats, Hitler’s henchmen convinced the political leaders of a nation to surrender and to direct their armed forces not to resist. In other cases, the surrender would come after a brief fight, for which the armies were unprepared. There was no need to order the people not to resist, because they were, by and large, unarmed.

By contrast, Switzerland had a weak central government; as a direct democracy, power was decentralized. The first unit of authority was the individual and the family. Then came the village or city, then the canton, and finally the Federal Parliament. Power was exercised from the bottom up, not the

top down.

The creation of the *Ortswehren*, or local defense units, exemplified the Swiss policy of total resistance by the entire population. By the end of 1939, the Swiss Army command had been studying how the strength of the people could be used for the national defense. The Wehrmacht operations against Denmark and Norway in April 1940 gave the army command insights into Germany's new techniques of warfare. The command wished to avoid the potential degeneration of a "total popular resistance" into an "unorganized popular uprising." That would have given the aggressor the occasion to treat each resistance fighter as an outlaw sniper, meaning that, if captured, he would not be protected by the international rules governing warfare and could be shot on the spot.¹⁰²

At a Swiss Army conference on April 29, Chief of the General Staff Jakob Huber expressed the need to have volunteer *Ortswehren* to reinforce the troops and to combat saboteurs and paratroopers, declaring that "only a total defense can oppose total war." General Guisan noted that the Munitions Administration had a surplus of 70,000 old rifles with ammunition that could be put at the disposal of the *Ortswehren*.¹⁰³

On May 4, the General applied to the Federal Council for immediate formal recognition of these armed reinforcements, whose tasks would be "prevention of sabotage, immediate combat against any foreign invader, maintenance of silence, and security in the community." The Federal Council gave its authorization three days later.¹⁰⁴ The *Ortswehren* were instituted none too soon, for the Germans launched their Western offensive on May 10, at which time the Swiss also expected to be attacked.

The *Ortswehren* not only filled actual military needs, but also satisfied the desire of a growing number of Swiss to make a personal contribution to the defense of the country. These local units, helping to unify the country militarily and politically, were an immediate success, and volunteers were plentiful. They consisted primarily of former soldiers no longer liable for service, the *Jungschützen* (young shooters), those who were not capable of military service but who were capable marksmen, those with emergency service duties, and others who had been exempt from the military, as well as suitable women who were in the medical service and fire brigades.¹⁰⁵ The recruits were so numerous that arms and equipment were insufficient.¹⁰⁶

Later, the Federal Council promulgated the administrative aspects of the *Ortswehren*. As members of the army, they were sworn in and instructed in

military law. Those without an old military uniform wore civilian clothing. To protect against treatment as guerrillas, those without uniforms received the Swiss armband. It was decreed that the *Ortswehr* soldiers would arm themselves either with their own rifles or carbines or, if available from army reserve stocks, the Model 1889 long rifle would be handed over.¹⁰⁷

On May 28, German Minister Köcher complained to Berlin that the Swiss military was disbursing munitions and organizing local groups to wage partisan war if invaded. Guisan was again sending a strong message to the Nazis.¹⁰⁸ On the same day, another message was also being sent: The military penal code was amended to provide for the death penalty for betrayal of military secrets and for treason. It was applicable to soldiers and civilians alike.¹⁰⁹

Eventually the *Ortswehren* came to number 200,000 and would have provided armed civilian resistance in every locality of Switzerland, no matter how remote. The historical significance of the *Ortswehren* was that they demonstrated the fundamental national attitude to resist an invasion by the Nazi dictatorship at all costs.¹¹⁰

As a neutral, Switzerland was entitled by international law to trade with any belligerent. The international treaty of October 13, 1909, had required the Swiss to allow transportation of commodities other than arms between Germany and Italy on the Simplon and St. Gotthard railroads.¹¹¹ This traffic was absolutely vital to Switzerland's economy. The Allies protested, but isolated Switzerland had no choice. However, the Swiss made clear to the Germans that any invasion would result in the demolition of the Simplon and St. Gotthard tunnels and railways. Unlike the Swedes, the Swiss disallowed the passage of German troops across their territory. Swiss customs guards and American spies effectively enforced this prohibition.¹¹²

On April 25, 1940, the Allies and the neutrals signed the War Trade Agreement. The Allies guaranteed the transit of Swiss imports across their territories and the seas. The Swiss agreed to limit export of certain items to Germany to agreed quantities.¹¹³

On May 27, trade negotiations began in Berlin. The Germans strongly protested Swiss exports of war materials to France and England, and sought the abrogation of the Swiss-Allied War Trade Agreement.¹¹⁴ Germany attempted to enforce its will on June 18 by prohibiting all coal exports to Switzerland, partly

in retaliation for the Swiss shooting down of Luftwaffe aircraft.¹¹⁵ With their economy heavily dependent on the import of coal, now only available from Germany, the Swiss were pressured into making concessions to the Germans such as increased deliveries of arms, aluminum, and dairy products. However, they upheld their right as a neutral to export arms to the Allies and refused to abrogate the War Trade Agreement.¹¹⁶ The Germans even agreed with the compensation deals under which the Swiss could import German parts, manufacture them into machine tools and other items necessary for war, and export them to the Allies.¹¹⁷

Aerial border skirmishes with the Luftwaffe continued. Some 36 German bombers penetrated Swiss air space on June 1 and were attacked over Lake Neuchâtel. Swiss Me-109s shot down two German He-111 bombers. Orders found in the downed planes read: “Caution when flying over Swiss territory!”¹¹⁸ The next day, one of several He-111s coming from Geneva-Rolle was shot down by a Swiss fighter near Yverdon.¹¹⁹

By June 4, the last remnants of the British Army arrived in England after evacuation from Dunkirk. Winston Churchill made his famous speech to the House of Commons that day, in which he declared, “we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.”¹²⁰ Having seen almost all of continental Europe swallowed up by tyranny, the Swiss took heart from this cry of defiance. It expressed their attitude precisely.

As Churchill spoke, 29 German planes—He-111 bombers and Me-110 Destroyers—were engaging a dozen Swiss planes, mostly Me-109s, over Chaux-de-Fonds in western Switzerland. Two of the Luftwaffe planes and one Swiss plane were shot down. This time, the German aircraft had the following order: “Lure the Swiss fighters into battle and shoot down as many as possible.”¹²¹

On June 8, it was David against Goliath again: 15 Swiss aircraft engaged 28 Luftwaffe planes, resulting in the downing of an old Swiss biplane and a Swiss Me-109 and on the German side one crash and two forced landings.¹²² The Germans claimed that the Swiss had attacked first over France, but the claim was inconsistent with evidence of the location of the Luftwaffe crashes. Diplomatic notes threatened that “the German Reich reserves the right to take any measures

necessary for the prevention of attacks of this nature,” and warned: “In event of any repetition of such incidents, the Reich will dispense with written communications and resort to other means of safeguarding German interests.”¹²³

The Swiss General Staff replied on June 9 that no Swiss plane had flown over foreign territory. That same day, a Swiss observation plane was shot down ten miles inside Switzerland by six Luftwaffe fighters. A German plane was forced down in the same vicinity. Ten miles west of Bienne, a Swiss pilot was hit by two bullets in a dogfight. Near Triengen, another German plane was forced down.¹²⁴

On June 9, in Berlin, a memorandum by the Luftwaffe General Staff, entitled “neutrality violation in Switzerland,” noted “the Führer himself has taken care of the further treatment of this issue. The Führer should be supplied directly with all material detailed from Luftwaffe General Staff concerning the dogfights with Swiss planes.”¹²⁵

In retaliation, Hermann Goering devised “Operation *Wartegau*,” under which German intelligence sent terrorists to blow up aircraft and other targets. “*Wartegau*” meant a future Nazi administrative unit. On June 16, seven German and two Swiss saboteurs traveled from Berlin to blow up the Altdorf munitions plant and the Payerne and Dübendorf air bases. The plan was amateurish, and the Swiss apprehended the saboteurs with large amounts of explosives on a train. The terrorists were sentenced to life imprisonment.¹²⁶

Meanwhile, the Germans unsuccessfully demanded the return of the Messerschmitt aircraft the Swiss had purchased before the war.¹²⁷ While the Swiss-German air war was not statistically significant in the overall Allied-Axis conflict, the Swiss victories—eleven Luftwaffe aircraft shot down to only three Swiss—inspired confidence and strengthened further the will to resist.¹²⁸

Five Swiss were killed and fifty injured at Geneva and Renens, near the French border, from bombs accidentally dropped by the British on June 12.¹²⁹ The British apologized.¹³⁰

The French government now fled Paris, which was occupied by the Germans on June 14. Not a shot was fired to defend the city.¹³¹ The next day, large posters appeared all over Switzerland advising the public of what to do in the event of a parachute invasion.¹³² On the 16th, Guderian’s panzers circled

behind the Maginot Line near the Swiss border.¹³³

For some time, the Gestapo had been spying on the Swiss. Gestapo agents were ordered to gather intelligence on “everything related to the military and political war of the New Europe against the Jewish democracies and Bolshevism” and “the cooperation of the Swiss authorities with our enemies and their intelligence services.”¹³⁴ As they did for other targeted countries, the Gestapo prepared lists of Swiss citizens to be seized at the beginning of a military occupation that included politicians, journalists, Jews, army officers and any other potentially hostile persons. The individuals were divided among those who would be executed, sent to prison camps or simply kept under close surveillance.¹³⁵

The Swiss captured one team of Nazi infiltrators, dispatched by Goering. Later in June it was found that other saboteurs had cut cables set by the Swiss to ignite mines under a bridge over the Rhine. Such activities would continue throughout the war. It was assumed that Nazi sabotage would precede a military assault. To pave the way for invasion, public buildings and newspaper offices would be torched, while bombs would explode on trains and rail stations, and in the homes of leaders. Once the fifth column prepared the way, according to Nazi theory, a blitzkrieg would finish off the Swiss.¹³⁶

On June 17, the new French Premier, Marshal Henri Philippe Pétain, sought an armistice. Hitler replied that he would have to consult with his ally, Mussolini, who had jumped into the war after the Wehrmacht victory was all but complete.¹³⁷ In Bern that same day, German Minister Otto Köcher and Italian Minister Attilio Tamaro discussed dividing up Switzerland between their two countries.¹³⁸

The Führer and the Duce met the next day in Munich to discuss their triumph and also the question of Switzerland. They noted that Switzerland would be totally cut off by the occupation of France and should be expected to make accommodations to the new reality in Europe.¹³⁹ There was discussion and some confusion over possible action against Switzerland.¹⁴⁰ Hitler desired its conquest, but Mussolini’s forces had performed badly against the French, especially in the mountainous terrain adjacent to Switzerland. The time was not yet ripe for an assault, at least if the Germans expected to coordinate their attack with the Italians.¹⁴¹

For Hitler, however, the question of the conquest of Switzerland was only a matter of timing. Aside from its democratic ideology and its refusal to acknowledge the inevitable supremacy of the Reich, Switzerland irritated the Führer because of her control of the transportation routes over the Alps, allowing her to restrict Axis traffic.¹⁴²

Beginning on the 16th, the Germans moving south in France pushed to the Swiss border. Forty-two thousand French and Polish soldiers fleeing the Germans, including the entire Polish 2nd Rifle Division, crossed into Switzerland seeking asylum.¹⁴³ They brought with them huge quantities of arms and ammunition, which they surrendered to the custody of the Swiss. It was ironic that such a large force would lay down their arms and escape to internment in a country whose soldiers were ordered never to retreat and to fight to the death with the last cartridge and the bayonet. Nevertheless, the Polish division was interned with its formations intact. An officers' school was established and the Poles continued to train in internment. If Switzerland had been invaded, the Poles would have been quickly rearmed and would have had a chance to fight the Nazis again.

On June 22, 1940, the French government capitulated, the Battle of France having lasted only six weeks.¹⁴⁴ The armistice was signed two days later. The final version left Switzerland with only one non-Axis border: the unoccupied area known as Vichy France. The German negotiators received a demand from the Wehrmacht High Command (OKW) just fifteen minutes too late (after the armistice was signed) that German troops occupy French territory adjacent to Switzerland in order "to lock Switzerland completely."¹⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the Swiss were now effectively surrounded and stood in the way of the geographical integration of the Axis powers.

The German SS intelligence service (*Sicherheitsdienst*, or SD) mocked Switzerland in its internal publication *Announcements from the Reich*, dated June 24, as a criminal "cheese state" that, because of her stand against Germany, should "vanish."¹⁴⁶ Three days later, the SD insisted:

One cannot forgive this state, that it has turned into the reservoir of all restless elements, that for years to come will pose the biggest opposition against Germany. Again and again the demand is raised, "Switzerland must quickly be swallowed," "Switzerland must not be allowed to stay out of the reorganization

of Europe.”¹⁴⁷

On June 24, the day after his triumphal march into Paris, Adolf Hitler had a celebration. Before the party began, he had been in a rage because Mussolini’s inability to win on the battlefield had meant an equal inability to win in French-Italian negotiations. This obstructed Hitler’s plans to surround Switzerland completely and control her external transit. A rail connection stood intact, giving the Swiss access through Vichy France. Hitler also blamed the OKW, the German military command, for this situation.¹⁴⁸ The Germans had been unsuccessful in a last-minute attempt, ordered by Hitler, to destroy the rail connection allowing Switzerland access to the outside world. Saboteurs would continue to try to explode rail bridges but would be unable to halt Swiss trade.¹⁴⁹

Since virtually the entire Swiss population could have been expected to fight had the Wehrmacht invaded, one can easily imagine Swiss resistance as infantry units and individual sharpshooters firing at German soldiers from behind rocks in the mountains. While much resistance would have taken this form, army units were often assigned to fixed positions with orders not to retreat or surrender. Many of these fixed positions were fortified.

The principal area of Swiss mountain defenses was bounded by three immense fortified areas at key mountain passes: Sargans in the east, Gotthard in the central south, and St. Maurice in the west.¹⁵⁰ Instead of three single forts, each area was a series of fortifications stretching over hundreds of square kilometers, most of which were rugged and impassable mountain terrain.

The eastward stronghold of this *Réduit National* was the Sargans fortifications. Amid steep mountain rocks jutting up into the sky, the Rhine Valley opens up here at the border with Austria. The tiny principality of Liechtenstein forms part of the border. Construction of the fortifications began with the Austrian *Anschluss* in 1938 and was completed in 1943. Within the triangle made by these fortifications, all ground was within range of heavy cannon. The cannon, many disguised, peeked out of towering mountain cliffs. No matter how an invader came in, he would be greeted by heavy artillery fire aimed precisely over many kilometers.¹⁵¹

In addition to the large fortifications—which were essentially underground buildings inside mountains with scores of rooms holding hundreds of soldiers

and complete with air-ventilation systems and electric generators—there were about 150 medium-sized fortifications and hundreds of small ones, all ready to spew out cannon, mortar, and machine-gun fire. Some of the Sargans fortifications are still used for military training and exercises.

This was definitely not panzer country. Tanks would have had access only through narrow valley routes, with little or no room for maneuver, and the bridges and roads were rigged with explosives. Nor were the fortifications vulnerable to Luftwaffe attacks. Positions were concealed in cliffs and protected by thick steel and several meters of concrete or rock. German espionage secured photographs and maps of some of the Sargans fortifications but were not informed about the extensive munitions reserves. Knowledge of its strength, together with ignorance of what else may have been hidden in the rocks, contributed to deterrence.

What is called the Plain of Sargans could more aptly be called the Valley of Death. German invaders attacking from Austria would have been pummeled from all sides with projectiles ranging from 7.5mm rifle cartridges to 10.5cm heavy-gun shells. The border brigades could be mobilized in a mere 6 to 10 hours and would make use of plentiful natural cover as well as bunkers and blockhouses, many disguised as cottages, from which would spew machine-gun fire.¹⁵²

Germans coming over the hills from Lake Constance would have found themselves bogged down in a swamp, unable to move and subjected to fire from all sides. The farmland in this area had been a malaria-infested swamp in earlier times, and a system of canals and dikes had been constructed that could release water within hours to flood the entire plain. The army tried the flooding procedure as an experiment in 1940. It worked like a charm—much to the chagrin of the local farmers.

The Gotthard fortifications in central southern Switzerland are in some of the most rugged mountains of the country. The terrain features glaciers at the top, massive cliffs and rock formations, and is more vertical than horizontal. Bunkers for cannon and machine guns are still hidden today on mountainsides over the few passes where an invader could attempt to enter.

Traditionally, commerce through the Gotthard Pass was impossible except across the Devil's Bridge, near where Russian armies had defeated Napoleonic soldiers nearly two centuries earlier. Built with the help of French and German investors, the Gotthard tunnel opened rail traffic through this harsh environment in 1882. The Swiss threat to destroy the Gotthard tunnel in the event of a

German invasion had to be taken very seriously in Berlin.

At the southern tip of the Gotthard, in northern Ticino, loomed Fort Airolo, its long-range guns facing in the direction of any Italian invasion. This was only the beginning of nature's vast mountain fortresses which, with the firepower of the Swiss infantry, mountain troops and artillery, would have been a death trap for any Axis invaders.

While not of the massive size as those further south, fortifications at the northern borders were extensive and sophisticated. Underground living quarters and munitions storage were built under cannon with precise, long-range firing capacity on hills or mountainsides overlooking the Rhine River. One such fortification, today operated as a private museum open to the public, is Reuenthal, near Baden in northern Switzerland. It was one of a string of fortifications along the Rhine built in September 1939 at roughly the same places where the Romans built forts for protection against barbarians some two thousand years before.¹⁵³

Cannon in bunkers were ready to fire at crossings of the Rhine. Machine-gun positions surrounded the cannon bunkers. The purpose of the border defense was to slow down the Germans to give the main defense time to form. Despite the losses they would have inflicted had the Germans invaded, it appears likely that the Swiss defenders at these border positions would all have been killed. The soldiers assigned to the border understood their role.

In response to continued German provocations, General Guisan issued an Order of the Day to the troops on June 3 declaring that the Swiss were "an armed people willing to preserve its independence and we must and can defend ourselves." It warned the people not to be influenced by the war of nerves, apparently referring to German warnings that Swiss attacks on Nazi bombers were being investigated by the Germans to determine whether the planes were over Switzerland or France.¹⁵⁴ The order continued:

Nobody can conceive without horror a foreign occupation, and the Swiss can and must defend themselves. The topography of the country is a first-rate ally, and the new methods of warfare will not take the Swiss unprepared. . . . To defeatist propaganda every one should oppose the spirit which animated the mountain-folk, who in 1291, when left to themselves, placed their confidence in themselves and in God. Thus will the country be strong and the Army quite ready. One order is ample: "Hold fast!"¹⁵⁵

General Guisan issued a second order on the same day expressing strong religious feelings and reminding the soldiers that “spiritual preparation” was superior to “material preparation.” The General reminded the soldiers of the practice of the medieval warriors: “Our fathers knew this, and they bent the knee praying to God before every battle. If until now, nearly alone among the small countries of Europe, Switzerland has escaped the horrors of invasion, she must attribute it above all to divine protection.”¹⁵⁶

Chapter 5

Fall 1940

Target Switzerland

AFTER THE FALL OF FRANCE, THE GERMAN HIGH COMMAND immediately ordered preparations for an invasion to end the existence of neutral Switzerland. It had become apparent that no country in Europe could stand up to a full-blooded Wehrmacht offensive, and the time had come for the vaunted “herdsmen” to see what a blitzkrieg could do. Germany would seize the northern four-fifths of the country, and Italy would seize the area south of a line from the Lake of Geneva to the east, including the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino.¹

Swiss intelligence obtained information that, on June 24, 1940, Hitler discussed the question of Switzerland with his principal advisers: Goering, Keitel, Ribbentrop, Hess and Goebbels. Foreign Minister Ribbentrop favored an occupation of Switzerland. General Keitel opined that the goal could be reached through preparatory measures— intimidation—“without risking the sacrifice of some hundred thousand German soldiers with it.” While Swiss intelligence attempted to verify and keep abreast of the planning discussions taking place in Berlin, one fact remained clear: the Führer had his sights set on Switzerland.²

As the Germans celebrated the triumph over their historic antagonist, France, the guns were once again quiet; what nearly every observer and participant had expected to be a long, grueling campaign had instead concluded with an armistice after six weeks. Nevertheless, a concentration of German offensive forces began forming beyond the Swiss border between Geneva and Basel in the weeks following the French armistice. This latest German buildup took place just as the Swiss, responding to the declared armistice and thinking the immediate crisis had passed, were demobilizing to an active troop strength of 150,000.³

General Walther von Brauchitsch, Commander-in-Chief of the German Army, informed his army group commanders about the intended invasion. The

attack would be led by General Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb, whom Hitler would soon promote to field marshal. Von Leeb, who later commanded Army Group North in Russia, reconnoitered the terrain and gave the command for the “*Sonderaufgabe* (Special Task) Switzerland” to his Army Group C, which was allotted the 1st, 2nd, and 12th armies for the task. Various deployments proceeded near the border during the following two weeks, including the return of two mountain divisions from northern France.⁴

On June 25, the effective date of the armistice in France, Otto Wilhelm von Menges, a captain on the German General Staff, submitted a precise plan for an attack on Switzerland to the Army High Command. Proposing a surprise pincer attack by Wehrmacht troops from Germany and France and by Italian troops from the south, the idea was to fragment the Swiss Army and preclude it from being unified for further resistance in rugged mountain terrain. It would have as an objective, for political and strategic reasons, the speedy occupation of the economic resources and arms industry around Solothurn and would deny the Swiss time to destroy railroads, bridges and— especially—Alpine transit routes.⁵

The invasion plan included a detailed description of the German units and the precise points of their attack. It noted the weakness of the Swiss forces near the French border (by then there were German troops near Geneva and Lyons) and observed that reinforcing them would only weaken Swiss positions at the German border.⁶

The operation was initially created as a contingency plan that was meant to be carried out only if the armistice with France broke down. However, Swiss intelligence reported the Führer’s outbursts of fury against Switzerland, which also could have led to a sudden order to attack. In either event, Menges’ specific operational plan would have been executed. With the French armistice, the Führer now had sufficient forces to do so.⁷

On June 28, Leeb noted in his diary that “the 12th Army gets many mobile units and two mountain divisions. Should the total be aimed at Switzerland?” In the ensuing days, he continued to prepare for execution of his plan. At a July 11 General Staff meeting, Leeb noted that maneuvers should not be carried out under the watchful eyes of Swiss customs officials, and that the destroyed railroad bridges leading to the Swiss border had not been restored. He added in a revealing passage that these two points must be rectified “if the special task for Heeresgruppe [Army Group] C, even if at an uncertain time, is still being

considered.” The “special task” was, of course, the invasion of Switzerland.⁸

Always one to play off his generals against one another, Hitler ordered the creation of another plan for invasion, to be prepared by Brigadier General Bernhard von Lossberg, who served on the Wehrmacht General Staff under General Alfred Jodl from 1939 until the end of the war.⁹ In a postwar book, Lossberg noted that early in the war it was recognized that passage through the Netherlands and Belgium to circle around the Maginot Line would be easier than moving through Switzerland. However, connections between the Axis countries would be better facilitated if the Swiss railroads could be made available not just for economic but also for military transport. Hitler was angry about reports of deliveries of precision engineering products from Switzerland to England. Moreover, he considered Switzerland a center of international espionage against Germany.¹⁰

Following Hitler’s orders, Jodl assigned Lossberg the task of developing an alternate plan for an attack on Switzerland. Lossberg recognized the geographic fact that only a small part of the country was militarily accessible: the plateau between the Jura and the Alps located from Basel to Geneva. Strong resistance there was expected from 50,000 soldiers supplemented by reserve forces. Lossberg wrote: “We recognized that the mountain-habitation and the freedom-loving character of the troops would make for stubborn resistance and probably also later small wars to contend with.”¹¹ The study was transmitted to Jodl and, probably after presentation to Hitler, stayed on Jodl’s desk. The war in the East caused Swiss attack plans to be put aside for the moment.¹²

In France, repression began immediately after the armistice and German occupation. Posters appeared everywhere directing that firearms and radio transmitters be surrendered to the closest German occupation headquarters within 24 hours and also stated: “All those who would disobey this order or would commit any act of violence in the occupied lands against the German Army or against any of its troops will be condemned to death.”¹³

Partisan groups would disregard these threats and take up arms against the Nazis.¹⁴ The severity of the Nazi decree demonstrates how greatly they feared resistance by civilians.

A week before the surrender of France, German troops discovered documents abandoned by French ministers at La Charité-sur-Loire, a town west of Dijon, detailing the secret agreements between the Swiss and French for

mutual assistance if the Germans attacked Switzerland, negotiated earlier by General Guisan. Because these documents could be used to challenge the “purity” of Swiss neutrality, the Germans would exploit these documents for political ends.¹⁵ At his conference with the Italian Ambassador Dino Alfieri on July 1 in the Führer’s headquarters, Hitler was outraged about the papers found at La Charité.¹⁶ In November, German Foreign Minister Ribbentrop discussed the documents with Hitler and cited them to support the plan to liquidate Switzerland. The Swiss became aware that the plans had fallen into German hands, and General Guisan could only wonder through the rest of the war when the secret would be used as a pretext for a Wehrmacht attack.¹⁷

On June 25, the future looked gloomy. Not only was Western Europe overrun by Nazis but the Nazi partner in the East—the Soviet Union—had conquered Finland and occupied part of Poland. The demonstrable effect of blitzkrieg warfare was frightening and had so far swept every enemy before it. The Swiss democracy stood alone in a continent of dictatorships.

On the night of June 24–25, 1940, when the German-French armistice became effective, General Guisan met with Chief of Staff Jakob Huber and other General Staff members to plan the defense of Switzerland from the National Redoubt.¹⁸ Guisan would write: “What mattered really was that the spiritual decision had been taken: the Chief of Staff and I had to be clear now in our own minds to what extreme degrees we must be prepared for all possible consequences of the *Réduit* policy.”¹⁹

A “*Réduit*” in the science of fortifications means a fortress built inside another, with the goal of prolonging the defense of the main fortress and driving the aggressor out.²⁰ The strategy of the *Réduit* had been debated in theory since 1815. Defense at the frontier meant defense of 1,800 kilometers of border and fighting on the plateau, which the French experience against the Germans had earlier proved to be ineffective. The *Réduit* strategy, in contrast, was absolute and extreme: to concentrate the army in the most favorable defensive position, the Alps. The army would retreat to the Alps and the pre-Alps, extending east and west at the fortified zones of Sargans and Saint- Maurice, with its center the ancient fortification of St. Gotthard. Smaller forces would fight at the frontiers and in the plateau to delay the enemy’s progress. The decisive battle would take place in the *Réduit*, where the army would defend to the last. This was resistance, not retreat: the *Réduit* would not be a refuge for the army, but rather

its chosen place of engagement.²¹

However, the *Réduit* strategy meant abandoning, after a fight by a limited number of troops, four-fifths of the Swiss population, including women and children, most of the industry (which would be destroyed) and a large part of the national heritage—profound considerations indeed for any military planner. The strategy was based on Guisan's appreciation of the primary strategic motive of the Axis aggressors—to establish a direct territorial liaison between Germany and Italy. The *Réduit* strategy was based on the idea that the defense would be concentrated on the sector that was the principal objective of the aggressor. Using the strategy, the Swiss would destroy any hope of Axis north-south communication by controlling the St. Gotthard and Simplon passes.²² The risk that the rest of the country would be lost would have to be taken, in view of the deterrent value of the defense plan that would deny the aggressor his most important objective.²³

The configuration of the Alpine terrain was favorable for the execution of Guisan's plan. German blitzkriegs elsewhere in Europe had demonstrated the superiority of modern offensive weapons, especially tanks and planes. Swiss anti-tank and anti-aircraft defenses were insufficient, especially for defense of the plateau, so defensive terrain had to be selected which would effectively counter superior German armaments. The high mountains would make it virtually impossible for the enemy to deploy these armaments with full force.²⁴



The “Army Position” anticipated an attack from German territory, but was no longer viable after the fall of France in 1940. The defense of the *Réduit National*, ordered by General Guisan on July 17, 1940, concentrated Swiss forces in the Alps.

The *Réduit* strategy incorporated the previous orders that there would be no surrender. The border troops, who were supplied with ample ammunition, would resist until eliminated. The troops in the Mittelland (the Plateau) would do the same, further slowing the German advance. Finally, the troops in the *Réduit* would not only hold firm but would also conduct counterattacks in the Plateau and even the Jura. The *Réduit* was the chosen place of primary engagement and resistance, not a place of retreat.²⁵

In short, as befit a small country facing far more numerous foes, Swiss

strategy was one of dissuasion; total victory was not expected. Such a small nation could not win a war with Germany, but it could promise higher losses than would be worth the cost to the aggressor.²⁶ While the Swiss General Staff planned to wage a war in which the army, or at least the forces concentrated in the *Réduit*, would remain intact, guerrilla war would also have occurred in the Alps and the Jura. No official plans had been made for guerrilla warfare in what would be occupied territory, but it had already been discussed among young officers and even by General Guisan himself.²⁷

On July 12, General Guisan wrote Minister of Defense Minger outlining the new strategy of the *Réduit National*, which would replace existing plans. In the previous phase of the war, Guisan explained, border troops had been placed in fortifications, while the main Swiss strength was in the “Army Position,” stretching from Sargans in the east to Lake Zurich and the Limmat River, then along the Jura Mountains to Lake Neuchâtel, and finally to Lake Geneva. In case of aggression, prior to this point, help could have been expected from France.²⁸

The fall of France and the entry of Italy into the war changed the situation. Attack could now come from any front, and there would be no assistance from any country. Further, since the signing of the French armistice, Germany and Italy had an increased interest in provoking new conflicts. The German Army in particular was at the height of its power, constantly needing new targets to showcase its strength. Democratic Switzerland already stood out in the redrawn map of Axis-controlled Europe, and both Germany and Italy coveted the transit lines across the Alps. Guisan continued:

Switzerland cannot escape the threat of a direct German attack unless the German high command, while preparing such an attack, becomes convinced that a war against us would be long and expensive, would uselessly and dangerously create a new battleground in the heart of Europe, and thus would jeopardize the execution of its other plans. . . . If we must be dragged into the struggle, we will sell our skin as dear as possible.²⁹

The new military situation made the current division of the army between the Border Position and the Army Position untenable. The value of the border troops and their fortification works remained. However, the Army Position, which had been designed to protect most of the national territory against an attack from the north, would no longer be the crucial line of defense. The risk of an attack over

any border, especially using modern methods featuring armored units, required a reduction in the density of forces assigned to fixed lines. Accordingly, General Guisan decided that “the defense of the territory will be organized according to a new principle, that of staggering in depth.” He instituted three main resistance echelons, including:

—*the frontier troops*, which would preserve their present positions;

—*an advanced position of cover*, which will use the outline of the present army position between Lake Zurich and the massif of Gempen and which will extend as a western front, bounded generally by the Bernese Jura and Neuchâtel–Morat–La Sarine until it reaches Bulle;

—*a position of the Alps*, or *réduit national*, that will be flanked at the east, west and south by fortresses, including Sargans, St. Maurice and the Gotthard.³⁰

The mission of the border troops would be to maintain their position. The troops holding the advanced position would block attacks which sought to penetrate toward the country’s interior. The troops in the Alpine *Réduit* would hold their positions with the prepared stores, without retreat, for a maximum duration. Guisan also envisaged a fluid resistance:

Between these three echelons, the intermediate defensive system will include support points of anti-tank defense, constituting redoubts or nests of resistance, kept on all fronts. Their methods of combat will be inspired by those of guerrilla warfare as well as of the most recent lessons of the war.³¹

This mobile, intermediate defense line, in the form of light detachments and territorial troops, would carry out widespread destruction of bridges, roads and factories. As an unavoidable consequence, much of the civil population could not be protected. Some Swiss could be evacuated according to local circumstances, but in no event could the entire population enter the *Réduit*, which would compromise the success of operations and expend stores.³²

Guisan has been recently criticized for planning to “abandon” Swiss civilians to Nazi occupation. To the extent that his strategy was the inverse of the border strategies adopted by other countries under German threat, the accusation against

the Swiss commander-in-chief is superficially correct. However, Guisan's strategy reflected not only the topography of Switzerland but also the reality of the Nazis' blitzkrieg warfare. The other small countries of Europe, as well as France, that massed their troops in border areas fell within a matter of days or weeks to blitzkrieg tactics. Their armies were quickly defeated and their entire populations subsequently placed under Nazi rule. By conceding that all of Switzerland's people, particularly those in the north, could not be protected against a Wehrmacht invasion, Guisan's *Réduit* strategy ensured that the Swiss Army would be able to continue the fight indefinitely. Considering Clausewitz's dictum that mere occupation of ground is useless unless the main forces of the enemy have been destroyed, occupation of Switzerland's plateau would have availed the Germans little if the Swiss Army remained intact, well supplied and capable of operations from inaccessible terrain in the Alps. Guisan's plan presented a strategic dilemma, in turn, to the German General Staff, which, despite drawing up elaborate plans for conquest in 1940 and in future years, would never confidently advocate a commitment of German forces against the *Réduit*. Switzerland would remain the only nation among Germany's neighbors whose military preparations deterred an attempt at annexation or invasion.

The Federal Council approved Guisan's strategy, and on July 20 Operations Order No. 12 was issued to the corps commanders. Troop lines would extend from the foothills below the Alps around the fortresses of Sargans in the east to St. Maurice in the west. The southerly position would be the high Alpine border near Italy. In the center would be the St. Gotthard Pass, surrounded by valleys with some industry and tunnels filled with munitions and fuel. Only a fifth of the population lived in this area.³³

On June 25, the same day that Guisan secretly authorized total resistance in the *Réduit*, Federal President Marcel Pilet-Golaz delivered a radio address that suggested acceptance of the new reality in Europe and advocated appeasement.³⁴ (One is tempted to call Pilet-Golaz the Chamberlain of Switzerland because of his ambivalence. He alternated between co-signing orders with Guisan and making accommodating remarks about the New Order.)

Defeatist in tone and in spirit, the radio speech warned the people to adapt to the new situation and urged the Swiss to rely on the leadership and authority of the Federal Council. This was a chilling recommendation for many Swiss to hear, after they had seen the leaders of nation after nation turn over their countries to the Nazis, sometimes after nothing but a closed-door meeting with

Hitler. Swiss soldiers, who favored resistance to the end, questioned precisely to what Pilet-Golaz was advocating that they adapt themselves: National Socialist domination of Europe, or of Switzerland?

Pilet-Golaz' speech was inconsistent with the April 18 order—which he himself had signed—that Switzerland would never surrender and would persevere at all costs.³⁵ After the Pilet-Golaz statement, those who favored the absolute no-surrender policy repeatedly demanded reissuance of the order, to no avail.³⁶

Even though the order was not formally reissued, it had stated that there would be no surrender no matter what the federal government said. It was not rescinded and thus remained valid until the end of the war. The Federal Council could have surrendered, yet according to the terms of the order, the army would have been obligated to disregard this and would have fought to the end.³⁷

Public support for Federal President Pilet-Golaz' accommodationist tendencies was weak. A popular pun in Switzerland stated that Pilet-Golaz must go: “*den Pilet muss man go la* [short for *gehen lassen* and pronounced “Golaz”].³⁸ A newspaper variation went “*Dann muss der Pilet gehen.*”³⁹ Many regarded him with suspicion. In any event, the Swiss then and even now do not assign as much importance to the office of national chief executive as we do in the United States.

Many began to fear, however, a growing sentiment of defeatism, and rumors spread that German agents planned to prevent General Guisan from issuing the necessary orders for national defense. Instead of the great medieval victories of Morgarten, Sempach, and Morat, it was believed that the Swiss might suffer a repetition of the 1798 French invasion, during which the national polity had been weak and divided. Some began to think of a coup d'état in which young officers would seize power, install a new Federal Council, and announce a new commitment to resist. The effort was unsophisticated and undemocratic but reaffirmed the abhorrence of Nazism among the military, as well as mistrust of the federal government. Sentiment grew among the soldiers to single out any Nazi sympathizers in the army and take any accommodationist officers prisoner.⁴⁰

Within the military, the *Offiziersbund*, or *L'Alliance des Officiers*, a secret society of officers which stood for total resistance, was formed.⁴¹ Its members pledged not to obey any orders to surrender. As a secret society, it was

considered a breach of discipline when its existence inevitably came to the notice of higher commanders. Twenty of the officer members were arrested on August 3 but were subjected to lenient discipline.

General Guisan reprimanded the officers for not having confidence in him and reassured them of the high command's commitment to total resistance. Guisan later wrote that "in the event the will of resistance would have been given up under foreign pressure, these officers, by refusing to obey, would not only have been acting completely within their rights, but they also would have followed that which is the highest duty of every soldier."⁴² When it became known that the officers had been willing to compromise their military careers in support of a total-resistance policy, and that the General had reassured them of his agreement, the people responded with new confidence in the army.⁴³

Another secret society, the *Aktion Nationaler Widerstand*, or *L'Action de Résistance Nationale*, was formed by junior members of the General Staff to support the policy of total resistance. Many officers and nationally prominent citizens joined and signed the promise to refuse any order by the government to surrender. If senior officers did not oppose a German invasion, junior officers would seize their commands. If surrender was ever suggested, these underground groups were pledged to engage in armed revolt.⁴⁴

Members of the resistance groups committed themselves, in the event of Nazi occupation, to engage in partisan or guerrilla warfare, with all the risks that would have entailed. They planned active resistance to the Gestapo and all potential occupation forces.⁴⁵

The *Aktion* movement was a lawful, albeit secret, organization of 500 members from all walks of life: the Parliament, members of all political parties, journalists, soldiers. Its members worked unstintingly to influence public opinion in favor of the policy of absolute resistance. It had meetings but no publications and was not subject to censorship. It lasted until the end of the war.⁴⁶

Switzerland had imposed limited press censorship to protect national secrets and avoid needlessly provoking Nazi retaliation. This censorship, however, was after-the-fact, not a prior restraint, and weak. Even during the height of the war, the press could speak mostly as it wished and frequently gave great offense to the National Socialists.⁴⁷ However, not even such minimal restrictions existed regarding individual conversations.

Aktion members included Max Waibel and Captain Hans Hausamann, who operated the “Bureau Ha,” a special component of Swiss intelligence. Contacts were made all over Europe, and in Switzerland the Bureau functioned to instill the spirit of resistance. Its spy network, termed the “Wiking Line” (named after a Swiss spy) reached right into Hitler’s headquarters.⁴⁸

After the French armistice, a significant portion of the Swiss forces were demobilized. However, on July 2 General Guisan issued an order which included these words: “An armistice is not peace. The war continues between Germany, Italy and Great Britain. . . . Even if we cannot win a direct victory, we will fight.”⁴⁹

At that point, the Nazis were on the verge of launching the Battle of Britain, a spectacular Luftwaffe offensive across the English Channel that would ultimately fail to pave the way for a land assault. The panzers were still idle. German troops were again concentrated at the Swiss border.⁵⁰

On American Independence Day in 1940, William Shirer was not celebrating. In Geneva with his wife and baby, the famous correspondent confided to his diary:

Everyone here is full of talk about the “new Europe,” a theme that brings shudders to most people. The Swiss, who mobilized more men per capita than any other country in the world, are demobilizing partially. They see their situation as pretty hopeless, surrounded as they are by the victorious totalitarians, from whom henceforth they must beg facilities for bringing in their food and other supplies. None have any illusions about the kind of treatment they will get from the dictators.

The newspapers advised preparing for hardship and loss of freedom. “The Swiss do not realize what the dictators really have in store for them,” wrote Shirer, adding: “And now that France has completely collapsed and the Germans and Italians surround Switzerland, a military struggle in self-defense is hopeless.”⁵¹ Demoralization had infected not only many Swiss, but also one of America’s leading correspondents. But in the face of such defeatism, General Guisan developed additional plans.

To instill and reaffirm the will to resist, General Guisan decided to muster the army’s key leadership—commanders, higher officers, and the Chief of the

General Staff—on July 25 at the Rütli Meadow.⁵² The officers rallied at and disembarked from Lucerne, all traveling on the same boat. Despite the risk of sabotage, Guisan did not want to divide them.⁵³

The eastern side of Lake Lucerne is an area surrounded by steep bluffs. From a dock, a footpath proceeds up to the Rütli Meadow. According to tradition, it was here that in 1291 Switzerland was founded.

On a beautiful day, Guisan faced the senior officers of the army standing in a semicircle on the Rütli Meadow, facing the lake. Canton Uri's flag of the Battalion 87 flew above. Addressing the measures taken "for the resistance in the *réduit*," Guisan ordered "resistance to all aggression coming from the outside, and to the various internal dangers, laxity, defeatism, as well as confidence in the value of this resistance."⁵⁴ He continued:

Here, soldiers of 1940, we will inspire ourselves with the lesson and spirit of the past to envisage resolution of the present and future of the country, to hear the mysterious call that pervades this meadow.⁵⁵

Guisan then gave the officers an order to pass on to the troops. Noting the importance of secrecy to a disciplined army and to the national defense, Guisan stated that many questioned the reason for recent modifications in the grouping of the forces and their mobilization. Recalling that on August 29, 1939, the Federal Council had ordered the mobilization of border troops, and soon thereafter the general mobilization, he continued that the army must safeguard the country's independence. Their neighbors, he said, had "respected this independence so far, but we must see to it that it is respected to the end." He warned:

Currently there are, beyond our borders, more troops—and excellent troops—than ever before. We can be attacked on all fronts at the same time, which was not really conceivable a few weeks ago. The army must adapt itself to this new situation and take a position that allows it to hold on to all the fronts. It will thus fulfill its invariable, historic mission.⁵⁶

Guisan prophetically stated: "In Europe, for a long time to come, millions of men will remain under arms, and as considerable forces can attack us from one

moment to the next, the army must remain ready.” Complimenting the army on the value of its past efforts and disdaining doubters, he urged renewed confidence in “the effectiveness of our resistance.”⁵⁷

Guisan later reflected: “The spirits and hearts were brought closer by the magnitude of the place, the cohesion and the camaraderie of leaders in this grand assembly.” That evening, each returned to his command post or his home reminded that “the task is hardly begun.”⁵⁸

Portions of the speech were broadcast on the radio and printed in newspapers.⁵⁹ New hope arose as the military directives took shape and additional fortifications were constructed. The Nazis were incensed that Guisan insinuated the Wehrmacht might attack and that he had defiantly asserted that any aggression would be stoutly resisted.⁶⁰ Any German hopes that Switzerland would surrender without a fight, or would give up after brief resistance, were shattered.⁶¹

On July 30, German Minister Köcher wired Berlin from Bern that a strong protest should be lodged against this “renewed incitement of Swiss public opinion against Germany and Italy.” Both Axis capitals did so shortly thereafter. A few weeks later, Köcher met with Pilet-Golaz, who replied that Guisan at Rütli had not sought to “describe Germany as the possible attacker or to incite public opinion against Germany,” but only intended “to exhort officers and men to the unqualified fulfillment of their duties.”⁶² Yet both men knew this statement bordered on the ridiculous, when the Axis powers posed the only possible threat to Switzerland.

On August 1, Swiss National Day, hundreds of fires, the historic symbol of Swiss independence, blazed from Alpine peaks as leaders expressed their determination to defend the nation.⁶³ General Guisan and President Pilet-Golaz pledged that the armed forces and the government would fight “to the end.”⁶⁴

At the National Day celebration at the ongoing World’s Fair in New York, speakers “compared the Swiss ideals of liberty, tolerance and neutrality to those of the United States.” Swiss Consul General Victor Nef noted that the Swiss had their own militia for defense, “and they always have relied exclusively on [their] own strength. These people follow the good-neighbor policy [and] exchange spiritual as well as tangible goods with their neighbors. Otherwise they would starve.” New York City’s Mayor LaGuardia issued the following statement to Dr. Nef:

The determined and long-continued aloofness of Switzerland from the turmoils of Europe tells the story of the greatness of your people, towering above the jealousies and selfish greeds of nations even as your mountains tower above their neighbors. Peace and liberty, these are almost synonymous in Switzerland. It is my prayer, shared by my countrymen everywhere, that the peace and liberty which you enjoy may remain as constant and secure as your Jungfrau and your Matterhorn.⁶⁵

Meanwhile the Führer's Luftwaffe pounded away at London. Frustrated by the efforts of the RAF, and because it had become too late in the season to launch an invasion, the Germans had resorted to wreaking havoc on the great city on the Thames. International skier Arnold Lunn, referring to "the creeping leprosy of the Nazi infection," expressed the common attitude of English and Swiss alike as follows:

When France fell and when we watched the fires of burning dockland on the night of September 7th, 1940, and wondered whether England could continue to take it, second only to the supreme horror of Hitler's evil face gloating over conquered London from the balcony of Buckingham Palace was the possibility that the swastika might fly from the roofs of Bern.⁶⁶

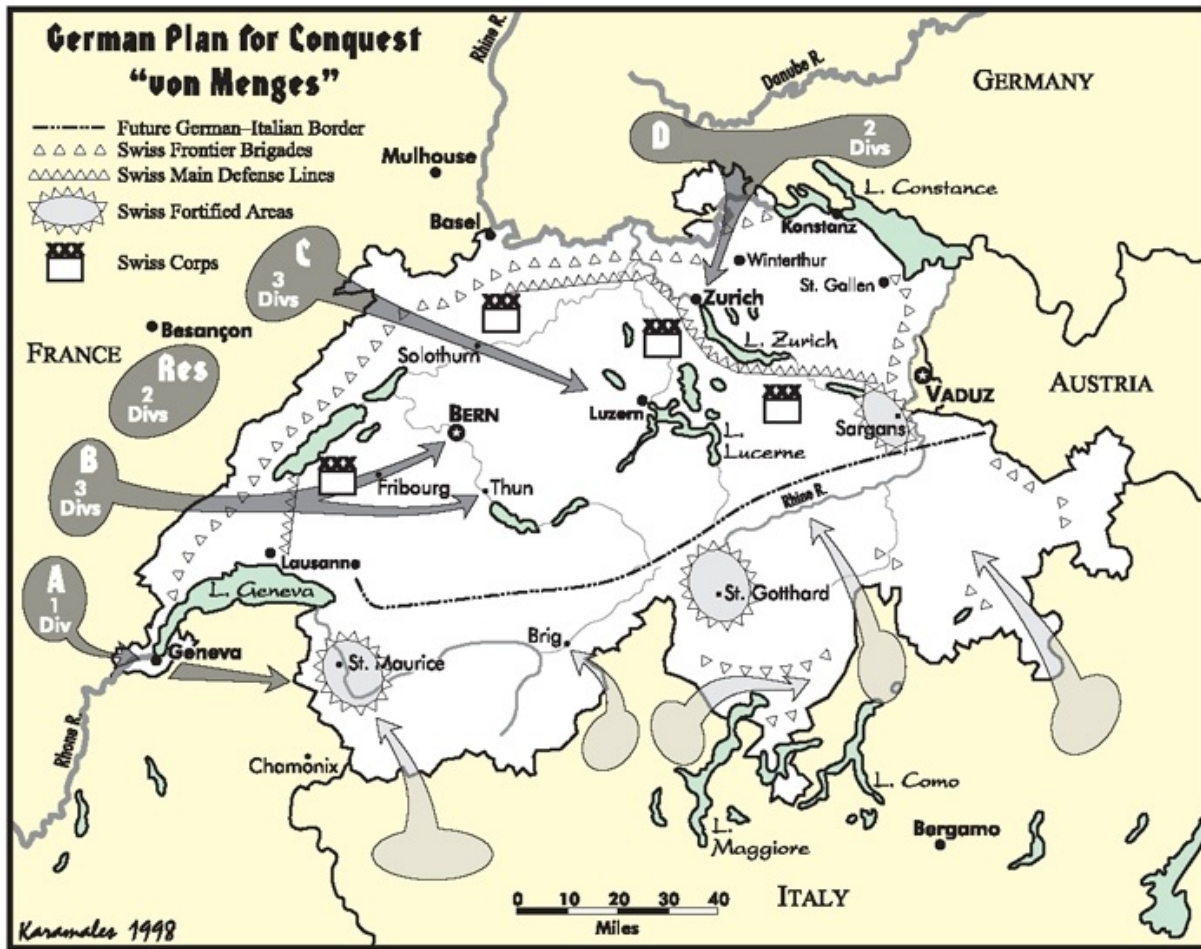
As the military situation and the location of German troops changed, so too did German plans to invade Switzerland. Hitler was constantly changing his mind. It behooved the German General Staff to continue to update attack plans against Switzerland, in case the command should come unexpectedly. A revised plan of the German Army high command, the OKH, dated August 8, conceded: "The single [Swiss] soldier is a tough fighter and a good shot." Nine German divisions and additional Italian forces would be used.⁶⁷

Captain Menges, drafter of the June 25 plan, submitted a revised plan entitled "The German Attack Against Switzerland" to the High Command on August 12. It again proposed a simultaneous Wehrmacht attack from Germany and France along with an attack from the south by the Italians. It would be a lightning invasion from several directions with the same goals as before: fragmentation of the Swiss Army and prevention of its withdrawal into the *Réduit*; seizure of the industry and arms production around Solothurn and Zurich; and preservation of the transportation system from destruction by the

Swiss.⁶⁸

Menges described the Swiss Army—underestimating it—as having a strength of 220,000 soldiers divided into six infantry divisions, three mountain divisions, three mountain brigades, one border brigade and a border battalion. It had no tank troop, and its air force was weak. Because of internal politics and economic factors, further demobilization would continue. However, remobilization could take place quickly, and the Swiss needed only five hours to mobilize the border troops. Menges proceeded to describe Swiss defenses in great detail:

[The Swiss have] a functionally organized and quickly mobilized armed force. The level of training will have been raised by the long time they have been mobilized. Leaders only theoretically schooled. Methodical leadership. Shortcomings in weaponry (artillery, tanks, anti-tank defenses, air force, anti-aircraft guns). The individual soldier is a tough fighter and a good sharpshooter. The mountain troops are said to be better than those of their southern neighbor. The fighting value of the western Swiss (French type) is limited, while those living south of Constance (Communists) will be bitter enemies. Final evaluation: an army suitable only for defensive purposes and completely inferior to its German counterpart.⁶⁹



The plan for a German attack from the north and west and an Italian attack from the south, submitted by Captain Otto Wilhelm von Menges of the General Staff to the German Army High Command on August 12, 1940. (Adapted from Fuhrer, "Renseignement," *Relations Internationales*, Summer 1994, No. 78, 236.)

Menges also mentioned that, in armistice commission discussions, the Germans had attempted to persuade Vichy France to change the demarcation line to allow the Germans to envelop Switzerland. Vichy refused.⁷⁰

It was reported from Bern on September 16 that the Swiss were anxiously awaiting the results of the Vichy-Berlin negotiations. Completely surrounded by Axis powers and their conquered territories, the Swiss feared loss of trade access with the nonbelligerent world. Economic strangulation was believed to be as likely as armed invasion. Still, that same day, the Federal Council approved a

referendum for an amendment to the Constitution to make premilitary training a requirement for all males over 16, setting December 1 for the public vote.⁷¹

For some time the Germans had been thoroughly angered by General Guisan—for his secret agreement with the French for a joint defense against a Wehrmacht invasion, for his influence in keeping troops mobilized, and for his known determination to wage total war against any German aggression. Max Waibel, head of the Swiss “N1” intelligence unit, learned that Berlin was attempting to hatch an intrigue against Guisan, whom the Germans found “unbearable,” and to replace him with a commander-in-chief who was more friendly to Germany. German Minister Otto Köcher attempted to instigate a cabal in Bern against Guisan and to convince the government to demobilize the troops.⁷² Not surprisingly, this unsuccessful effort coincided with the preparation of more invasion plans against Switzerland.

A series of plans codenamed “Tannenbaum” was drafted for the German General Staff. On August 26, General Franz Halder, Chief of the General Staff, ordered planning for an assault to be undertaken by Field Marshal von Leeb’s Army Group C.⁷³ At least two plans resulted from this command.

The operations plan dated September 6 recognized that Switzerland would resist with all her might. The 12th Army under Field Marshal Wilhelm von List would spearhead the German attack, which would include winged movements centered on Bern.⁷⁴ In contrast, the plan of October 4, to be executed by von Leeb, would have used extraordinarily short deployment times but relied on 21 divisions.⁷⁵ While driving along the Swiss border from Germany to France on October 6, General Halder reflected:

The Jura frontier offers no favorable base for an attack. Switzerland rises, in successive waves of wood-covered terrain, across the axis of an attack. The crossing points on the river Doubs and the border are few; the Swiss frontier position is strong.⁷⁶

The next day, Operation Tannenbaum was sent to the General Staff, which, after reviewing it, ordered a new study that would use only half as many German divisions.⁷⁷

Besides all the foregoing plans, there was the “Plan Zimmerman” of October 4, prepared for the German High Command, which did not even acknowledge

the existence of the plan of the same date for Army Group C. This study realistically anticipated that resistance and fighting would continue under a German occupation.⁷⁸

General Halder, as is known by his October 17 note, continued to focus on an invasion of Switzerland. He contemplated two major operational zones using eleven divisions. First, an infantry attack would be feinted in the Jura to pin down the Swiss Army, which would then be cut off from the Alps by a new assault and smashed on the plateau. The concept was not unlike the plan that defeated France, which involved an initial assault into Belgium to flush out French and British forces, while the main thrust emerged on their rear flank from the Ardennes. According to the plan against the Swiss, army remnants in the Gotthard and other parts of the *Réduit* would initially be left alone, for they could not survive over time.⁷⁹

However, the Swiss Army was already concentrating arms and supplies in the *Réduit*, about which General Halder stated: “The immobilization, for an indefinite time, of powerful forces without hope surrounding the central position of Switzerland, and the certainty of being deprived of a vital, favorable liaison with the Italian ally is insupportable.”⁸⁰ The Chief of the German General Staff clearly preferred the benefits of limited usage to the complete cessation of transit across the Alps.

All of these invasion plans were being developed during a period of intense focus on Switzerland by Hitler and Mussolini. The two met at the Brenner Pass on October 4, and the Duce wrote the Führer on the 19th: “I am sure you will not be surprised to find Switzerland on my list of remaining English outposts on the continent. With its incomprehensible hostility, Switzerland poses itself the problem of its existence.”⁸¹

In sum, at least five separate German attack plans were devised in 1940. Three of the plans would have been directed from the north, east and west and placed the center of gravity in the pre-Alps in order to attempt to separate the Swiss Army from the Alps and destroy it in the Plateau. The Germans knew that if the Swiss Army were in the Alps, its infantry would be extremely difficult to dislodge.⁸²

The other two attack plans, “Operation Switzerland” of August 12, and the Zimmerman study of October 4, would have been launched against western Switzerland from France in the rear of the Limmat River position of the Swiss

Army.⁸³ There were also attack plans from Italy, including the plan of General Vercellino of June 10 and others. The Duce intended to seize large parts of southern Switzerland.⁸⁴

The German attack plans variously called for between 10 and 21 divisions, each division typically including some 12,000 to 15,000 soldiers. If 15 Italian divisions were added, that would make between 25 and 36 divisions.⁸⁵ Thus, the Axis would have found it necessary to attack Switzerland with 300,000 to 500,000 trained men—a massive force in contrast to previous German invasions of small countries.

The Wehrmacht invasion plans were drafted by at least three different groups working independently of one another and with differing hypotheses. The plans differed dramatically on the capacity of the Swiss for resistance, the size of the forces necessary for an invasion, and the foreseeable duration of the campaign. The Germans agreed, however, that the Swiss Army would put up a strong, albeit unsuccessful, resistance, expressed a marked respect for the mountains, and feared popular resistance after hostilities officially ended. On the whole, the German experts advised against an attack, knowing that a war in the mountains would be a long-term enterprise with doubtful results.⁸⁶

On October 19 the Swiss Army announced that home defense soldiers, including men aged 42–60, were being recalled to relieve younger troops who had been on duty since the war started.⁸⁷ On October 26, the Swiss government announced the arrest of officials and employees of the Swiss Union of Friends of Authoritative Democracy, a Nazi group directed from Germany. Federal police simultaneously conducted raids in several cities.⁸⁸

At the same time, Germany was tightening its economic stranglehold on Switzerland. The United States was still not in the war, allowing William Shirer to continue reporting from Berlin. His wife and baby living in Geneva, to which he commuted regularly, were subject to the same privations as the Swiss, which Shirer described:

This winter the Germans, to show their power to discipline the sturdy, democratic Swiss, are refusing to send Switzerland even the small amount of coal necessary for the Swiss people to heat their homes. The Germans are also allowing very little food into Switzerland, for the same shabby reason. Life in Switzerland this winter will be hard.⁸⁹

Scarcities led to the imposition of rationing in early November. The “cultivation battle,” a plan authored by Dr. F.T. Wahlen, chief of crop production for the Federal war bureau, was initiated to employ every available town square, yard, soccer field and other piece of land in food production. Virtually every family participated with great enthusiasm and a sense of patriotism. A typical family might transform the backyard into a potato, bean or tomato field and plant herbs in the flower beds.

In the fall, townspeople would harvest wheat and corn planted outside town. In the evening, they would return with a pound of ground flour which they received in return for their harvest, a welcome supplement to their meager rations. With these efforts land cultivation almost doubled. The cultivation battle, often waged by women and children while the father (and for rural families, the horse too) was away on a mobilization order, was an essential part of the program of spiritual national defense and led to sizable crops throughout the war years.⁹⁰

On November 9, the Italian press and radio denounced the Swiss for allegedly allowing flights of British RAF bombers over Switzerland on their way to Italian targets. Basel’s *National Zeitung* quoted the Italian radio: “The Swiss must not think themselves inviolable—this is our last warning.” The Swiss high command confirmed that the British had violated Swiss air space and noted that Swiss anti-aircraft guns had fired at the planes. Swiss newspapers also asked why the Swiss should be blamed for the half-hour flights over their territory if the Axis could not stop the RAF pilots in their three-hour flight over German-occupied territory.⁹¹

On November 15, 1940, a petition with 105 names was filed with the Federal Council advocating appeasement of Germany. By April 1941, it had 173 signatures, although it came to be known as the infamous “Petition of the Two Hundred.” Its demands included abolition of a free press and revocation of criminal sentences for pro- German treason.⁹² The Federal Council never responded to the petition, and its signers were subjected to criminal investigation. The petition had the opposite of its intended effect—it outraged the press and the majority of Swiss, who reacted with an increased determination to resist.⁹³

The same day the petition was submitted—November 15, 1940—the fifth-column *Nationale Bewegung der Schweiz* (NBS, or National Movement of Switzerland) issued an “ultimatum” to the Federal Council and President Pilet-

Golaz.⁹⁴ The NBS ultimatum was referred to the Department of Justice and Police. Police had already acted against this organization four times earlier in the year, but it kept reappearing under different names. It was believed that the group, which brought leaflets into Switzerland attacking the Federal Council and advocating the triumph of National Socialism, would be prosecuted for subversion.

On November 17, General Guisan reported that the NBS did in fact endanger the security of the state.⁹⁵ Two days later, the Federal Council dissolved the NBS. Finding that the organization was attempting to overthrow democracy, the Federal Council forbade its activities, prohibited its publications and prohibited it from reorganizing under a different name. Violators would be tried under the decree of December 5, 1938, which meant trial before military tribunals. A recent military tribunal had sentenced seven defendants to life terms at hard labor for plotting to sabotage the country's defense.⁹⁶ Switzerland's action in banning the NBS at the height of Nazi power took courage in the face of Berlin's military might.

On November 27, the Federal Council also banned the Communist Party and any branches or renamed groups as a threat to democracy. Like the Nazis, the Communists were weak and not represented in the Parliament.⁹⁷

The German press continued to wage a propaganda campaign against Swiss neutrality and its free press. Nazi journalists denounced the reporting in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* of German night bombings of England while ignoring British bombing of German hospitals and civilian targets. In a headline article entitled "Switzerland in Churchill's Service," the *Frankfurter Zeitung* stated:

Never will the German people forget the attitude of the Swiss during this war. A nation of 80,000,000, while fighting for bare existence, finds itself almost uninterruptedly attacked, insulted and slandered by the newspapers of a tiny State whose Government claims to be neutral.⁹⁸

The *Strassburger Neueste Nachrichten* (*New Evening News*), claiming that Switzerland was once part of the Reich and was now within the "field of force" of the Third Reich, similarly stated that "Switzerland cannot prevent the penetration of the idea of the new order of Europe." European politics would no longer be dominated by the British policy of the balance of power but would be

based on an “unbalance,” under Axis leadership. To this new order, Swiss neutrality must bow, since Europe “is no longer interested, especially from the strategic and political viewpoint, in maintaining the isolation of certain anomalous regions.”⁹⁹

Few military analysts believe that Switzerland, outside the *Réduit*, could have held out for long against a multi-directional, combined-arms attack by Germany and Italy, no matter how bravely the Swiss fought. Occupying the country afterwards, of course, would have been a different problem for the fascists. An unidentified Swiss officer expressed the sentiment in his country as follows: “Even if Germany was irresistible, we were determined to resist. It was a character test. Are we men or dirty dogs?”

Defeat would be only a matter of months, perhaps weeks, but the Swiss believed that they could kill 200,000 Nazis before surrendering and thus contribute a noble service to the cause of all free men. And even in 1940, when it seemed as if resistance was futile and Hitler invincible, the Swiss took the long view and knew that they would not die in vain, if they preferred death to surrender. Their children and their children’s children would still be proud to be Swiss, and from the seed of their pride would flower the spirit of resistance that would one day liberate enslaved Europe from the Nazi tyranny.¹⁰⁰

Consistent with this theme, a publication of the SSV (Swiss Shooting Federation) ended the tension-filled year with the question, “What happens now?” The simple answer: “Learn to shoot, Swiss, learn to shoot.”¹⁰¹

Chapter 6

1941

The New Order in Europe

FEDERAL COUNCILLOR ERNST WETTER, SWITZERLAND'S PRESIDENT for 1941, opened the new year with the commitment that the country's 650-year tradition of independence would survive the "dark future."¹ The new year also saw the retirement of Rudolf Minger, the tough head of the Military Department who had been responsible for ever stronger defensive measures since the Third Reich came into existence in 1933. An accomplished marksman, Minger also had promoted rifle competitions throughout the country for defense training and readiness.²

From 1941 until the war was nearly over, Switzerland would be encircled by the Axis powers, subjected to regular air-raid alarms, and isolated from the outside world. The country remained subject to a Nazi media barrage, which, although meant to intimidate the Swiss, only engendered a stronger spirit of resistance involving not only marksmanship but also comradeship. "These weapons and these ties will never fail," the SSV's publication insisted.³ It was the soldier and his morale, not the blitzkrieg or the Luftwaffe, that were decisive.⁴

In February 1941, British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden sent apologies to the Swiss for bombs accidentally dropped over the Swiss border. Four civilians were killed in Basel and eleven other people in Zurich.⁵ Eden wrote that the British were "anxious to maintain in all circumstances the ancient ties of friendship and goodwill" with the Swiss. He asked for the forbearance of the Swiss to the British, "fighting as they are for the traditions of freedom and resistance to tyranny, of which the Swiss Confederation has in former times been the protagonist in European history."⁶

On March 22, Federal President Wetter told his party in Bern that the

government would cooperate economically with the new European order, but only on Swiss terms. “In accepting economic collaboration with the rest of Europe we would not be accepting any new ideal.” New restrictions had been placed on the former policies of world trade and a liberal trade policy. “But we can make the condition that the new order be based on the principle of collaboration of free States.”⁷

A group of eleven Swiss journalists touring the Reich made it clear that Switzerland was not eager to join the New Order. This led Nazi Propaganda Minister Goebbels to deliver a speech on March 25 in which he stated: “If Switzerland has decided to remain outside of our orbit under any circumstances, I cannot prevent it, but in that case Switzerland should remember that it will be excluded from all the advantages which the New Order will give to Europe.” The Bern *Nation* responded: “We hope that Dr. Goebbels will keep his word. That would be the most beautiful message possible for our country, which has only one desire—to be left alone.”⁸

Meanwhile, the Soviets supported and praised Hitler’s conquests. The U.S.S.R. was grabbing up the parts of Eastern Europe awarded it in the Nazi-Soviet Pact and German-Soviet trade continued. Stalin, despite irritating the Germans with his avarice for territory, made every effort to solidify his relationship with Hitler.⁹ During this period, Communist agitation had also heated up in Switzerland, with Moscow’s agents instigating dissent and calling for the overthrow of the Swiss government.¹⁰

On March 26, 1941, the government in Yugoslavia entered into a pact with the Axis and was promptly deposed in a coup with popular support. The new government proclaimed unconditional neutrality.¹¹ The Swiss vocally supported the coup.

One Socialist newspaper urged Swiss Foreign Minister (one-time Federal President) Pilet-Golaz to “take note” of the revolt in Yugoslavia and warned against “dangerous pilgrimages,” such as to Berlin. “The people and army form one indivisible thing, so that even in small countries strong diplomats are nothing,” said the paper. The article quoted a warning from a Swiss folk song: “Today you proudly ride your horse; tomorrow you are shot in the chest.”¹²

The elation of the Swiss people at being joined in their defiance of Nazi Germany by the Yugoslavs was unfortunately short-lived. On April 6, German, Italian and Hungarian armies invaded Yugoslavia; at the same time, Germans

(from Bulgaria) and the Italians (from Albania) attacked Greece.

The Swiss press and people condemned the invasions and cheered on the beleaguered states.¹³ The Yugoslavs had a million men under arms, as well as mountainous terrain that should have greatly assisted their defense. Nevertheless, their army collapsed in the face of the assault, and by the 17th, after only 11 days, the country had capitulated. The Yugoslavs had bravely, if foolishly, deployed their army to defend their entire 1,000-mile border—a tailor-made opportunity for blitzkrieg. Once the panzers cut through selected points of impact, outflanked or surrounded Yugoslav divisions panicked, thus prompting a general collapse. Elements of the Yugoslavian confederation, primarily from Slovenia and Croatia, declared for the Nazis when the attack began, further hastening the dissolution of resistance.

In the light of the Yugoslavian debacle, General Guisan's plan to fight at the border, delay in the Plateau and pre-Alps, and concentrate in the *Réduit National*, seemed more astute than ever. The cliché “he who defends everything defends nothing” was entirely applicable to defense against blitzkrieg, and though the Swiss military strategy would have “cold-bloodedly” conceded large portions of the country and large civilian population centers to Nazi domination, such pragmatism would have assisted greatly had it been applied to the Yugoslav cause.

The Wehrmacht, which lost only 151 men killed in the entire campaign against Yugoslavia, had a harder time against Greece, which was backed by three full-strength British divisions with modern equipment. Unfortunately, giving the lie to the admonition against trying to defend everything, the Greeks had cleverly arrayed their strength against anticipated points of Axis attack. But they had no defenses on their Yugoslavian border. When the panzers came streaming down on their left flank, after the sudden collapse of their neighbor, the Greek defense became unhinged. Hard fighting took place in the retreat down the Greek peninsula, including a brief stand at Thermopylae, and then the survivors of the British divisions performed another Dunkirk-like retreat, to Crete. Athens surrendered on April 27.

The evening after the Greek surrender, Athens radio called on all residents “to surrender all arms immediately and to fly the German flag wherever the Greek flag is flown.”¹⁴ In Switzerland, many citizens were despondent at what seemed to be the invincibility of the Third Reich and its allies and its growing network of conquered territory.¹⁵

Karl Megerle, a Nazi commentator, had warned Switzerland in the April 9 issue of Berlin's *Börsen Zeitung* "to take note of what has happened to Yugoslavia." Megerle claimed that civil unrest in Yugoslavia had "sabotaged a foreign policy of common sense." He attacked a recent article in the Swiss press which praised the honor and bravery of the Yugoslavs and warned that Switzerland might find herself in a situation similar to Yugoslavia's. Switzerland, he argued, could not be truly neutral if her press was allowed to continue to express "resentment and enmity toward Germany."¹⁶

The Swiss, however, remained unshaken in their desire for unconditional independence and continued to place great faith in the power of the individual citizen soldier to preserve the country's freedom. The Swiss Shooting Federation, ever on the scene, exhorted:

The best and first guarantor of our neutrality and our independent existence is the defensive will of the people, the well-trained and armed army, and the proverbial marksmanship of the Swiss shooter. Each soldier a good marksman! Each shot a hit!¹⁷

Heer und Haus (Armée et Foyer—"Army and Home"), an information and communications center, was initiated by the Aktion Nationaler Widerstand (the secret national resistance society) to focus the will of the people to resist and to further cement the bond between citizen and soldier.¹⁸

Heer und Haus entertained soldiers, but its real function was to instill the spirit of resistance into soldiers and the public alike. Conceived by intelligence operative Hans Hausamann and the journalist August Lindt, Heer und Haus was headed by Oscar Frey, a vocal spokesman in favor of resistance against Hitler's New Europe. Private lectures were not subject to censorship, and every Saturday afternoon and Sunday through the rest of the war, lectures would be held on subjects such as the military situation, the *Réduit* concept, and the will to fight. Lecturers stated explicitly that Hitler was the enemy. Persons who attended lectures spread the word. Thus, an entire communications network, free of censorship, pervaded the country.¹⁹

The April *National Geographic* featured a picture of a Swiss couple in their home, with the heading "Swiss 'Minutemen' Keep Their Guns at Home, Ready for Instant Action." The caption read: "Under his wife's supervision, this citizen soldier sews on a uniform button and inspects rifle, helmet, and cartridge

bandoleer.” “A Sword Symbolizes His Ancient Right to Vote and Bear Arms” ran the caption on another picture, with the explanation: “The custom dates back to the days when only those entitled to vote were permitted to carry arms in peacetime.”²⁰

This feature accurately depicted Switzerland. On May 4, 1941, the shooting association of the Canton of Fribourg admonished its members not to waste the “precious cartridges” they were allotted. For the Swiss, accurate shooting was a science. In May, the army published a manual entitled *Shooting Instructions for the Infantry (Schiessvorschrift für die Infanterie)* filled with mathematical formulae and scientific data for firing the rifle, carbine, light machine gun, heavy machine gun, anti-aircraft gun and anti-tank gun. Distances ranged, depending on the weapon, from 50 to 4,000 meters. One diagram demonstrated the great efficiency of single rifle shots over machine-gun fire: a 6-shot group with a spread of 30cm from the carbine versus a 250-shot group with a spread of 90cm from the machine gun, both fired in 30 seconds at 300 meters.²¹

On April 27, state-controlled Rome radio had sternly warned Switzerland that her “existence” would be jeopardized unless she observed the Axis definition of strict neutrality. “The Swiss must not forget that if they continue to eat it will be due to Italy’s benevolence,” said Enzo Mario Gray, a member of the Supreme Fascist Council and Mussolini’s mouthpiece. He charged that “the majority of the Swiss press is paid by British Jewry and serves British interests. Locarno has become a center of espionage. Switzerland must be careful.”²²

In another account of this radio address, Gray said: “Your neutrality is not a divine privilege, and so under no circumstances can it be considered eternal.” The Swiss government was responsible for the “criminal outbursts of the press” which “treat Italy’s victories with extreme flippancy” while reporting British victories in detail. At carnival time, Swiss marchers insulted fascism, he said. “All this leads the Axis Powers to realize that Switzerland has no intention of accepting and subordinating itself to the New Order which is meant for the whole European Continent.” His voiced boomed: “Neither Hitler nor Mussolini will allow the survival of such a dangerous nest of conspirators of the old, defeated world.”²³

The German press similarly attacked the Swiss press and people on April 30 for anti-Nazi statements and Swiss aloofness from the New Order, warning that “one day our patience will come to an end.” The *Börsen Zeitung* described world-famous Swiss theologian Karl Barth as “a fanatic enemy of Germany” and

said that “if such people are allowed to preach public hatred against Germany, then it is useless to argue with the Swiss press about the conception of neutrality.”²⁴

The Axis attack continued, as the Italian press predicted that “Switzerland’s turn was coming” because her press had “played up the Italian retreat in Cyrenaica, yet scarcely mentioned the Italian troops’ glorious efforts to regain lost terrain.” (In early 1941, General Erwin Rommel and his Afrikakorps had arrived in North Africa and immediately reversed recent Italian defeats.) In another attack, the *Börsen Zeitung* wrote: “As the result of previous experience with other European countries, we hold the Swiss government responsible for public opinion. However, this warning does not seem to help.”²⁵

Yet such threats only hardened the Swiss will to resist. “The Swiss are united that in case of attack, they will fight to the last man on every line.”²⁶

In his “Eagle’s Nest” at Berchtesgaden on May 11–12, in a meeting with Vichy Admiral Darlan, Hitler expressed his disappointment with France’s collaboration and stated that Germany would obtain permanent possession of several French ports as well as of Alsace and Lorraine. In return, France would be allowed to take Belgium’s Wallonia and French Switzerland, albeit without the Reich’s assistance. The Vichy Régime was hardly in a position to attack the Swiss; however, Hitler’s promise demonstrates his assumption that Switzerland would soon be another territory of the Reich, to be divided as he saw fit.²⁷

By May 1941, the entire Swiss field army of nine divisions— 358,000 soldiers and 46,000 horses—was concentrated in the *Réduit* with provisions for both the people and the army in this region to last for five months. There was just a small number of troops left at the frontier, and only three light brigades stationed in the Plateau for purposes of demolition and the destruction of factories, tunnels and bridges.²⁸ A blitzkrieg would at that time have mostly hit thin air—the Germans would instead need to contemplate combat with the Swiss Army on its chosen ground, in the Alps.

The *Réduit* utilized vast, concealed underground storage facilities. The prospect of a five-month siege would have dissuaded Germany or any other invader, and in any event the Swiss could likely have conducted raids to acquire more supplies. Further, there would have been nothing worth taking. The Gotthard and Simplon railroad lines would have been destroyed. Factories would have been stripped of essential components. Losses would have been high, especially in the mountains, and the invader would not be able to count on a

short campaign. In the Alps, with its narrow passages and vertical terrain, the defending infantry could resist both panzers and the Luftwaffe. The mountains were pocked with heavy fortifications and camouflaged positions.²⁹

As Swiss defense tactics became more refined, so did German offensive tactics. On May 20, the Germans practiced a new form of offense, albeit one they had demonstrated on a smaller scale before, in Norway and the Netherlands: they launched an airborne invasion of the island of Crete. Over 600 German transports and gliders skimmed across the Mediterranean to deliver 7,000 parachutists and mountain troops, against a British Empire garrison of 40,000 men. The carnage on the drop zones was horrendous; many paratroopers of the first wave were killed by ground fire before they even came to earth. But by the end of the week 22,000 Germans had landed while some 600 bombers and fighters of the Luftwaffe supported the assault and attempted to keep the Royal Navy at bay. By June 1, in a familiar story, 18,000 British troops were evacuated, this time to Egypt. The Third Reich had won again.

The news of Crete, history's first conquest by airborne invasion, resonated in Switzerland, as did the seeming German willingness to pay any price in blood, against whatever odds, in pursuit of a quick victory. In fact, Hitler had been repulsed by the steep price his paratroopers had paid for Crete and resolved not to attempt an airborne invasion again. But the Führer's attitude was unknown to the Swiss, who more than ever wondered what the Nazis had in store with their combined arms that could force a decision in the Alps.

That month's issue of London's *Contemporary Review* noted that Switzerland had maintained her liberty, despite being surrounded by the most powerful enemies of freedom in European history. After the shocking defeats of 1940, the Swiss recommitted themselves to resist and steadily improved their defenses.³⁰ The article went on to surmise, "little use the Nazi army could make of holding Zurich and the lower hills of the Jura, while a few divisions of Swiss snipers could hold the peaks of the Alps for an almost indefinite period."³¹

Despite flattering comments in the British press, however, the Swiss had yet to witness a successful land operation performed by the British Army against the Germans. In mid-1941, of course, the United States was still neutral, largely unarmed and remote. With the exception of Franco's Spain and Salazar's Portugal, the entire continent, except for democratic Switzerland, was an Axis domain. Who knew if the "Thousand Year Reich" was indeed an irrevocable fact? Even if the Nazis were reluctant to attempt a direct conquest, how soon

would it be before Switzerland would be economically strangled or starved?

On June 22, 1941, the Germans launched the greatest offensive in history, against the Soviet Union. The Führer's former friend Stalin, Hitler's accomplice in the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact, now had his turn to see blitzkrieg at first hand. This was a lucky break for the Swiss. Nazi plans to invade Switzerland had been drafted around the same time as plans to attack Russia were being developed. An Italian plan during this period would also have unleashed three armies with 15 divisions on Switzerland. Had Hitler not launched his legions at Russia, Switzerland would surely have been the continued obsession of the German General Staff. Instead, "Operation Barbarossa" meant a delay in the assault on Switzerland.³²

While most Swiss had no sympathy for Soviet totalitarianism, the Aktion Nationaler Widerstand, Switzerland's total-resistance purists, cheered the Russian resistance and thanked God that Hitler had decided to divert his forces elsewhere in Europe.³³

Nevertheless, despite Germany's attack on the Soviet Union, planning continued for an assault on Switzerland. In July, Colonel Adolf Heusinger presented to the Chief of the German Army Operations Department an invasion plan named "Operation Wartegau" (not to be confused with 1940's sabotage plan of the same name). The plan included not only paratrooper, panzer and Luftwaffe attacks, but also the transportation of forces on hydroplanes which would land on lakes in Switzerland. Informed by good intelligence, General Guisan would plan for just such an attack in the coming months.³⁴

This plan was not consummated, but Hitler did not lose sight of his ambition to destroy the Swiss nation. No one, including Western military observers, expected the Soviet Union to withstand the German onslaught, and a Wehrmacht victory would free up troops for an attack on Switzerland. During 1941, Swiss traitors continued to be trained by the Waffen SS and other Nazi groups in sabotage and espionage for the purpose of carrying out Nazi activities against their homeland.³⁵

However, the Führer believed that the Swiss would not be fit citizens of the Reich. Reflecting on the need to colonize his conquests with racially pure peoples, Hitler insisted: "we must attract the Norwegians, the Swedes, the Danes and the Dutch into our Eastern territories. They'll become members of the German Reich. Our duty is methodically to pursue a racial policy." The Germans created a new Waffen SS division, "Viking," composed of Scandinavian

volunteers and also recruited young men from the Low Countries. Despite the reputation of the Swiss, earned over hundreds of years, as the best infantry and the most intrepid fighters in Europe, however, the Führer was never able to attract more than a handful of Swiss to his endeavors. Himmler's SS eventually created independent units of various European nationalities from French to Latvian (and also a formation of East Indians), but it was never able to recruit enough Swiss to form a self-standing unit. Regarding the "inferior" people to Germany's immediate south, Hitler griped: "As for the Swiss, we can use them, at the best, as hotel-keepers."³⁶

At the June 2 conference between Hitler and Mussolini on the Brenner, the two dictators took turns expressing their hatred for the Swiss. Hitler went first:

The Führer characterized Switzerland as the most despicable and wretched people and national entity. The Swiss were the mortal enemies of the new Germany. . . . They frankly opposed the Reich, hoping that by parting from the common destiny of the German people, they would be better off. . . . Their attitude is determined as it were through the hate of renegades.³⁷

Elsewhere in this harangue, Hitler made an obscure reference apparently expressing resentment against the Swiss for their victory against the Germans in the Swabian War of 1499. He saw Switzerland as the historic enemy of the First as well as the Third Reich.

Mussolini agreed, complaining that the Swiss opposed the Axis nations without regard to language group and sounded out Hitler on dates for an invasion:

On a question of the Duce, what was in store in the future for Switzerland, which is but an anachronism anyway, the German Foreign Minister [Ribbentrop] replied, smiling, that the Duce must talk about it with the Führer. The Duce observed that only the French Swiss in Switzerland stood by France, while the Italian Swiss stood against Italy and the German Swiss against Germany. On the Jewish Question, the Führer said that after the war all Jews would have to get out of Europe completely.³⁸

Thus Hitler managed to link his hatred for both the Swiss and the Jews in the same diatribe. He called for the killing of Swiss until they submitted and the

eradication of all Jews, whether or not they submitted.

The Führer held Switzerland in particular contempt because of her policy in favor of peace. On August 20, 1941, he stated: “If one wants to wish the German people something good, it would be to have a war every fifteen to twenty years. An army whose only goal is to secure peace, one is led to observe, becomes playing at soldier—one only needs to look at Sweden or Switzerland—or it is in danger in the sense of a revolutionary setting.”³⁹

In September 1941 Heinrich Himmler communicated with his lieutenant Gottlob Berger regarding who might be named Reichs-statthalter (governor) in a conquered Switzerland. Himmler’s papers include a document entitled “Reichsführer SS, SS Hauptamt, Aktion S[chweiz],” which was a detailed plan for a Nazi takeover in Switzerland.⁴⁰ It is unclear whether Himmler actually chose a Reichsstatt-halter for Switzerland.

Nazi aversion to the Swiss stemmed in part from the Swiss tolerance for different languages, cultures, religions and ethnic groups. *Contemporary Jewish Record*, a publication of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), commented that in 1941 Switzerland’s 18,000 Jews “have preserved their socio-religious existence, and have still become completely absorbed within the Swiss body-politic. This is the cardinal reason for the fact that there is no anti-Jewish movement in Switzerland worthy of such designation.” Germany tried to finance Nazism in Switzerland, but “when the source of these incomes dries up, Nazi activities and the spread of anti-Semitic poison cease at once.” Almost all anti-Semitism in Switzerland stemmed from German citizens living there, and the authorities vigorously suppressed Nazi activities.⁴¹

The umbrella for Jewish groups in Switzerland was the Swiss Union of Jewish Communities (Schweizerischer Israelitischer Gemeindebund). The AJC publication also stated: “Having found no difficulty in synthesizing their lives as Swiss citizens and as Jews, being left in peace at least for the time being, Swiss Jewry is consolidating its cultural and socio-religious activities with a remarkable degree of success.”⁴²

An article in the American magazine *Commonweal* commented that Switzerland was the most international country of Europe while at the same time, with her system of local autonomy, the most decentralized. Since the Middle Ages, “the Swiss were a sort of European militia, and their country was recognized as free because it was an ‘Imperial Domain,’ not a feudal state like the others.” The Swiss still represented the same ideals:

Switzerland, at present encircled by the Axis powers, is a living refutation, a concrete and indisputable denial, of the totalitarian ideal. The Swiss have never asked for any other “living space” than liberty. By its very existence Switzerland proves that several races can live together in harmony, and on a footing of scrupulous equality; that it is possible to unite, in a freedom of diversity, various languages, various modes of life, and that this union is far more truly human than the enforced unity of the dictatorships. By its very existence it refutes the racial and nationalistic theories.⁴³

On August 11, Federal Councillor Karl Kobelt, head of the Federal Military Department, defined Switzerland’s double task in the midst of the European war as that of safeguarding her national defense and her food supply. To survive, commercial treaties with other nations had to be undertaken. At the same time, it was necessary to keep spending the three and a half million francs per day to keep mobilized for defense.⁴⁴

Before France fell, Swiss arms exports were almost equally divided among the warring camps; the defeat of France cut Switzerland off from Allied markets. In 1939, 42 of 64 million francs’ worth of arms exports went to France and Great Britain. In 1940 the official figures were, in millions of Swiss francs: France 26, Great Britain 21, Germany 33, and Italy 34; in 1941, Germany 122, Italy 61, and the Allied countries 0.⁴⁵ These official figures, though, obscure the major (and often surreptitious) Swiss exports of defense items to the Allies, which would continue for the entire war, as was acknowledged in secret British documents in 1943. Not surprisingly, despite Swiss trade with the Axis, Admiral William D. Leahy, the American Ambassador to Vichy France, found the Swiss in August 1941 to be “in complete sympathy with the cause of the democracies.”⁴⁶

Under the Hague Conventions governing war between nations, the commercial enterprises of a neutral may engage in free trade, including trade in arms, with belligerents. A neutral state may not supply one warring party with arms, but a private firm may.⁴⁷ Hague Conventions 5 and 13 of 1907 concerned the rights and duties of neutrals in war, including the right of all belligerents to equal treatment.⁴⁸ During the war, Switzerland strictly followed international law and prohibited state-owned firms from selling weapons to belligerents. Private commercial transactions, including those in arms, took place and were consistent with international law.

As a small, landlocked nation surrounded by the Third Reich and its allies, the Swiss, from necessity, traded with the only market available to them—the Axis. More puzzling was the ongoing trade between the Third Reich and the neutral United States. A document written by Major Charles A. Burrows of Military Intelligence addressed to the American War Department on July 15, 1941, stated:

A report has been received from Cleveland, Ohio . . . to the effect that the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey now ships under Panamanian registry, transporting oil (fuel) from Aruba, Dutch West Indies, to Teneriffe, Canary Islands, and is apparently diverting about 20% of this fuel oil to the present German government.⁴⁹

The September 1941 issue of *Fortune* magazine noted that the Swiss were denounced at least twice a week at the Wilhelmstrasse press conferences in Berlin. This was because the Swiss, who were “outspoken democrats and antifascists,” had “the only oasis of democracy, free speech, and civilized living in all Europe today.” Surrounded by the Axis, landlocked Switzerland was “a continental island blockaded by the British and counterblockaded by the Germans, *yet dependent on foreign trade to live.*” Of its four language groups, “the German-speaking, German-descended *Volksdeutsche* are readiest to fight if Hitler should try to violate their democratic soil.” Yet “nations other than Switzerland, Sweden for example, have taken their place in the Nazi New Order without visible resistance. But the Swiss have shown that they will never peaceably submit to *Gleichschaltung.*”⁵⁰

Economic strangulation, *Fortune* continued, forced the Swiss to trade with the Axis. “For to fight Germany they must meantime live and work and produce—and because of their economic isolation they can do so only on German sufferance. The ironic result is that by arming themselves, they are forced to arm Germany as well.”⁵¹

Before the war, Swiss trade with England accounted for 17% of total foreign trade, but this was now almost totally blocked. Switzerland had imported foodstuffs, tobacco, rubber goods, and machinery from the United States, but England, fearing that the goods might find their way to the Nazis, had in the previous April stopped issuing permits for U.S.-Swiss trade in bulk foods and many materials.⁵² With Switzerland’s markets now severely restricted, *Fortune*

described the situation:

The Axis sets its own prices, and the Swiss say that their profits have been cut to the bone. But nothing can be done. The factories must go on producing if Switzerland is to implement its own defenses. They must produce at full blast or there will be unemployment—and unemployed men are open targets for Nazi propaganda. The factories can run at all only because Germany sells, or permits others to sell, coal, iron, copper, and other necessary raw materials, and the supplies come through only because Germany receives war materials in return.⁵³

In a telling incident showing the attitude of the average Swiss, the authors of the *Fortune* article had recently returned from Germany via Switzerland, and observed the following rather humorous phenomenon seen at movie houses that showed both American and German newsreels:

The Nazi reels move with a peculiar jerkiness, a result of the removal of all “*heiling*” for the Swiss market. The Germans are still puzzled, but they found that Swiss audiences laughed uproariously at every sight of a grim-faced German shooting up his hand like a railroad signal and grunting “*Heil, Hitler!*” One theatre had to stop the film to restore calm after a scene in which Hitler himself had said “*Heil, Hitler!*”⁵⁴

As the brutal nature of German occupation of foreign territories unfolded during 1941, it became clear how the Nazis might have responded to a nation of armed citizens, of which Switzerland was the best—indeed, the only—example. The Germans took the sternest measures against the few citizens who possessed arms in the occupied countries. At year’s end, the Nazis decreed:

The death penalty or, in less serious cases, imprisonment shall be imposed on any Pole or Jew . . . if he is in unlawful possession of firearms . . . or if he has credible information that a Pole or a Jew is in unlawful possession of such objects, and fails to notify the authorities forthwith.⁵⁵

This decree was related in part to the activities of the *Einsatz-gruppen*, Nazi killing squads that exterminated Jews and others in the East. A half-million

Soviet Jews were murdered in the second half of 1941. In Riga, Latvia, a mere 23 men killed 10,600 people. As Raul Hilberg observed in his 1985 book: “The killers were well armed. . . . The victims were unarmed.”⁵⁶ The Einsatzgruppen killed two million people between fall 1939 and summer 1942.⁵⁷

Six Einsatzgruppen of a few hundred members each, and divided into Einsatzkommandos, operated in Poland and Russia. Their tasks included arrest of the politically unreliable, confiscation of weapons, and extermination.⁵⁸ The Einsatzgruppen reports to superiors in Berlin during 1941–42 are enlightening. Interspersed with report after report of thousands executed were accounts of snipers. For instance, Einsatzgruppe C reported in September 1941 that, besides liquidating Jews and Communists, its operations included, “above all, the fight against all partisan activities, beginning with the well-organized bands and the individual snipers down to the systematic rumor mongers.”⁵⁹

Typical executions were that of one woman “for being found without a Jewish badge and for refusing to move into the ghetto” and of another “for sniping.” Persons found in possession of firearms were shot on the spot. Reports of sniping and partisan activity increased over time.⁶⁰

Even under the most repressive conditions, a small proportion of the citizens who had arms gave the Nazis great anguish. The Nazis did not overlook the “sniping” to be expected should an incursion into Switzerland be ventured. If they needed a reminder, they could read about it in the Swiss Shooting Federation’s newspaper: “Swiss weapons are part of the Swiss mentality. . . . The government has the confidence to give the people weapons and even ammunition to save us from any surprise.”⁶¹ Swiss Jews received arms just like all other citizens.

It was reported from Bern on December 2 that Germany was expected to demand that the Swiss expel all British nationals. Britain’s offensive in Libya and the resistance of the Russians were believed to have delayed the Nazis’ “Swiss revisionist plan” to integrate Switzerland into the New Order. The Swiss were prepared to resist any new push to become part of an economically and politically related Nazi bloc.⁶²

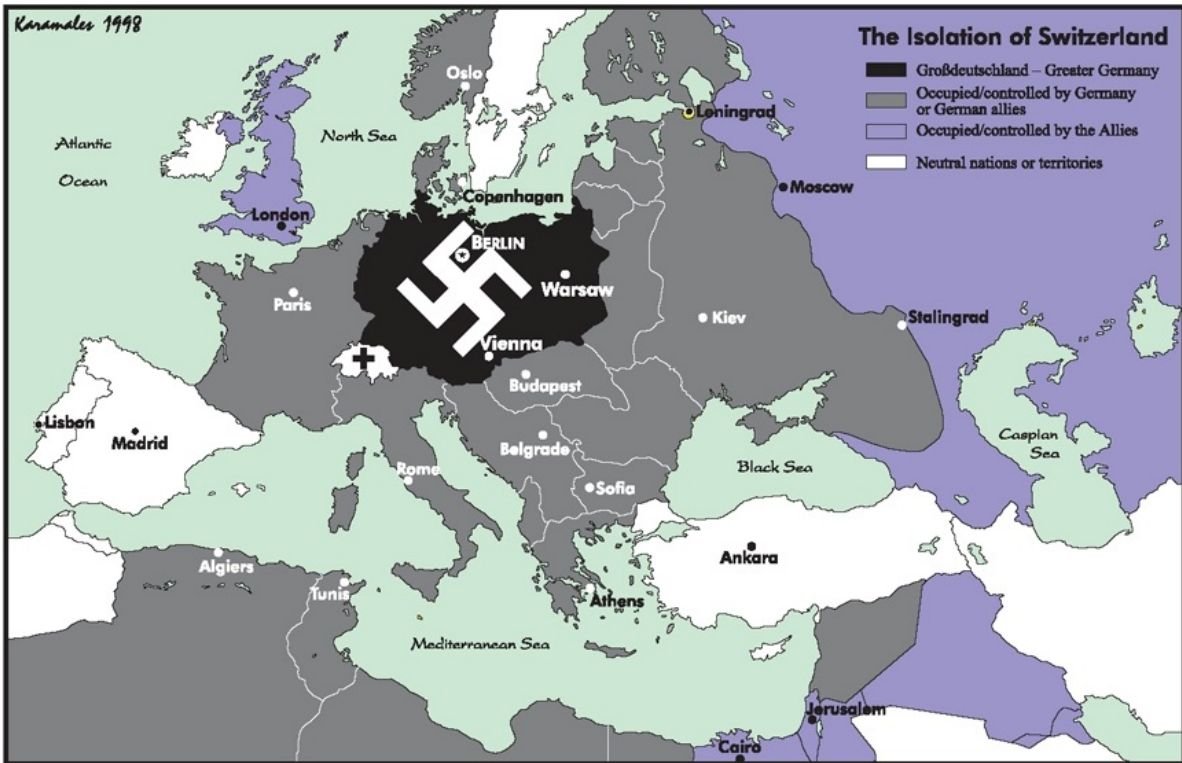
Switzerland’s role as a neutral in World War II concerned not merely military defense and trade policy but also, continuing an age-old tradition, diplomacy. The United States remained neutral until forced into the war by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Three days later, it was

announced that Switzerland would likely represent the interests of the United States in Japan. Her first duty would be to arrange the exchange of officials and nationals of each country.⁶³

On the 11th, the German and Italian ambassadors notified the American government that their countries had entered into a state of war with the United States. The Germans appointed the Swiss to represent their interests in the United States, beginning with the exchange of nationals.⁶⁴ Six days later, the State Department announced that Switzerland would in turn represent American interests in all belligerent countries and all occupied countries. While the Swiss would represent the Americans in Japan, Japan selected Spain to represent her in the United States.⁶⁵

By the following month, Switzerland was representing the interests of twenty belligerents, a function that included the exchange of wounded prisoners.⁶⁶ In Germany, the Swiss represented the interests of the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, among others.⁶⁷

Throughout the war, Hitler continued to exhibit both hatred and fear of things Swiss. One incident from 1941 illustrates the point. In June, Hitler personally forbade Schiller's play *Wilhelm Tell* from being performed in Germany or read in the schools. Tell was a freedom fighter, and his killing of a tyrant reminded Hitler of the 1938 attempt of the Swiss citizen Maurice Bavaud to kill him. Bavaud, though he had not succeeded, resembled a modern Tell.⁶⁸ Schiller's play, however, could still be performed at theatres in Switzerland, the only free German-speaking theatres left in Europe.





The historic Rütli Meadow on July 25, 1940, just after the fall of France. On the very spot where the “Companions of the Oath” had formed the Swiss Confederation in 1291, General Henri Guisan summoned his highest officers to stand before him and receive his orders: Switzerland would never surrender!



“If my first arrow had my dear child struck, The second arrow I had aimed at you, And this, I swear, would not have missed its mark. “—William Tell to the tyrant Gessler (Schiller, 1804). From a painting by Ludwig Vogel.



1315: The Battle of Morgarten, where 1,400 Swiss peasants defeated 20,000 Habsburg knights and infantry. Pummeled with huge stones and driven into the lake, 2,000 Austrians were killed to only 12 Swiss. The painting is by Ferdinand Wagner.



Henri Guisan, Switzerland's wartime leader, has been compared to Winston Churchill for the inspiration he gave his people during times of crisis.



August 30, 1939: At the Federal Parliament in Bern, General Guisan is made commander-in-chief of the Swiss Army. With Guisan are, from left to right, Federal Councilors Marcel Pilet-Golaz, Philipp Etter and Rudolf Minger.



General Guisan reviews a unit of troops. Swiss soldiers traditionally keep their arms and equipment at home, allowing for rapid mobilizations.



The Ortswehren (Local Guards), consisting of older men from the shooting

associations, as well as teenaged marksmen, carried the old Model 1889 rifle. Armbands identified them as members of the Swiss military.



German troops enter a Belgian town in May 1940. Belgium, the Netherlands and France would fall and the British would evacuate the continent after a campaign that lasted only six weeks.



June 18, 1940: Hitler and Mussolini in Munich, where they discussed plans to attack and carve up Switzerland.



Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels fumed about the Swiss press throughout the war. In May 1942 he called Switzerland “this stinking little state.”



The German attacking force under the 1940 von Menges plan would have been Army Group C commanded by General Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb.



Allan W. Dulles arrived in Bern in November 1942 to establish the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the American intelligence network. Switzerland was an ideal location to spy on the Axis, encourage French and Italian partisans and communicate with Germany's underground.



The Swiss applied a fluid defense between the border and the the Alps. Each mobile 11-man squad was equipped with a light machine gun (right), a submachine gun and nine K31 carbines. The main strength of the Swiss Army, however, awaited a German attack in fortified Alpine positions (below).





Although Switzerland has been called a country where marksmanship is the “national sport,” the Swiss Army also trained in other martial skills.



When the men were under mobilization orders, the rural women, helped only by the children, were left with all of the farm work.







Climbing uphill with skis carried in a backpack specially designed for mountain troops (top). On ski maneuvers, troops travelled light with a K31 carbine and 48 cartridges each. The soldier at left has a rope around his waist which is tied to each following member of his squad. This kind of terrain, inaccessible to German panzers, would also have frustrated Luftwaffe raids.



Camouflaged Swiss mountain snipers were ready to confront the German Army in the Alps.



Women in the auxiliary forces, identified by the armband with the Swiss flag —white cross on red background (not to be confused with the Red Cross emblem of a red cross on a white background).





A 75mm mountain cannon (above) and a 105mm turret cannon (left). Such artillery was typically placed at high positions overlooking valleys through which an invader would have to pass.



This Swiss-made 20mm anti-aircraft gun fired 250 rounds per minute with a range of 4,500 meters.



Swiss Messerschmitt fighters originally purchased from Germany. In 1940, Swiss pilots shot down 11 Luftwaffe planes and lost only 3 of their own.



The Luftschutz (air raid defense), which included many female members, detected and plotted the paths of intruding bombers and fighters.



Scrambling into the cockpit during an air raid alarm (below). The plane appears to be armed with a Model 1925 light machine gun.





The woman standing points to the Gotthard fortification on the map at a military communications office.



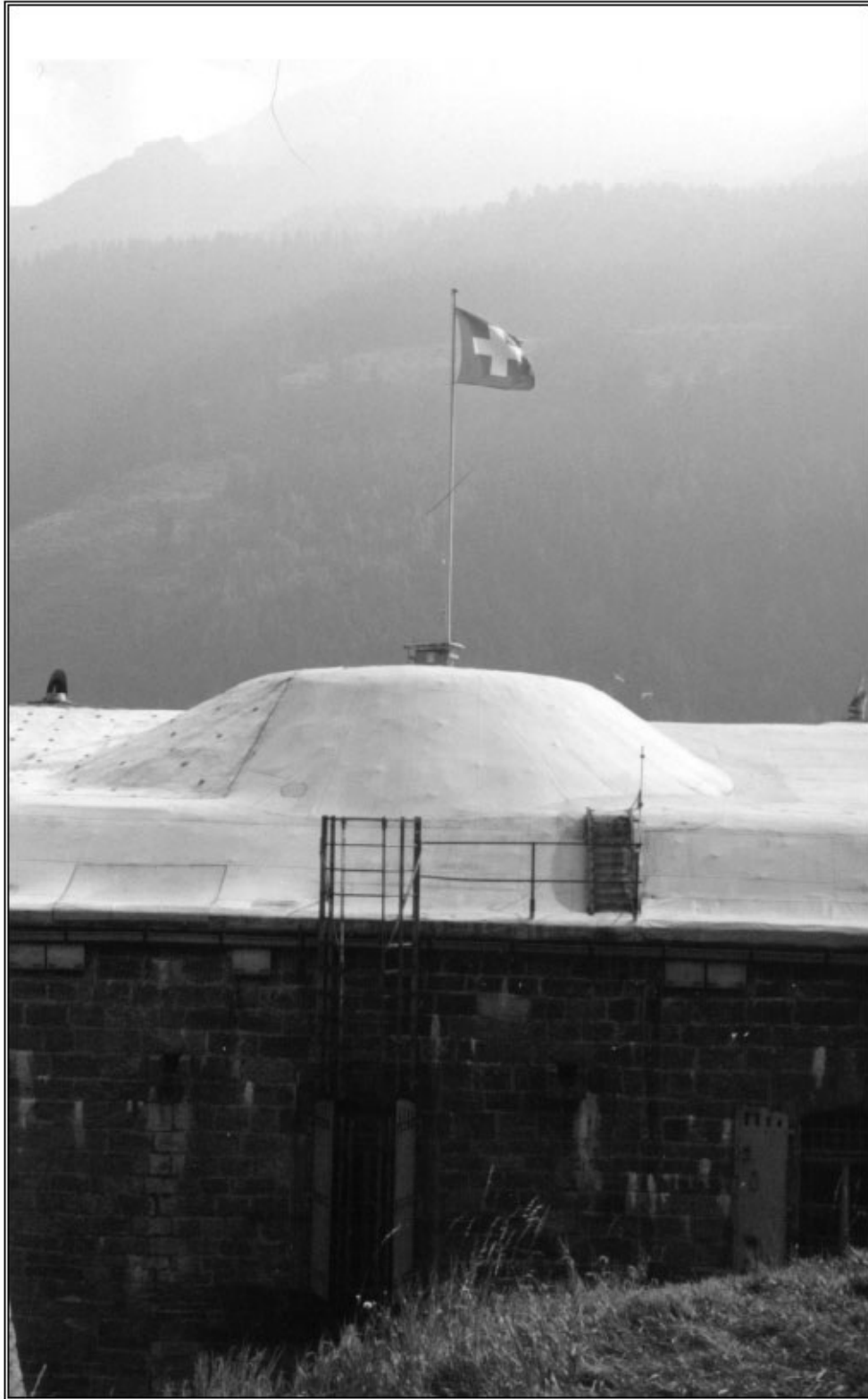
The tragic bombing of Schaffhausen on April 1, 1944 by thirty American Liberators, whose pilots thought they were over Germany, killed scores of Swiss. The Swiss forgave the attack and provided a safe haven for 1,700 downed American pilots.



A Swiss infantry combat unit. The Swiss feared, and stayed in readiness for, a German attack from the beginning of the war in 1939 until the end in 1945.



The Swiss hosted over 100,000 interned soldiers during the war, 65 percent of whom were Allied. French Colonial troops pictured above found refuge in Switzerland after the fall of France.



Fort Airolo, part of the Gotthard fortification located in northern Ticino, pointed its long-range guns in the direction of a probable Italian invasion. The

flag flies peacefully today.



July 16, 1995: A young woman with a Sturmgewehr 90, the current service rifle, and a young man with a Sturmgewehr 57, a now obsolete military rifle, march in a parade in Thun celebrating the Federal Shooting Festival.

Chapter 7

1942

“Oasis of Democracy”

AS 1942 UNFOLDED AND AN ALLIED VICTORY SEEMED REMOTE, the battle for hearts and minds was at a critical stage. On January 5, the Swiss arrested an artillery soldier and his co-conspirators whom German intelligence had paid to steal certain Swiss weapons and munitions and to make maps of Swiss Army positions. By a judgment on October 9, he became the first Swiss soldier sentenced to death for treason.¹

The Führer’s intent to impose Nazi rule on Switzerland at some future date was evident again during a discussion on his policy toward Jews on January 27. A week after the notorious Wannsee Conference, where the plan to annihilate the Jewish people was settled, Hitler insisted: “The Jew must get out of Europe! . . . Out of Switzerland and out of Sweden, they must be driven out.”²

Nazi spies and propagandists were busy, but the Swiss were equally vigilant, as a sampling of reports for the first quarter of 1942 reveals. Two workers at the Altdorf Munitions Works were convicted of communicating fortification plans to a foreign power.³ Six Nazi agents were sentenced to prison for revealing military secrets.⁴ In Lucerne, Swiss police arrested nineteen National Socialists, followers of Swiss Nazi propagandist Franz Burri, for distribution of prohibited propaganda.⁵ Burri had already fled from Swiss authorities and was in exile in Vienna. In Zurich, two were sentenced to prison for violation of military secrets and eleven were jailed for organizing unlawful propaganda.⁶

The two founders of the Swiss National Socialist movement, which had been dissolved in 1940, were convicted by a Zurich court in absentia of threatening national security and were sentenced to prison.⁷ Several men were convicted of revealing military secrets to a foreign state and stealing ammunition and weapons parts from the military, some receiving life sentences.⁸

Also in January, General Guisan took steps to make official the collaboration between the security service and the public communications section known as Heer und Haus (Army and Home). That organization was invited to “commence the struggle against all extremist propaganda for the purpose of instruction and dissuasive activities.”⁹ This meant that nothing was barred by the censor for fear of Nazi retaliation—lecturers could explicitly discuss the advantages of Swiss democracy over National Socialism, and of shooting as many Wehrmacht invaders as possible.

In the January 9th issue of *Reich* magazine, Nazi Propaganda Minister Goebbels attacked “the remaining so-called neutrals in the European hegemony” and charged that “Switzerland and Sweden are lacking in the most elementary appreciation of the security of their nations and their future existence.” Goebbels insisted:

If these neutrals are not prepared to fight with us for the German victory, they should at least pray God for that victory. But they have not even enough sense for that. . . . Their political tendencies incline them toward bolshevism.¹⁰

As Goebbels wrote those words, for the first time in the war he might have been growing nervous. German Army Group Center, surprised by both the Russian weather and Soviet reserves, was just barely staving off a huge counteroffensive outside Moscow. Still, in the preceding months the Nazis had surrounded Leningrad, occupied the Baltic states, and taken Kiev and most of Ukraine.

The January 25th *New York Times Magazine* included an article on Switzerland entitled “Oasis of Democracy” which argued that while the Swiss took every measure to guarantee peace, they never followed an appeasement strategy. “Dependent though they are upon their Axis neighbors for everything, the Swiss, democrats and independents to the core, have never acquiesced in Germany’s ‘New Order’.”¹¹

Nevertheless, Switzerland was feeling the effects of the war. There was only enough coal to heat one room per house, the article noted. Most commodities were rationed, and there were three meatless days a week. Both private and public grounds, including soccer fields and, in at least one case, the front lawn of a library, were given over to growing potatoes. The Swiss survived only through foreign trade, and all exports required a German permit. Yet their trade with

Germany paradoxically allowed them to defend themselves from Germany. Indeed, “by manufacturing arms for Germany they have been able to make arms for themselves.”¹² In any event, Swiss manufactures accounted for only a miniscule part of German weapons acquisitions. For the entire war period, Swiss arms deliveries to Germany accounted for 0.6% of Germany’s total armaments.

Despite protests from the Reich, Switzerland refused to recognize Axis conquests and allowed the occupied countries to maintain their embassies in Bern. This policy corresponded to the British policy of permitting similar embassies, as well as entire governments-in-exile, to operate in London. The Swiss were ready for an invasion, according to the *Times*: “Their citizen army is tiny by comparison with the millions mustered by its neighbors, but its equipment is excellent and it is highly trained.”¹³

While far too few partisans in the occupied East had guns, the small number who did continued to wreak havoc. Propaganda Minister Goebbels made the following diary entry on March 16, 1942:

The activity of partisans has increased noticeably during recent weeks. They are conducting a well-organized guerrilla war. It is very difficult to get at them because they are using such terrorist methods in the areas occupied by us that the population is afraid of collaborating with us loyally any longer. The spearheads of this whole partisan activity are the political commissars and especially the Jews.¹⁴

Jews with rifles waging guerrilla warfare were obviously hampering the activities of the Nazis. Similarly, the Swiss Shooting Federation believed that despite the role of the panzers and heavy weapons on European battlefields, the rifle-carrying infantryman remained invaluable: “The calm individual single shot is still the most important thing. . . . A little war behind enemy lines is being fought with well-aimed, single shots by infantrymen. Our purpose is confirmed: we must make every effort to heighten the training of marksmen.” Swiss marksmen thus promised the same treatment to Wehrmacht invaders as was meted out by the Russian partisans.¹⁵

German military training as of 1942, and probably long before, emphasized marksmanship skills at 100 meters.¹⁶ The Swiss population at large, whether of military age or not, regularly participated in rifle competitions at 300 meters,

although military training entailed distances of anywhere from 50 to 600 meters. Although the Germans were formidable foes on the battlefields of other European countries, none of these countries had a reputation for good marksmanship.

In a March 16 speech, Military Department chief Karl Kobelt stated that “Switzerland does not want peace at any price and never at the price of her honor.”¹⁷ Addressing marksmen in eastern Switzerland, Kobelt referred to the founding of the country six-and-a-half centuries earlier:

It was the supreme goal, the fight for freedom, that gave the small mountain people the strength to win. . . . If we lose our freedom, it will have to be won again, because the Swiss can only live in freedom.¹⁸

A report in Fribourg Canton typifies the Swiss preparations for a war of all the people against an invader:

On April 11, the chief of the I Division spoke at Fribourg on the role of the noncommissioned officers and the shooters in the event of rapid mobilization and under enemy fire, wherein orders perhaps will be lacking or not delivered to them. This raises the value and importance of shooting as applied to the specific terrain that the troops of our canton will have to defend.¹⁹

As explained in the *Training Manual for the Infantry 1942* (*Ausbildungsvorschrift der Infanterie 1942*), the Swiss infantry combat unit consisted, at full strength, of a squad leader and ten soldiers. The unit was armed with a light machine gun, a submachine gun, and nine carbines, one of which featured a telescopic sight. Two soldiers carried equipment for the launching of anti-tank shells and two antitank weapons. The unit might also have had hand grenades and, in exceptional cases, land mines.²⁰

The light machine gun was the primary weapon for the firefight. It could be shot at 600 meters and, in favorable conditions, at 800 meters with success. The submachine gun was not only the automatic weapon for use under the arm at the shortest distances, but also offered good hit probabilities at targets up to 200 meters. Normally the shooter fired in quick single shots or bursts at short distances.

The telescopic-sight carbine belonged in the hands of a superior marksman.

This rifle could be used at distances over 500 meters when sufficient time existed for carefully aimed shots or when ammunition was low. The regular carbines could be used out to distances of 600 meters, if the targets were at all recognizable.²¹

The unit was well supplied with ammunition. Excluding the two anti-tank weapons supplied with five rounds each, the squad of eleven soldiers could shoot around 1,800 bullets at the enemy before drawing new supplies from their parent unit or arms caches.

Given the natural cover in the Alps and the Jura, the countless hills, crevices, and bodies of water at the border and in the Plateau, these combat units would have been deadly against any German invasion. Roughly half a million soldiers would have been divided into units of just eleven. One can imagine the damage a seemingly infinite number of swarms of these units could have inflicted on the Wehrmacht.

Yet for the time being, the war between Germany and Switzerland continued to be waged with words instead of bullets. Nazi Propaganda Minister Goebbels complained in his diary on May 7 that the Swiss had recalled their representative to a film organization. “This stinking little state [*dieser kleine Dreckstaat*] is trying to provoke the International Motion Picture Association.” He insisted that the association impose a general boycott on the Swiss.²²

The press, especially in Switzerland’s German-speaking areas, strongly opposed National Socialism and criticized any concessions the government made to the Reich. Berlin’s *Völkischer Beobachter* attacked Switzerland as “the reservation park of democracies,” peopled by “*Berg-Semiten*,” mountain Jews. A popular Nazi song went:

Switzerland is a porcupine,
We will take her as dessert;
Then we’ll go to the wide world
And get us Roosevelt.²³

The Swiss joked that only the Nazis would eat porcupine.

The Nazi assault on the Swiss press continued. In mid-October, Dr. Paul Schmidt, Press Chief of the German Foreign Office, charged that the Swiss press had a “negative attitude” toward the New Order. As Swiss reporters listened, he continued: “There will be no place for such editors in the new Europe. We will

make short shrift of them. Perhaps they will find their future home in the steppes of Asia, or maybe it would be best simply to send them off into the Great Beyond.”²⁴

From Switzerland, the *Neue Berner Zeitung* shot back: “The National Socialist conception of a new European order is absolutely incompatible with the freedom of Europe’s states and peoples.” Under a headline “*Wir machen nicht mit!*” (loosely, “We won’t play ball”), Zurich’s *Volksrecht* also responded: “The prospect of death can scare no one who must imagine what the ‘New Europe’ of tomorrow will be like, from the way it looks today.”²⁵ The Federal Council protested Schmidt’s death threats through the Swiss minister in Berlin.²⁶

Dr. Schmidt was at it again on November 21, blaming the Swiss for allowing British bombers to fly over their territory en route to targets in northern Italy. Schmidt claimed that Switzerland, which “flatters itself on being a democratic country and flaunts particular sympathies for Britain,” tolerated the flights, which resulted in the deaths of women and children.²⁷

On June 15, 1942, it was reported that the Swiss were preparing for full mobilization. Domestic trouble in the Reich was anticipated; Italian soldiers had not been paid and were clamoring for food, and traffic on the “underground railroad” by which refugees and deserters from the German military forces escaped into Switzerland had greatly increased. Interned German soldiers confirmed that an “escape organization” existed in the German Army, just as one existed for civilians. Two German airmen from the faraway Russian front deserted into Switzerland.²⁸

On July 5, Hitler attacked the Swiss press for glowing reports about Soviet military power, deploring that “not only in England and America, but also in Stockholm and in Swiss cities the population believes in Jewish claptrap.” The Führer fumed that Jews must have special influence in Switzerland because her people cared only about matters such as milk-interests, grain prices and clocks. In addition to all the other characteristics of the Swiss that Hitler disliked, he hated them because of their free market capitalism, which he associated with Judaism.²⁹

The Swiss National Day celebration on August 1 was marred by air-raid sirens and a blackout. General Guisan’s order of the day stated: “Soldier of Switzerland of 1942! To remain master of your own destiny, sole master after God, hold to the watchword I gave you at the beginning of the year: Stand firm

and faithful.”³⁰ Three days later, on August 4, the Federal Council decreed that military tribunals rather than civil courts would try all persons, including civilians, accused of crimes against state security.³¹

In August, the British staged a large amphibious raid against the French port of Dieppe. Using a Canadian division, Churchill had intended to demonstrate that Nazi-held Europe was vulnerable to surprise attacks made possible by the strength and mobility of the Royal Navy. The Canadians, however, were met by a wall of fire from German tanks and guns. Most of the invaders were killed or captured before the remnants were rescued in a hasty evacuation. It would be almost two years before the Allies would attempt another invasion of northern Europe.

On August 26, Hitler, in one of his harangues to his military advisers, stated bluntly: “A state like Switzerland, which is nothing but a pimple on the face of Europe, cannot be allowed to continue.” Hitler denounced the Swiss as a racial miscarriage, “a misbegotten branch of our *Volk*.”³²

For all his threats and the numerous General Staff operational plans to attack Switzerland, Hitler hesitated to commit the Wehrmacht to combat on Swiss ground. Nazi military intelligence was well aware of the military prowess of this “pimple.” It prepared a Little Swiss Information Manual (*Kleines Orientierungsheft Schweiz*), issued September 1, 1942, to acquaint German soldiers with Swiss defenses. The manual stated:

The Swiss militia system enables a complete use of all those fit for military service with relatively low expense. It invariably results that the warrior spirit arises in the Swiss people and allows the installation in the small country of a very strong and expedient organization, resulting in the quick readiness of the army for war.³³

The Swiss soldier, the manual continued, is characterized by love of home, toughness and tenacity. His shooting performance is good. He dedicates himself to the great care of arms, equipment, uniforms, horses and pack animals. “Particularly the German Swiss and the Alpine soldier would be good fighters.”³⁴

After Hitler launched World War II in 1939 by invading Poland, the Swiss decreed that foreigners in their country must have a visa.³⁵ Early in the war,

French civilians and Belgian and Dutch soldiers found refuge in Switzerland. Many left again through Vichy France. Once the Axis occupied Vichy France and thus completely surrounded the Swiss in November 1942, however, there was no longer any escape route, and the Swiss government, fearing food shortages, became reluctant to accept new refugees. It was known that other countries such as the United States would not accept refugees. In the first half of 1942, the United States granted only 30 visas.³⁶

Meanwhile, Switzerland continued to play her traditional humanitarian role. The International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva handled millions of letters to and from prisoners and provided assistance to wounded soldiers.³⁷ It resisted Axis pressure to extradite political refugees and, while an “independent” Vichy France existed, Swiss officials helped endangered persons to escape from it and through it.

In August, the Swiss border was briefly closed to Jewish refugees. Heinrich Rothmund, police chief of the federal Ministry of Justice and Police, commanded his men to prevent persons from entering Switzerland, especially over the French border. This drastic policy change led to such a public outcry, however, that within days border guards were ordered to accept Jews under sixteen, families, and the elderly.³⁸ Once again, the Swiss people had protested successfully against policies established by government bureaucrats. Edgar Bonjour, the preeminent scholar on Swiss neutrality, notes:

Left to themselves, the Swiss people would have swept away all frontier barriers and taken in all the thousands who were striving to save their lives, if nothing else, from fury at their persecutors. But the government was soon warning the people of the dangers of the “overcrowded boat,” and stressing the inexorable limits set to the granting of asylum.³⁹

Wartime immigration policy was debated in the National Council, the lower house of Parliament, on September 22. The government’s anti-immigration policy was attacked. A government spokesman warned that fifth columnists could infiltrate the country if the borders were opened. However, he acknowledged that numerous refugees were being granted asylum.⁴⁰

Swiss citizens resorted to ingenious methods to assist refugees. A Swiss doctor bandaged a Jewish woman as a ruse and, crying emergency, took her

right past the guards on both sides of the German border. She then stayed in a Swiss home which took in several other Jewish refugees until she could make her way to the United States.⁴¹

During this period, the average number of refugees fleeing into Switzerland was 175 per night, for a total of more than 14,000 by October 3, 1942. The mostly destitute refugees, in particular those seeking to escape slave labor, came from the north and from Vichy France in the southwest. Soon the previously lax border control was tightened and a Commissioner for Refugees was appointed.⁴²

For purposes of comparison, it is instructive to examine American refugee policy during this period. In July 1940, the U.S. State Department directed its consuls not to issue visitors' or transit visas unless the person had an exit permit from his home country. An American edict of June 1941 made it all but impossible for refugees with relatives in the Reich to come to the United States. At that time the Vichy government unsuccessfully sought the resettlement of thousands of French Jews in the United States. The State Department did not recognize Jews, as such, to be political refugees. It was later decided that *children* from Vichy could enter, but between March 1941 and August 1942 only 309 refugee children were admitted into the United States. Of the 460,000 visas available for admission to the United States between 1938 and 1942, only 228,964 were issued.⁴³

On November 8, 1942, the Allies invaded North Africa, prompting the Nazi occupation of Vichy France so that the Germans could guard the Mediterranean coast. Premier Pétain objected, but offered no resistance.⁴⁴ The noose thus tightened around Switzerland.⁴⁵ The Nazi takeover of Vichy France included an incident that illustrated what it meant for Switzerland to be a protecting power for the interests of belligerents. A Wehrmacht soldier with a submachine gun took over the United States Embassy in Vichy just before the arrival of the Swiss representative, Minister Walter Stucki. Stucki burst into the embassy brandishing his only weapon—a Swiss Army knife—with which he managed to drive the soldier from the building.⁴⁶

The Nazis seemed to be postponing an invasion of Switzerland until they could defeat the major powers. Germany could, of course, also invade when the Gotthard and Simplon tunnels were no longer of military value. Meantime, the Germans kept Swiss industry supplied with coal.

The Allies restricted imports from Switzerland and threatened to blacklist Swiss firms.⁴⁷ The Swiss spent most of the year negotiating with the Allies over trade terms. Without coal from Germany, Swiss industry would collapse, and an unemployed work force would be a seedbed for National Socialist agitation. To get coal, Switzerland had to export products to Germany. Yet this Swiss-German trade also allowed Switzerland to manufacture goods for the Allies. The Swiss obtained transit permits from Berlin and Rome allowing shipment of goods to the Allies, who in turn would ship raw materials to the Swiss. The Allies and the Axis were both concerned, of course, that their raw materials not be used to manufacture goods for their enemies. Controls could not be strictly implemented, however, and in fact the Allies and the Axis, both of which needed Swiss products, had to approve trade agreements allowing Swiss trade with their enemies.

The chief American negotiator, Winfield Riefler, promoted trade with the Swiss for the purpose of employing the Swiss work force to produce for the Allies and of strengthening the Swiss military. He argued against some of his British colleagues that refusing to trade with Switzerland because the Swiss traded with Germany would only force the Swiss to trade more with Germany. At the end of 1942, it was agreed that, in the first four months of 1943, Switzerland would export goods valued at two and a half million Swiss francs to the United States and Britain. In return, the British and Americans would supply specified raw materials for the exclusive use of the Swiss Army. This trade allowed the Swiss to *decrease* shipments to Germany.⁴⁸

Now that the United States had been forced into the war by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, some Americans suddenly took a dim view of neutrality on the part of other countries.⁴⁹ Yet despite Germany's influence over Swiss imports and exports, American public opinion still recognized, as *Newsweek* reported, that "Nazism never was able to take deep root among the freedom-loving mountaineers."⁵⁰

The burgeoning American war effort now required Swiss goods more than ever before. Machine tools, ball bearings, and especially jewel bearings (almost all made in Switzerland by watchmakers) were much-needed imports. This trade reflected the real feelings of most Swiss. In a telling example, while the Germans would not allow the Swiss to export chronographs, which the Allies used for air bombings, the Swiss smuggled them out disguised as ordinary watches. Diamond dies were also surreptitiously exported to Britain. Swiss

customs agents were in collusion with the manufacturers.⁵¹ U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Dean Acheson noted that the delivery of industrial diamonds to Allied countries “required more than cooperation by the Swiss, often complicity in illegality or indifference to it.”⁵²

In response to the new dangers posed by the sudden Nazi occupation of Vichy France, in November 1942 General Guisan and the Federal Council issued “Orders to the Population in Case of War,” which was a revised version of the no-surrender order of April 18, 1940. It began with the usual admonition:

1. Switzerland will defend itself in an attack with all its powers *to the end*.
2. Any news that doubts the will to resist of the Federal Council or the Army leadership, or that portrays it as broken, are inventions of enemy propaganda and *false*.⁵³

Just as when originally issued, this order was remarkable. It asserted that there would be no surrender—ever—and that any statement or broadcast of surrender by the government or the military must be considered false. It made surrender impossible. It reaffirmed to the populace the high duty to resist to the death and sent a message to the Nazis that any invasion would be very costly in blood.

The order further instructed that any men who were capable of fighting but not enlisted, and who wished to volunteer to defend the country, should report immediately to the *Ortswehren*, the local defense organizations created in 1940. Persons who were not members of an officially recognized armed force were told not to participate in armed hostilities. These directives were intended to make sure that every armed man or boy would have the Swiss armband and thereby be entitled to treatment, if captured, as a prisoner of war and not be shot on the spot. However, the order continued: “Everyone will otherwise support the actions of our troops *with all his power*.”⁵⁴

Allen Dulles became the last American to enter Switzerland legally before the Nazi occupation of Vichy France. Although he was officially attached to the American legation, Dulles described his real tasks as an assignment to “gather information about the Nazi and Fascist enemy and quietly to render such support and encouragement as I could to the resistance forces working against the Nazis

and Fascists in the areas adjacent to Switzerland.”⁵⁵

Dulles established the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in Bern. As the only neutral nation bordering Germany and Italy, Switzerland was the perfect location for his spy mission—the American window on the Reich. Numerous refugees had found asylum there in the six prewar years of the Reich, and some continued to make the perilous border crossing. According to Dulles, certain German officials and citizens who traveled to Switzerland on business were also willing to give information about conditions in Germany.⁵⁶

One of Dulles’ first tasks was to gather intelligence about underground anti-Nazi movements in Germany. Besides refugee labor and church leaders, Dulles soon came into contact with Hans Bernd Gisevius, a Gestapo official who would later conspire with Wehrmacht officers in an attempt to assassinate Hitler. Assigned to the German Consulate General in Zurich, Gisevius was actually sent to Switzerland by the conspirators to make contact with the Allies. As Dulles wrote, such men “felt that a victory of Nazism and the extinction of liberty in Europe, and possibly in the world, was a far greater disaster than the defeat of Germany.” They wanted to hasten that defeat before Germany was totally destroyed.⁵⁷ Bern became a center not only for anti-Hitler plots but also for smuggling currency to assist Jewish refugees.⁵⁸

Aid and encouragement to resistance movements in France and northern Italy were also primary objectives of the OSS. The American legation helped the French *maquis* (resistance fighters) in the mountains south of Lake Geneva communicate with arms suppliers. Sam Woods, American Consul General in Zurich, assisted interned U.S. soldiers and airmen in escaping from Switzerland through Axis lines.⁵⁹ The Nazis suspected Swiss intelligence of passing Axis secrets to the Allies. They rightly saw General Guisan as their enemy and an Allied sympathizer, although Guisan scrupulously honored his duties as military chief of a neutral country.⁶⁰

With the Vichy French state, Switzerland’s last corridor to the outside world, under Gestapo jurisdiction, many Swiss feared that the Führer would complete the process of controlling the entire continent and invade. *Time* magazine commented:

Less doggedly independent lands would have toppled long ago, but Switzerland’s reaction to the new situation was to answer the obvious question

before it was asked. Said the democratic *Volksrecht*: “It is of the greatest importance that we leave no doubt in anybody’s mind that not even the most hopeless situation will make us capitulate voluntarily, and before we can be commanded we have got to be beaten.”⁶¹

Without saying which was the first, *Time* commented: “Man for man, Switzerland probably has the second best army in Europe today.”

In late November, seven Swiss soldiers were sentenced to death for treason. Infantryman Ernst Leisi watched one evening as a platoon of 20 soldiers marched by. They carried carbines, but no packs or helmets. He thought that they must be going to a shooting match. Not so. These were members of the same platoon as artilleryman Ernst Schrämli. They were acting as a firing squad, and they would execute their former comrade a few minutes later. Schrämli was convicted of passing military secrets to the Germans concerning a new type of armor-piercing ammunition. The Parliament upheld his death sentence, although a few leftists voted for life imprisonment.⁶²

During the war, thirty-three death sentences for treason or espionage would be pronounced by the Swiss. Seventeen Swiss would finally be executed for treason. Once the appeal was denied, the traitor would be shot immediately by a firing squad composed of his own army unit. A total of 245 Swiss, 109 Germans and 33 others would be convicted of treasonous offenses. These measures helped deliver the message to Berlin that any attempts to coerce Switzerland into the New Order would be met with strenuous resistance.⁶³

Despite repeated press barrages, as the year ended the Nazis were more pessimistic than ever about winning over public opinion in Europe’s remaining neutral nations. On December 15, Goebbels wrote in his diary: “Sentiment has turned very much against us in Sweden and in Switzerland. . . . My articles in the *Reich* are for the present about the only source of information on which the elements friendly to Germany in the neutral countries can depend for their moral uplift.”⁶⁴

By contrast, there was growing optimism elsewhere. On Christmas Eve, international skier Arnold Lunn mused about the preceding years in Switzerland and England: “There were months when we faced the peril of losing something even more precious than the mountains, our island fortress, and with that fortress the last hope of enslaved Europe.” Still, Lunn retained “unquestioning faith in

final victory.”⁶⁵

During the year the bread ration in Switzerland had averaged only 225 grams a day—less than the ration in Germany, Sweden, and occupied France and Denmark. While their standard of living continued to deteriorate throughout the war, the Swiss stubbornly maintained their spirit and the military capacity to resist any invasion.

Chapter 8

1943

“A Pistol at Their Heads”

“SWITZERLAND, AXIS CAPTIVE”? DESPITE SWISS RESISTANCE WHICH had thus far deterred an invasion of their country, such was the portait offered by writer Charles Lanius in the *Saturday Evening Post* in January 1943. He began with a dramatic, if inaccurate, statement: “I’ve just escaped from a Nazi-occupied country. The name of that country is Switzerland.” Switzerland’s four million people were surrounded by 125 million hostile neighbors. “The Swiss are a people living with a pistol at their heads.” According to Lanius, German Minister Hans Sigismund von Bibra really ran Switzerland.¹ The theme of the article was the domination of the Swiss economy by Germany. Lanius conceded that the majority of the Swiss hoped for an Allied victory.²

Outraged by Lanius’ article, Walter Lippmann published a reply in the *New York Herald Tribune* which could be considered the most significant statement in American journalism on Switzerland’s role in the war. A founder of *The New Republic*, Lippmann had influenced Woodrow Wilson’s concept of the League of Nations and would later win two Pulitzer prizes for journalism. Lippmann began by suggesting that Lanius “certainly did not mean to do an injustice to a nation which is of such moral importance to America and to all the United Nations,” yet “unintentionally he has wronged the Swiss and hurt our own cause.”³ Lippmann wrote:

What was not so obvious to Mr. Lanius, though it should have been, is that the Swiss nation which is entirely surrounded by the Axis armies, beyond reach of any help from the democracies, that Switzerland which cannot live without trading with the surrounding Axis countries, still is an independent democracy. The “engulfing sea of 125,000,000 hostile neighbors” has not yet engulfed the Swiss.

That is the remarkable thing about Switzerland. The real news is not that her factories make munitions for Germany but that the Swiss have an army which stands guard against invasion, that their frontiers are defended, that their free institutions continue to exist and that there has been no Swiss Quisling, and no Swiss Laval. The Swiss remained true to themselves even in the darkest days of 1940 and 1941, when it seemed that nothing but the valor of the British and the blind faith of free men elsewhere stood between Hitler and the creation of a totalitarian new order in Europe. Surely, if ever the honor of a people was put to the test, the honor of the Swiss was tested and proved then and there. How easy it would have been then for them to say that they must hasten to join the new order, and lick the boots of the conqueror of Europe. Their devotion to freedom must be strong and deep. For no ordinary worldly material calculation can account for the behavior of the Swiss.⁴

The behavior of the Swiss was of critical importance, Lippmann continued, because the majority were, “by Hitler’s standards, members of the German race,” who lived on Germany’s border and within its economic jurisdiction. He concluded:

Yet they have demonstrated that the traditions of freedom can be stronger than the ties of race and of language and economic interest. Could there be a more poignant, a more dramatic, a more conclusive answer to the moral foundations of Nazism than that which Switzerland has given?⁵

In Switzerland the *Journal de Genève*, commenting on these articles, compared the persistence of the Swiss to endure in the present war, which the Americans praised, to “the spirit of the American pioneers.”⁶

The Nazis themselves certainly did not consider Switzerland to be, as Lanius put it, “Nazi-occupied.” Two days after his article was published, the Swiss Federal Council ordered the seizure and forbade the sale of the latest edition of the German publication *Meyers Konversations Lexikon*, Volume 9, for “insulting language towards this country.” The book presented “appreciations of Switzerland today” in these words, according to the *New York Times*:

A country that, like London and Paris, is no longer anything but a dumping place for doubtful individuals who abuse their liberty. . . . It is peopled by a medley of

criminals, particularly Jews.

The Switzerland of today is a backward State detached from the German Empire. But even today the greater part of its inhabitants belong to the 'German body' [*Deutscher Volkskörper*].⁷

"Switzerland stands today an island in a Nazi ocean," a *Times* editorial commented. While forced by economic necessity to produce for the Nazi war machine, "spiritually they refuse to be conquered." The *Times* continued:

Perhaps the Swiss didn't mind being called "a medley of criminals, particularly Jews." To be called a criminal by a Nazi is to receive a high compliment. To be called a Jew by a Nazi is to be classed with those who have suffered martyrdom for freedom's sake.⁸

Even with Nazi bombers minutes away, the Swiss had suppressed Nazi organizations in their country. Their pastors denounced anti-Semitism. While the Swiss protested Allied flights over their territory, they would shoot down Nazi planes. "Hitler may yet, in some last despairing thrust, occupy their country. He won't conquer it."⁹

The Swiss were able to continue shipping highly strategic products to the Allies throughout the war, either with German approval or by smuggling. Of the strategic war materials, the most important items were jewel bearings, used in the flight instruments of bombers. In March, American Minister Leland Harrison urged that Swiss requests for military supplies be favorably considered. Secretary of State Cordell Hull told the Joint Chiefs of Staff regarding the shipment of supplies to Switzerland: "It is in our vital interests that the Swiss Army be maintained at the highest possible standard of military preparedness and efficiency. While supply routes to Switzerland are still open, advantage should be taken to bring the Swiss Army up to the level essential for the defense of Switzerland, regardless of any present or pending agreement of a compensatory nature." The State Department understood that the Swiss Army needed to remain strong to resist German demands to send troops through Switzerland or otherwise violate her neutrality.¹⁰

On January 6, 1943, General Guisan sent a confidential report to the federal cabinet on the increased danger of a future "Fortress Europe," in which the Nazis

would attempt to seize the passes and tunnels of the Alps along with its defensive positions. An invader would try to seize these key points in a surprise attack, before the Swiss had time to destroy them.¹¹

The American military attaché in Bern prepared an intelligence message dated January 29 that the German General Staff was “studying [a] new plan [for the] invasion of Switzerland” and that, on an Allied invasion of Italy, “Germany could not have large parts of a mountainous frontier held by a nation which was,” in the words of this American officer, “only [an] advance guard of [the] Allies.” The German plan was a “surprise air invasion before the Swiss could concentrate in their National Redoubt,” in which “parachute and air landings troops neutralize troop concentrations” and “motorized and mechanized ground invading forces” make an assault across the borders. The Germans had prepared a scale map of the *Réduit*, a copy of which was obtained by Allied intelligence.¹²

By February 2, the last German holdouts in Stalingrad had laid down their arms. An entire army of a quarter-million men had been wiped off the map. Thus released from the siege, half-a-million Soviets were added to the westward offensive that threatened to destroy the entire German Army Group South. During the days of heady German expansion, the Swiss had been in the Nazis’ sights; now Switzerland’s neighbor had become a wounded animal that might do anything to survive. If the Germans continued to fall back from Russia pursued by the Red Army, all of central Europe could become a desperate battleground.

In February and March, 1943, OSS operative Allen Dulles met secretly with two German spies, one of whom worked under General Walter Schellenberg, the chief of SS foreign intelligence. The content of the meeting is unknown, but it took place at the time when Wehrmacht generals were plotting assassination attempts against Hitler.¹³

On March 3, General Guisan had a secret meeting with Schellenberg, whose organization conducted espionage against Switzerland and areas nearby. The Swiss had all bases covered. As Allen Dulles noted, he (Dulles) had lines of communication open with Swiss intelligence officer Max Waibel, while Colonel Roger Masson of the Swiss General Staff had contact with Schellenberg, head of Himmler’s intelligence service.¹⁴ Masson set up Schellenberg’s meeting with Guisan.¹⁵

Schellenberg’s motive for meeting with the General was apparently to size up the Swiss leader for purposes of planning future operations to incorporate the

Swiss Alps into Germany's defenses.¹⁶ Guisan explained his own purpose as follows: "I did not want to neglect any occasion to confirm in our northern neighbor's mind the sentiment, which was evidently not strong at all, that our army would fulfill its mission under all circumstances and would fight against anybody attacking our neutrality."¹⁷

Meeting at the Bären Inn in the town of Biglen in northern Switzerland, Guisan told Schellenberg in no uncertain terms that Switzerland would resist any invader and that a Nazi assault would result in instant destruction of the Alpine railroads.¹⁸

In early 1943, Italian planners continued to discuss an invasion of Switzerland.¹⁹ Hitler retained similar designs, partly because of his concern about an Allied invasion of Italy. On March 14, the Führer warned his commanders that "the loss of Tunisia will also mean the loss of Italy." Plans for "Case Switzerland" were therefore revived in the event that a collapse in Italy allowed the Allies to reach the Alps. Schellenberg reminded the commanders that Switzerland would succumb, if at all, only through conquest.²⁰

In Munich on March 20, 1943, General Eduard Dietl, who had commanded mountain troops in the invasion of Norway, and more recently on the Murmansk front in alliance with the Finns, prepared a "Switzerland command" that would use air transport and parachute forces.²¹ The day before, Swiss intelligence, with its "Wiking Line" source in the German high command, reported to Bern that the Germans were planning an invasion. It was believed that German mountain troops were concentrating in Bavaria. This episode became known as the *März-Alarm* (March Alarm).²²

The German General Staff had, indeed, been discussing a strategic retreat from Russia into "Fortress Europe"—of which Switzerland could be made a pillar. The SS had orders to prepare such a plan and wished to incorporate the Swiss Alpine positions. Fortunately for the Swiss, Hitler decided against a strategic retreat in the East at this time because of recent German success there.²³ German Field Marshal Erich von Manstein had halted the huge Soviet offensive in the southern sector, rolled it back, and on March 12 the Germans had retaken the Soviet Union's fourth-largest city, Kharkov.

According to one account, a week later it was learned that the warning resulting in the *März-Alarm* may have been planted by the Germans to encourage the Swiss to keep their troops mobilized in order to deter an Allied

invasion through Switzerland. The rumor may also have been started as leverage for the benefit of German trade negotiators then engaged in talks with the Swiss, who had recently reduced credit and exports to Germany.²⁴

According to another account, when “Wiking” warned Swiss intelligence of “Case Switzerland,” Swiss Colonel Masson naïvely asked Schellenberg if it was true. This tipped the latter off to the fact that a leak existed in Hitler’s headquarters. Since any element of surprise was lost for a German attack, which the Swiss were now preparing to defend against, Schellenberg later told Masson that he had persuaded the German command against launching an invasion.²⁵

OSS operative Allen Dulles was aware that the Nazis made plans to invade Switzerland in 1943 during the last stages of the battle for North Africa. Dulles later reflected:

At the peak of its mobilization Switzerland had 850,000 men under arms or standing in reserve, a fifth of the total population. . . . That Switzerland did not have to fight was thanks to its will to resist and its large investment of men and equipment in its own defense. The cost to Germany of an invasion of Switzerland would certainly have been very high.

During his tenure as the chief American agent in Switzerland, Dulles made clear to the Swiss that “the stronger they were in their preparations against a German attack, the better we liked it.”²⁶

As the German position in North Africa neared liquidation by the Allies, and Russia hung in the balance, increased talk of a “Fortress Europe” led Guisan to believe that a very real danger of invasion loomed. Himmler and his colleagues began to contemplate a last stand that could join the Swiss *Réduit* with the Black Forest, the Arlberg and the Bavarian Alps, the Brenner Pass and the Dolomites. A coup against the Swiss, whose troops were outnumbered six to one, would prolong the war.²⁷

Perhaps in reaction to this tension, the SSV shooting federation encouraged heightened vigilance. To the Swiss, freedom was the “highest good on earth,” but only power and force could secure it.²⁸ The SSV printed a message from Federal Councillor Karl Kobelt, head of the Military Department, encouraging every person to join an official defense organization. Kobelt stated:

Every Swiss who is able to fight and shoot can participate in the fight for our country. But in order not to be regarded as *Heckenschuetze* [outlaw sniper], he must join an official military organization, the military service, *Ortswehr* [local defense], or *Luftschutz* [anti-aircraft defense] and be subject to their rules. . . . The civil population not organized in battle corps . . . must stay out of active armed participation in battle.²⁹

Switzerland was thus relying on the Land War Law of the Hague Convention, which protected a member of a military organization, if captured, from being shot on the spot as an unofficial partisan. Had an invasion actually occurred, it is unclear whether the Germans would have respected this rule; they seemed to have done so more in their Western than their Eastern campaigns. It seems unlikely that Swiss who were not members of an official organization would have foregone resistance activities for that reason. Then again, virtually every Swiss capable of bearing arms was already a member of an officially recognized organization. This raised the question, which the German foreign minister mentioned in 1940, of whether almost the entire population of a country must be recognized under international law as being in a military force.³⁰ In the event of capture, would armed civilians with military armbands be treated as prisoners of war or would they be shot?

Many German military professionals, excluding the SS, recognized the principles of international law. However, the German Army had traditionally abhorred partisan or guerrilla warfare, so it was important that Swiss fighters be recognizable as national soldiers rather than irregulars in any combat with the Wehrmacht. There were no guarantees. The Führer himself had never been greatly impressed with any laws of warfare or nations.

In a May 8 diary entry, Nazi Propaganda Minister Goebbels described Hitler's address to the conference of the Reichsleiters and Gauleiters, the Nazi Party sub-leaders. "The Führer deduced that all the rubbish of small nations [*Kleinstaaten-Geruempel*] still existing in Europe must be liquidated as fast as possible."³¹ Hitler defended Charlemagne, even though he was branded the "Butcher of the Saxons," and asked:

Who will guarantee to the Führer that at some later time he will not be attacked as the "Butcher of the Swiss"? Austria, after all, also had to be forced into the Reich. We can be happy that it happened in such a peaceful and enthusiastic

manner; but if [Austrian Chancellor] Schuschnigg had offered resistance, it would have been necessary, of course, to overcome this resistance by force.³²

Hitler had not yet ventured to become the butcher of the Swiss, in part because the Swiss had the arms and capacity to kill an unacceptably large number of invaders. Indeed, in this period the Swiss Military Department reissued the famous order requiring a fight to the end and prohibiting surrender. On May 24, General Guisan recalled the directions “concerning the conduct of the soldiers not under arms in event of attack” that had been issued on April 18, 1940, and that since then had been printed in the soldiers’ Service Books. The General now directed that the particular portions of the order be adapted to reflect the replacement of certain guarding tasks of the soldiers by Auxiliary Patrol Companies, *Ortswehren*, air raid defense organizations and factory guards.³³ The general provisions of the remarkable no-surrender order remained the same.

On May 31, General Guisan addressed the meeting of the Swiss Society of Noncommissioned Officers in the town of Arbon. Warning that the war would be fought ever closer to the Swiss borders, he noted that preparations for combat must be adjusted accordingly. The strategy must “offer to inflict heavy losses on the potential enemy.” Promising that “the first to penetrate into our country will be our enemy,” Guisan stated that “the people and the army are united more than ever. There are no French, Italian or German Swiss; there is only an indivisible Switzerland.”³⁴

As has been shown, a crucial part of the Swiss strategy was widespread armed resistance on the part of individuals or small units. Elsewhere in Europe, populations had little means with which to fight back against German forces, even after the murderous policies of the occupying power had become clear. The heroic Warsaw ghetto uprising demonstrated that a small population with arms in its hands could effectively resist the Nazis. The second Warsaw *aktsia*, meaning the violent roundup and deportation of Jews to death camps, which began in early 1943, sparked resistance. Simha Rotem, a member of the Jewish Fighting Organization (*Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa*, or ZOB), described the situation:

I and my comrades in the ZOB were determined to fight, but we had almost no weapons, except for a few scattered pistols. . . . In other places, where there were

weapons, there was shooting, which amazed the Germans. A few of them were killed and their weapons were taken as loot, which apparently was decisive in the struggle. Three days later, the *aktsia* ceased. The sudden change in their plans resulted from our unforeseen resistance.³⁵

ZOB members obtained more pistols and some grenades by the time of the April 19 *aktsia*. Rotem recalled that, despite the Germans' heavy arms, after an SS unit was ambushed:

I saw and I didn't believe: German soldiers screaming in panicky flight, leaving their wounded behind. . . . We weren't marksmen but we did hit some. The Germans took off. But they came back later, fearful, their fingers on their triggers. They didn't walk, they ran next to the walls.³⁶

Dozens of Germans were killed, but partisan losses were few. In the first three days not a single Jew was taken out of the buildings. Finally, the Germans resorted to artillery and aerial bombings to reduce the ghetto to rubble. On the tenth day, the ghetto was burned down. Many fighters escaped through sewers and into the forests. There they continued the struggle in cooperation with non-Jewish partisans.³⁷

The great Warsaw ghetto uprising of Passover 1943 is described by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. in the following succinct manner:

More than 2,000 heavily armed German soldiers and police were backed by tanks and artillery. The 700 to 750 ghetto fighters had a few dozen pistols and hand grenades. Yet in three days of street battles, the Germans were unable to defeat the Jewish combatants.³⁸

During the fighting, 24-year-old Mordecai Anieleicz wrote to his liaison with the Polish underground: "Jewish self-defense in the Warsaw ghetto has become a fact. Jewish armed resistance and revenge have become a reality."³⁹ Ironically, this was confirmed in Joseph Goebbels' May 1 diary entry about the occupied areas:

The only noteworthy item is the exceedingly serious fights in Warsaw between the police and even a part of our Wehrmacht on the one hand and the rebellious Jews on the other. The Jews have actually succeeded in making a defensive position of the Ghetto. Heavy engagements are being fought there. . . . It shows what is to be expected of the Jews when they are in possession of arms.⁴⁰

The uprising was defeated but it demonstrated the viability of armed resistance. As *Notre Voix (Our Voice)*, a French Jewish partisan paper, stated:

The Warsaw Jews have given to their brothers, and to the whole world, an admirable example of courage. . . . Let us arm ourselves; let us form defense groups to fight back all attempts at arrest and deportation; let us strengthen the Resistance organization. . . . Let us attack the enemy wherever he may be.⁴¹

In retrospect it is tragic that the means, both physical and spiritual, forcibly to resist Nazism had not been engendered years before among the groups and nationalities conquered by Hitler. However, before the war and even during the years of German conquests, 1939–41, few people had fully recognized the magnitude of the horrors to come. (The infamous Wannsee Conference took place in January 1942.) Whole countries were surrendered by their leaders to the Führer without a fight, and this attitude of defeatism infected individuals, groups and nations. By 1943, universal resistance, of the kind that Switzerland planned in her own defense, was no longer possible in Europe at large, even though increasing numbers of partisans were fighting back with whatever weapons were at hand. In picking up arms to resist the Nazis, the heroes of the Warsaw ghetto were acting with the same philosophy that had inspired and would save the Swiss.

Polish Jews who fought back from the forests—their equivalent to the Alps in terms of defensive terrain—also illustrated how anti-Nazi defenders with only a few firearms could successfully combat the Wehrmacht. In 1942, resistance leader Harold Werner met about 40 Jews waiting to go to the ghetto, and recruited 15 of them to hide in the forest. They had not a single gun and were even attacked by wild boars and wolves. Eventually they purchased sawed-off shotguns and other firearms from local villagers.⁴²

The Jews entered into alliances with Russian partisans. Werner stated that the “Russians had weapons, and the Germans knew that they were armed. The

Germans were more cautious in attacking when they knew there would be resistance.” The Jews’ first attack “was a tremendous uplift to our morale to be able to hit back at the Germans. It was also important to us to show the villagers that Jews, once armed, would strike back.”⁴³

The group tried to persuade Jews at the Adampol slave labor camp to join them in the forest, but the inmates feared the Germans would kill them. The partisans explained that the Germans had superior forces, “but our bullets were just as deadly as theirs, and they were just as afraid of us as we were of them. I explained that the woods were our protection, and that it was easy to disappear into them. . . . I showed them my gun and said: ‘Only this will save us.’”⁴⁴ An armed partisan who escaped from the Warsaw ghetto uprising joined the group. “It made us feel fortunate to be in the woods, free and armed with weapons with which to defend ourselves.” In a typical ambush, the partisans killed 20 Germans and lost only one of their own.⁴⁵

By the summer of 1943, the group numbered three hundred fighters, both men and women, all armed. Many of the arms were World War I leftovers. In one incident, the Germans ambushed the forest hideout. Some forty boys and elderly men with rifles held the enemy at bay. The armed Jews effected the escape of many and held off the Germans, although most of the defenders were ultimately killed. In other fights, the Jews and other partisans prevailed over the Germans.⁴⁶

As a non-belligerent, Switzerland had a prominent humanitarian role to play in the war. That role was featured in the May 1 *Saturday Evening Post*, which began, “Other people make wars and the Swiss pick up the pieces.” The Swiss had shipped food and medical supplies into desperate areas like Greece and Yugoslavia, brought in French, Belgian and Dutch children for rehabilitation, and had sent nurses and doctors to dangerous war zones. The International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva maintained records on 1,600,000 war prisoners and sent out countless letters each day. The Swiss safeguarded the rights of both Allied and Axis war prisoners, thereby earning the trust of both sides.⁴⁷ The Swiss themselves bore three-fourths of the costs of their humanitarian efforts, mostly from voluntary contributions. As an example, 10,000 children brought in for rehabilitation stayed in private homes.⁴⁸

As a neutral, Switzerland also served as an important financial center to which funds for the resistance in occupied Europe could be transferred. The

American Joint Distribution Committee funneled money for the Jewish Resistance in France through the *Vaad Hatzalah* (Palestine Rescue Funds) in Istanbul, from which funds were transferred to Switzerland.⁴⁹

Marc Jarblum, a founder of the French Jewish Resistance, escaped from the Gestapo over the Swiss border in April 1943. From Geneva, he informed the world of the needs of the French Resistance, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Saly Mayer, the Joint Distribution Committee head in Switzerland, transferred funds to Jarblum, who distributed them to the Jewish Army, the Communists, and other resistance groups.⁵⁰

The Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees was reorganized in April 1943 at the Bermuda Conference to consider the refugee problem. Nothing was solved because none of the countries, including the United States, was prepared to absorb the refugees. In proportion to her population, tiny Switzerland gave asylum to more refugees than any other country.⁵¹

Switzerland pleaded with the United States to allow an increase in Swiss foreign trade so that the beleaguered nation could afford to admit more refugees. The U.S. Department of State promised to give sympathetic consideration to the request, acknowledging:

The United States Government is aware of and appreciates greatly the generous reception which the Swiss Government has extended to the large numbers of refugees who have made their way to Swiss territory.⁵²

French Jewish resister Anny Latour wrote that, despite Swiss border guards preventing entry to many adult Jews, “On the brighter side, however, there was an attempt made to rescue the children—they were not sent back, but arms were outstretched to them, and many were thus saved from slaughter.” Rescuers would slip past German soldiers and Vichy police, snip the barbed wire, and send the children running through the opening. “Once on Swiss soil, they were safe—Switzerland, sanctuary for Jewish children.”⁵³

Smuggled children needed both a false and a real identification, the latter to present to Swiss authorities and to the Relief Organization for Children in Geneva, which would care for them. Swiss border guards sometimes also permitted adults with small children to cross the border.⁵⁴

Georges Loinger smuggled some 600 children into Switzerland. He would

take children to a soccer field fifty meters from the border. Some would play while others sneaked across the border. When the Gestapo became suspicious, Loinger managed, just a hundred meters from a German patrol, to throw his wife and two children over the barbed wire. Swiss soldiers helped them escape. Loinger continued his rescue work until the Liberation.⁵⁵

The Swiss Army's Adjutant General issued an official pamphlet entitled *Die Judenfrage (The Jewish Question)* on May 25. It noted that extremist, nationalist movements had persecuted Jews from the Middle Ages to the present. After an analysis of the historical role of Jews in Switzerland and present demographics, the article stated:

Article 4 of the Federal Constitution states that every Swiss is equal before the law. Democracy is based on the principle of tolerance, tolerance of different views, but also—and to be sure, nowhere like in Switzerland—vis-à-vis different races, different languages and different religions. Mass, race, and class hatred [*Massen-, rassen-, und Klassenhass*] are fundamentally undemocratic principles.⁵⁶

Allowing a political doctrine based on racial hatred to be espoused in Switzerland meant letting in an irreconcilable ideology. “Anti-Semitism is simply intolerance,” the Swiss Army publication asserted. “It is therefore undemocratic and tears at the roots of our democratic way of thinking.” The *Judenfrage* pamphlet concluded: “Anti-Semitism is an invasion of foreign propaganda.”⁵⁷

On July 7, the Federal Council banned two additional National Socialist parties: Rassemblement Fédéral and National Gemeinschaft Schaffhausen. Two members of these groups had previously been executed by military order for giving military information to a foreign power. The decree of dissolution applied to any organization that would replace these groups.

The *New York Times* noted that the government adhered to neutrality, but the people were overwhelmingly anti-Axis. “Switzerland, acting strictly within her rights as a neutral, sells Germany goods that Germany needs.” However, “the Swiss are just the people, if pushed a mite too far, who would prefer to starve or die fighting rather than give in. Because they are that kind of people they may not have to prove it in action.”⁵⁸

In May the Allies sought assurances from the Swiss regarding Axis use of

the Gotthard railroad. At the Gotthard Convention of 1909, the Swiss had guaranteed that use of the railroad would not be interrupted.⁵⁹ On June 29, the Federal Council stated to the U.S. Department of State that it adhered to the declaration of neutrality and would never allow foreign troops or military stores to pass through the country. The Council asserted: “As for the transit through Switzerland, the Swiss government is resolved to observe conscientiously the rules of the Law of Nations, as well as International Conventions and to take care that [the transit] is handled in conformity with Switzerland’s policy of neutrality.”⁶⁰

These assertions would soon be put to the test. On July 9 a mammoth Anglo-American invasion force landed in Sicily. The Italian Army made only a half-hearted defense, and it soon became clear that the Germans alone could not hold the island. Italy would soon become a theater of war. On July 25, Hitler received the news that Mussolini had been deposed. He immediately dispatched eight divisions from Army Group B under Rommel’s command to northern Italy to secure the Alpine passes. This would ensure the supply pipeline to the Wehrmacht forces already in Italy and those still fighting in Sicily.⁶¹

Once again, the Nazis threatened to pass through Switzerland, this time to keep Italy in the Axis—a threat that would worry the Swiss profoundly in the months to come. If the Germans had carried out this plan, the Swiss made it clear that they would defend their borders, then fight from the *Réduit*, where resistance would continue indefinitely. The tunnels would be destroyed and with them rail linkage with Italy, thus defeating the military purpose of any invasion. The Germans were again deterred.⁶²

In the Soviet Union, the Germans had made one last attempt to deal a crippling blow to the Red Army, at Kursk, resulting in history’s greatest tank battle. On July 15, after ten days of heavy casualties, the attack was called off, and the Soviets immediately launched a series of counteroffensives. Even as the panzers gave ground, key units were pulled from the front and transferred to Italy. The Germans would never regain the strategic initiative in the East. Although the Swiss cheered any Wehrmacht defeat, the spectre of the main Nazi armies falling back on central Europe for defense implied a new and dangerous development.

With its “unlimited will for independence,” Switzerland would have been a rebellious province had she been in the New Order, and in any event was “an enemy to the Reich” and was in “solidarity with the suppressed nations,” in the

words of the Swiss Shooting Federation (SSV).⁶³ These published comments no doubt confirmed to the Gestapo that the names of the SSV leadership must be on the list of persons to execute when the invasion came.

The Allies completed their liberation of Sicily on August 17, although the German defenders had effected an evacuation to the mainland with most of their equipment during the preceding week. Mussolini's fall intensified bombings of Italian ports, including Genoa, from which the Swiss had shipped goods for the American market. *Business Week* reported that "Swiss trade may now be reaching the end of the line."⁶⁴

The British Eighth Army landed on the boot of southern Italy on September 3. Five days later the American Fifth landed farther up the coast, at Salerno, south of Naples. That same day the secret armistice between the Allies and Italy was announced. The security of northern Italy now became critical for Germany, and its factories ran overtime to turn out munitions for the Wehrmacht.⁶⁵ Shortly after the capitulation, almost 4,000 Italian civilians and thousands of escaped Allied prisoners of war entered Switzerland.⁶⁶

After the Allied invasion of Italy, the Germans concluded that a decisive battle would eventually take place for "Fortress Europe," in which Switzerland might be forced to play a role.⁶⁷ The Germans continued to debate their Italian strategy. Field Marshal Rommel advocated falling back to defend the Alpine mountain passes in the north—a strategy that would have put Switzerland near the front line. Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, however, convinced Hitler that the Allies could be held off during the coming winter in the mountainous terrain south of Rome.

On September 13, the SS accomplished the daring rescue of Mussolini, who was being held captive and waiting to be turned over to the Allies. The Führer set up a new fascist government in northern Italy under the Duce.⁶⁸ Since Italy's surrender could have sent German or Italian troops rushing into Swiss territory, on September 15 partial remobilization was ordered in Switzerland. The Swiss anticipated that the Wehrmacht might launch a surprise attack to seize the key positions protecting the passages to the center of the Alps in an attempt to keep transit lines open.⁶⁹

A broadcast to America from the Swiss Schwarzenburg station on September 16 asserted:

Now that Italy has capitulated and the northern Italian territories have been occupied by German troops, the Swiss situation has become very difficult. She is now dealing not with just one coalition, but with just one country. The customs officers of that one country control all possible openings with the outside world. Switzerland must, therefore, now suffer from the effects of the counter-blockade and stop all economic exchange with America. It is not yet possible to measure fully all the consequences of this new situation. In any case, just one word describes it: "Encirclement."⁷⁰

On September 17, officials in Bern denied a rumor that the Swiss government had received an ultimatum demanding transit privileges for German troops through Switzerland. Messages communicated by means of diplomatic circles in Stockholm contained information that, after setbacks to the Allies at Salerno, the Germans had demanded passage for the Wehrmacht. It was believed that the Swiss refused, but that the Germans would not take no for an answer. Even if the Swiss blew up the St. Gotthard and Simplon tunnels, the German high command was said to have planned to use the roads across these passes, built by Napoleon, which could carry artillery. The routes through Austria and France by which reinforcements could be sent were considered vulnerable to Allied air attack. While German control over northern Italy isolated Switzerland more than ever before, in the face of this imminent danger the Swiss mobilization demonstrated the nation's resolve to maintain neutrality and prevent any passage by belligerents through her territory.⁷¹

Now that the war was at their doorstep, the Swiss were never more determined.⁷² Heretofore, Hitler believed Guisan's warnings that Switzerland would be defended at all costs, allowing her to avoid the fate of the other neutrals. But Switzerland was now even more of a prize than in 1939–40, for she separated the Reich from its own forces in Italy.⁷³ Switzerland was a natural path for both reinforcements and retreat.

On September 26, Federal Councillor Karl Kobelt, chief of the Department of Defense, told a gathering of women in St. Gallen:

There can never be and must never be any doubt but that we will categorically reject any demand for passage through Switzerland by troops of a foreign country. Should an attempt be made to force such a passage, we will resist with

arms.⁷⁴

The Swiss predicament was treated with understanding in the September issue of the *Yale Review*, which contended that “Swiss political sympathies . . . are reflected by the relative accuracy of her anti-aircraft batteries. Only two British planes have been shot down, but some fifteen German planes have been brought down by their fire.”⁷⁵

While forced to conform to numerous German economic demands, Switzerland’s independence was protected by her ability to destroy her mountain tunnels and by her democratic army, which could hold out for a very long time:

Stores of ammunition have been hidden in rocks and crevices, during the past four years, large enough to enable the Swiss to carry on a savage guerrilla warfare. . . . Swiss artillery is embedded in crevices at an altitude of 10,000 feet, where it is inaccessible to tanks and unassailable from the air.

The author of the article noted that if a poll were taken “to determine whether the Swiss people want a victory of the Anglo-Americans or of the Germans, 95 percent would be in favor of the United States and Great Britain.”⁷⁶

Due to the change in Switzerland’s position after the German occupation of northern Italy, trade by the Swiss again became a vital question for the Allies. In a secret memorandum dated November 29, entitled “Trade with Switzerland,” representatives of the British Chiefs of Staff pointed out to their American counterparts:

1. The British Chiefs of Staff attach considerable importance to the military advantages they now derive from Swiss neutrality and are anxious that our policy towards Switzerland should aim at ensuring that these advantages are neither discontinued nor curtailed.
2. These advantages include the following:
 - a. Switzerland is an important source of intelligence.
 - b. Switzerland is the protecting power for prisoners of war.
In addition to their official duties as protecting power the

Swiss render many valuable services to our prisoners, e.g., the distribution of parcels to prison camps and assistance to escaped and escaping prisoners.

- c. Certain valuable materials of importance to the war effort find their way to us from Switzerland with the connivance of the authorities. These materials include special R.A.F. plotting equipment, jewels for instruments, machine tools, stop-watches and theodolites to the value of some £300,000 per year.

3. The British Chiefs of Staff accordingly hope that the U.S. Chiefs of Staff will support the proposals which have been made by the British Government for the dispatch of certain supplies for the Swiss Army.⁷⁷

Tough negotiations over trade issues persisted throughout the year. Winfield Riefler, America's chief negotiator, warned the Department of State about blacklisting: "When we threaten to list such firms, therefore, we simply force them to choose between Axis orders which they have the ability to fill and overseas orders, the continuation of which are uncertain because of Germany's counter-blockade."⁷⁸

In the trade agreement of December 19, 1943, the Swiss met most Allied demands.⁷⁹ Swiss exports to Germany, particularly arms and machine parts, were sharply curtailed. The Allies restored the quotas for food, but could not guarantee the supply of scarce items needed for survival. Thus, as a result, trade with Germany was decreased without equivalent increases in Allied trade.⁸⁰

As late as 1943, the Waffen SS had not abandoned its earlier plans for an attack. The circles around Himmler hoped for an opportunity to retaliate against Switzerland for her anti-National Socialist stance. Preparations for an invasion plan were assigned to SS General Hermann Böhme, who became chief of the Austrian military intelligence service after the *Anschluss*. Böhme, who was knowledgeable about Switzerland as a result of his intelligence work, drafted his plan, entitled "Thoughts Concerning the Defense Situation of Switzerland in Event of a German Armed Intervention," in late 1943.⁸¹ It is a highly important document, demonstrating how high-ranking Nazis regarded Switzerland during the war. In brief, they were both impressed with her capacity for resistance and

angered at her refusal to be drawn into the New Order and particularly at her support for the Allies.

Böhme analyzed the changing military situation since 1938 and how it had affected the Swiss. Germany's 1940 victory in France had had profound effects on Switzerland. Deeply impressed by the great efficiency of the German Army, the Swiss Army leadership tried to adapt its forces to new military realities. Switzerland had two difficulties: first, she had to impress Germany with the speed of her military adaptability, and second, she had to obtain German approval to import the material required for her armament. Böhme described the Swiss rejection of the New Order:

Although expectations would have been that the new military- political situation in Europe would also lead to a total alteration of Swiss politics in all areas, reports only showed too clearly, however, that internal politics degenerated into a peculiar defensive posture. The visible consequence is the *Réduit*: fight, instead of putting itself entirely into the concerns of the new Europe.⁸²

As a result of her rejection of the "New Europe," Böhme noted, Switzerland failed to join the crusade against the Soviet Union. No significant number of Swiss volunteers joined. Yet Switzerland should have known that the realities of political power in 1941 made survival "dependent in first instance on the will of the German Reich." The Reich's late 1942 seizure of Vichy France demonstrated again that Switzerland was surrounded on all sides by territory under German control. Yet the Swiss continued their efforts to decrease dependence on German influence. Their food supply in particular was rearranged, as much as possible, to rely on domestic production.⁸³

One could not expect, Böhme continued, a reversal of the Swiss mood after 1942 brought the Allied invasion of North Africa and the German setbacks in the East. Yet the Swiss resistance to Germany's potential power remained baffling, as the following demonstrated:

1. The defense against Allied flights over Swiss territory is insufficient in view of the existing possibilities.
2. A bulk of news reporting in broadcasting and the press is anti-German. Germany has no good press in Switzerland.

3. The granting of asylum to so-called refugees and the presence of large numbers of Allied intelligence services greatly damage German-Swiss relationships.
4. By its numerous interconnections of Swiss capital with foreign countries, Switzerland is organized in the interests of the Allied forces more and more. A German victory in Europe would have disastrous consequences for that Swiss capital.
5. Members of German-friendly army circles, who always give an assurance of strict neutrality, fall cold.⁸⁴

Anticipating that the Allies might include Switzerland within their strategic plans, Böhme asked: "How can Switzerland be conquered quickly by military force under the present realities?" He proceeded to consider in detail the strength of Swiss national defense, recognizing that the Swiss Army had a great tradition which utilized the power of the people. While there were 470,000 soldiers to contend with in 1939, there would be 550,000 by the end of 1943. He calculated four corps with 10 to 12 divisions, including light brigades, mountain brigades and border troops. The troops were geared toward infantry. Domestic industry supplied the army with good quantities of firearms, machine guns to 34mm, cannon to 120mm, ammunition and motor vehicles. The air force had only 250 planes and no bombers. Fortifications both in the interior and at the borders had greatly increased.⁸⁵

Swiss weaknesses, on the other hand, included the inexperience of the army in combat, insufficient tanks and air power, and the nearness of industry to combat zones. Yet the value of the Swiss Army should not be underrated. Böhme wrote:

The *fighting spirit* of Swiss soldiers is very high, and we will have to equate it approximately to that of the Finns. A people that produces good gymnasts also produces good soldiers. The unconditional patriotism of the Swiss is beyond doubt. Despite the militia system, the shooting instruction is better than, for example, in the former Austrian Federal Army with 18 months term of service.⁸⁶

General Böhme obviously had a high regard for the resistance spirit of Switzerland.⁸⁷ In stressing that losses would be heavy because the Swiss were

first-class shots, Böhme's impressions reflected exactly what Swiss defensive strategy aimed to make known to potential enemies.⁸⁸

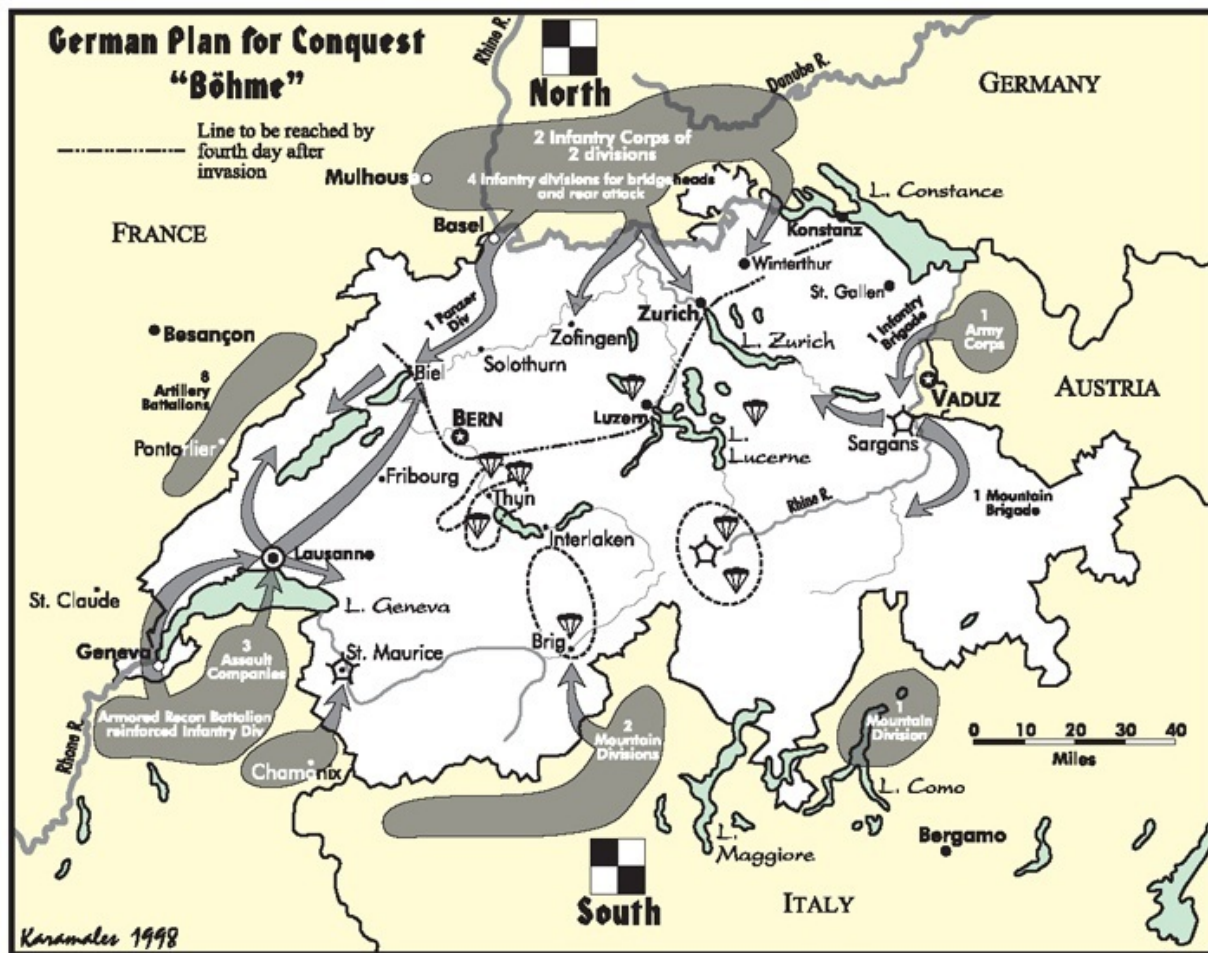
Since 1939, Böhme continued, numerous Swiss units of all weapons types had the opportunity to become proficient. While the Swiss lacked combat experience, they would be fighting in familiar terrain. If Switzerland could survive the critical first weeks, numerous combat-experienced troops would be available.⁸⁹

Swiss armament was insufficient in many ways, he observed, but the high command effectively promoted up-to-date training and arming, and, just as the Germans, the Swiss would improvise in making the best possible use of arms. Strong border fortifications which had been built since 1938 were an obstacle and would make up for other deficiencies. Thorough destruction near the border would create serious barriers. The *Réduit* would provide a strong defense and guarantee reserves.⁹⁰

The goal of an attack, Böhme was certain, must be to take complete possession of an intact Switzerland. An armed intervention was not profitable unless Swiss industry was captured undamaged, electric power and railways were intact and there was a population willing and able to work. The reprovisioning of Germany being a high priority, it would not be advisable to undertake a military operation that would transform Switzerland into a desert.⁹¹

The German planner anticipated that it would take a large number of Axis forces to overcome the resistance of the Swiss troops defending the steep Alpine *Réduit*.⁹² Even after the conquest of the Swiss, Böhme acknowledged, permanent German security forces would be required to guarantee the pacification of the country.⁹³

Böhme detailed two operations to be executed independently of each other. Operation I would have the main focus of attack in the north with occupation of the Mittelland, swift occupation of the Swiss airfields, and capture of the mass of the Swiss Army. Operation II would penetrate the *Réduit* with paratroopers, mountain troops, and ground forces. It would be incumbent that, in the first 72 hours, the paratroopers cut off the Plateau from the *Réduit*. The Luftwaffe would fend off any possible Allied bomber attacks.⁹⁴



SS General Hermann Böhme’s attack plan against Switzerland completed in December 1943 after the Germans had occupied northern Italy. Recommended for execution in August 1944, the Allied invasion of Normandy in June rendered the plan moot. (Adapted from Kurz, *Die Schweiz in der Planung*, 51.)

The actual operations and places of attack proposed by Böhme were highly detailed. He recommended a surprise attack from all sides with fifteen divisions. Casualties were expected to be twenty percent. The attack would be conducted in the summer of 1944, preferably in August.⁹⁵

The Allied invasion of Normandy in June 1944, two months before the recommended time of Böhme’s plan of operations, would render the plan inoperable.⁹⁶ But that was in the unforeseeable future. For now, General Guisan’s Christmas message to the soldiers at St. Gotthard included the watchwords: “Double our vigilance, hold the rifle tightly in our hand!”⁹⁷

Chapter 9

1944

War at the Border

THE NEW YEAR OPENED WITH A DRAMATIC CONFIRMATION OF the continuing Nazi threat. A Luftwaffe twin-engine plane flying over the Bernese Jura Mountains responded with gunfire to Swiss orders to land. In the dogfight that followed, Swiss fighters shot it down.¹

War Department Minister Karl Kobelt, in a speech at Winterthur on January 24, expressed confidence that Switzerland could protect her independence because of

an extraordinarily high number of small strongpoints, countless mined objectives, and sufficient quantities of arms, ammunition and war materials, including food, all stored at scientifically chosen central points, to enable us not only to bring the battle to the enemy if we are attacked but also to live, fight and hold in the interior of Fortress Switzerland. We are on guard and are ready for anything.²

The same day, the government announced that “in view of the present necessities, a large part of the 19-year-old class will receive military instruction immediately.”³

At the beginning of 1944, there were 16,000 German nationals in Switzerland. Desperate for manpower, Berlin called almost all able-bodied citizens home from various countries for war conscription that year. It is noteworthy that the Germans allowed some 12,600 to remain in Switzerland, the fifth column card that they believed might need to be played.⁴

Swiss trade with the belligerents continued during 1944. Both the Allies and the Axis needed Swiss products and had an interest in allowing Switzerland access to raw materials. Both sides had servicemen interned in Switzerland and

thus had greater incentive to preserve Swiss neutrality.⁵

On March 29, OSS operative Allen Dulles prepared a report on a conference he had had with General Guisan, who wanted to know whether France would be invaded soon. “He fears the threat to Switzerland present in the fact that the Nazis may wish to use Swiss railroads to transport Nazi forces into safety in the event of a retreat of the Germans from the south.”⁶

The Germans occupied Hungary on March 30 in response to an advance by the Red Army on the Carpathians and because they suspected a movement in the Hungarian government to hand the country over to the Soviets. To the Swiss, this proved once again that Hitler could suddenly launch the Wehrmacht into Switzerland any time it suited him or whenever he felt German strategic interests would be served.⁷

The April 1944 issue of *American Mercury* included an intriguing article entitled “If Switzerland Is Invaded.” As his attack on the Soviet Union demonstrated, the Führer could do unexpected things. But if Switzerland managed to stay out of the war, said the magazine, it was only because of her ingenious military preparations.⁸

If Switzerland were to be attacked, demolition would begin in seconds. “Terrific explosions [would] rend the air all along the Swiss frontiers, as if hundreds of avalanches were thundering down the mountain slopes of the land.” All bridges over the Rhine would collapse, and mines would await invaders who tried to cross by rafts or amphibious tanks. The Simplon and the St. Gotthard tunnels would be immediately destroyed. Roads, railways, bridges, power stations and air fields would be blown up. Camouflaged tank traps and electric barbed-wire fences would stop many panzers and infantry.⁹ Just as they had done at the Battle of Morgarten in 1315, when they launched boulders down the mountain sides to crush the Austrian invaders, the Swiss could use modern technology to cause landslides and avalanches that no infantry and armored divisions could survive.

Both World War I and Hitler’s blitzkrieg tactics demonstrated to the Swiss General Staff the need for lightning mobilization. As soon as the order was broadcast, every soldier not already on duty would grab his rifle and report to a nearby post. *American Mercury* continued:

It is the pride of the country that every citizen is allowed to keep his army rifle

and ammunition in his house. So orderly and ethically advanced is the population of this model country that there is rarely a case where this officially sanctioned and encouraged custom leads to violence.¹⁰

American B-17 Flying Fortresses and B-24 Liberators conducted major raids over southern Germany on March 18, destroying a factory that produced the Messerschmitt 109 fighter. Prompting an air-raid alarm, sixteen of the bombers flew into Swiss air space. Most had been damaged in the raids and crash-landed, their crews parachuting to safety and then being interned. Swiss pursuit planes brought down one bomber which appeared to be fleeing.¹¹

Fifty Swiss were reported killed and over 150 seriously wounded on April 1 when thirty American Liberator bombers dropped explosive and phosphorus incendiary bombs on the Swiss city of Schaffhausen, which lies north of the Rhine. Six factories were destroyed and the busy marketplace was hit. The American target was apparently Singen, a German town and rail junction eleven miles away. No Swiss fighters pursued the American bombers. Astonishingly, while grieving for their dead, the people of Schaffhausen reportedly expressed no hard feelings toward the United States for what they truly believed to be a tragic mistake.¹²

Leland Harrison, American Minister to Switzerland, expressed his deepest regrets for the accidental bombing. A mass funeral was planned. American fliers, when told of their mistake, were exceedingly distressed, remembering that Switzerland provided a safe haven for American airmen interned there. “There are a lot of our airmen alive today because they were able to come down there instead of in enemy territory,” said Lt. Howard McCormick of Michigan.¹³ Speaking of conditions in Switzerland for interned American airmen, Lt. Robert A. Long of New Jersey said, “The Swiss people were good to us.”

Insisting that measures be taken to prevent a repetition of the disaster, the *New York Times* commented:

The tragic error through which the peaceful and friendly Swiss town of Schaffhausen was laid waste by American Liberators shows that our precision bombing is not always as precise as we have assumed. . . . The reaction of the Swiss themselves is characteristic. Only an admirably self-disciplined people could grieve without anger over so unnecessary a calamity.¹⁴

Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Secretary of War Henry Stimson offered their apologies and promised that steps would be taken to prevent a recurrence, even as bodies continued to be found in the smoldering rubble.¹⁵

American Minister Harrison called on former President, now Foreign Minister, Pilet-Golaz on April 4 in Bern to communicate the American apology and to assure the Swiss that the tragedy would not be repeated. The meeting was interrupted by another air raid alert, however, as U.S. bombers once again strayed over the border. While official American explanations blamed the April 1 mistake on bad weather, the Swiss press noted that the sky over Schaffhausen had been clear, with excellent visibility, and nearby Lake Constance and the Rhine falls were definitive landmarks.¹⁶ The final report of the official investigation cited malfunctioning of the navigational equipment of the leading plane and high winds. Directives were revised to prohibit bombing targets in Germany that were not positively identified if within 50 miles of the Swiss border.¹⁷

On April 13, thirteen American bombers flew over Switzerland after attacks on southern Germany. Twelve of the planes obeyed instructions issued by the formations of Swiss fighters intercepting them and landed safely. The thirteenth plane was shot down by the fighters in the canton of Schwyz, in central Switzerland, after it refused to obey Swiss instructions. Its crew members parachuted out.¹⁸

That day, Swiss radio announced more details of the accidental Schaffhausen bombing. A total of 331 incendiary and explosive bombs had been dropped. The number reported dead was revised downward to 39, although several of the wounded were near death, and others were invalids. Some 438 Swiss citizens lost their homes.¹⁹

In an article published in American and Swiss newspapers, Walter Lippmann called upon President Roosevelt to take the occasion of the Schaffhausen tragedy to reexamine and liberalize America's economic policies toward Switzerland, arguing that Switzerland was a neutral, not a German satellite. By maintaining their democratic freedoms while surrounded by fascism in the darkest days of the war, the Swiss "contributed to humanity." Americans, Lippmann concluded, should appreciate the positive role played by Switzerland, which in the future would have a role to play in the recovery of Europe.²⁰

On June 4, the American Army entered Rome. Two days later the greatest

invasion fleet the world had ever seen landed at Normandy in France. After years of battling the German Army in the Mediterranean theater, the strongest Allied army yet had attacked in northern Europe, breaching Hitler's "Atlantic Wall." The next day, General Guisan requested the Swiss cabinet's authorization for a mobilization of troops based on continued reports of hostile intentions on the part of the Nazis. Public opinion welcomed the Allied landing, and the mobilization was favorably received.²¹ Military leaders had long expressed concern that Switzerland would face increased danger as the borders of the Reich constricted—a fear confirmed by Wehrmacht disengagement actions in Italy.²²

On June 10, as Swiss soldiers mobilized, a battalion of the 2nd SS Panzer Division claimed to have discovered explosives in the village of Oradour-sur-Glane, near Limoges, France. The Germans rounded up and executed 642 people, almost the entire population.²³ The Nazis were as unpredictable and ruthless as ever.

General Guisan warned Swiss soldiers on June 15 that the threats to Switzerland "might be progressively discernible or could appear quite suddenly," thus requiring new forces to be called up. Guisan's order of the day stated:

The risk to which this country is exposed does not of a necessity—as many pretended to believe—spring from the threat from this or that group of belligerents. Neither does it apply to this or that frontier, or always present itself in this or that concrete form.

It can come quite slowly and progressively increase, or it can break out with startling suddenness. It can even take on a form you have never imagined, but one which it is the duty of your leader who is entrusted with defense to reflect upon and measure in all its consequences.

To parry this danger, determination, courage, the best troops, armaments and fortifications alone will never suffice, unless we are ready in time. It is far better, therefore, that we are ready too soon than too late. It is far better to watch all outposts, even those deemed unimportant, than to find that we have neglected a single one.²⁴

The Nazis were still capable of dangerous surprises. As General Guisan spoke, the first of the German “Vengeance” rockets—the Vergeltungswaffe 1—exploded over London. In rocket technology, Nazi scientists had leapfrogged their Allied counterparts. The big question then being asked by a select few in the United States and Britain was: how close were the Nazis to developing an atomic bomb?²⁵

“As the war in Europe reaches its climax the position of Switzerland becomes more precarious,” said Werner Richter in the July 1944 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. Unlike Nazi-encircled Switzerland, all of the other neutrals—Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Turkey and Sweden—had a seacoast and thus the capacity for contact with the Allies. If the Wehrmacht was expelled from the Po Valley or from eastern or southern France, however, it might attempt to overrun and then to resist from Switzerland. Further, the Reich’s plans for its final stand on the “inner line” could entail seizure of Swiss railways connecting France with Austria and Germany with Italy.²⁶ Allied tactics of blanketing German forces with massive firepower, especially from artillery and bombers, would have grave implications for Swiss cities and civilians if the Nazis fought from Swiss territory.

Richter noted that the Swiss were determined to prevent any such invasion. The Swiss militia was equivalent to a superior standing army and, until the Allied invasion of Italy, was the only armed force in continental Europe not subject to Hitler’s orders.²⁷

German imperialists historically stigmatized the Swiss as rebels, Richter continued. Until the seventeenth century, the word “Swiss” in Germany was equivalent to the French radical term “Jacobin.” The centralization of the German state under Bismarck and Wilhelm II coincided with the alienation of the Swiss. Essentially, it was the Austrian-born Führer, Hitler, who had renewed the old Habsburg claim to Switzerland. The Swiss, Hitler believed, remained traitors against their “German blood”; Nazi school maps depicted Switzerland in the “Grossdeutsches Reich.” But the contrast between Germany and Switzerland had grown dramatically in the previous eighty years:

While the Reich became more and more the incarnation of imperialism, centralism, deification of the state and negation of the individual, Switzerland grew more and more firmly attached to the principles of her origin—democracy, federalism and individual freedom.²⁸

Economically, according to Richter, Switzerland was in fact paying tribute to Germany. Had Switzerland not traded with Germany, “she would soon have been forced by starvation into capitulation and would have become one more on the list of occupied countries, while her factories went ahead full blast under Nazi management.”

The most critical internal problem was the food supply. Rations of essential foods were still far below those in the United States. Yet the Swiss resisted Nazi attempts to use commercial negotiations to extort political concessions, such as demobilization of troops. That did not prevent, of course, harangues from German loudspeakers telling Swiss frontier troops that they would be massacred within hours.²⁹

By 1944, Richter wrote, Switzerland was a refuge for over 60,000 men and women who had fled from the New Order. More than 100 million francs of federal funds had been expended on helping refugees. The Swiss government, moreover, took measures to protect the rights of Jews with interests or presence in Switzerland:

When a German decree maintained that the property of German Jews in Switzerland was forfeited to the Reich, the Court of Appeals in Zurich—only a few minutes’ flight from German bombing bases—condemned this law and declared it to “constitute an intolerable violation of our native sense of justice.” And when the Gestapo seized a Jewish refugee on Swiss territory at Basel as a spy, the Swiss Government protested and stubbornly maintained its protest, regardless of risks, until the captive was returned.³⁰

Allied intelligence derived substantial benefits from operations conceived in neutral Switzerland. From his arrival in Bern until midsummer 1944, OSS operative Allen Dulles had devoted considerable effort to supporting the French Resistance. *Maquis* fighters and couriers slipped into Switzerland, where the OSS would give them funds, plan parachute drops of arms, and coordinate resistance activities with the Allied forces which had swept into France. Dulles noted that “the groups we had worked with in the Haute-Savoie region adjoining Switzerland had been instrumental in clearing the way for the American thrust northward after the landings on the coast of southern France in July of 1944.” In addition, Italian partisan leaders would slip over the border into Ticino, the Italian-speaking Swiss canton, and arrange with the OSS for air drops of

supplies to their mountain bases.³¹

The German underground also plotted Hitler's death from Switzerland, where Dulles served as the intermediary between the conspirators and the Allies.³² On July 20, Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg planted a bomb at Hitler's headquarters, the "Wolf's Lair," and flew back to Berlin to stage a coup against the Nazi regime. Hitler survived the blast, however, and the discovered plotters were executed in a barbaric manner. Thousands more would be rounded up and killed. Dr. Hans Gisevius, a longtime leader of the German Resistance, escaped to Zurich with the help of OSS-forged papers.³³ Tragically, the failure of the "Officers' Plot" left Hitler with a more committed, hard-core military cadre than before. Anyone within the professional ranks of the Wehrmacht suspected of being insufficiently instilled with the Nazi cause was purged. Field Marshals Erwin Rommel and Gunther von Kluge committed suicide. Hitler now had an officer corps too intimidated to object to even his wildest and most destructive whims.

The untested but highly regarded Swiss capacity for a universal partisan war could be contrasted with the pitiful condition of the partisans in occupied Europe, who were hardly armed at all. The Allies would therefore parachute into Europe one million Liberator pistols—a cheap single-shot, smooth-bore pistol that was useless for anything except shooting a Nazi in the head at point-blank range in order to steal his arms. The partisan was lucky if the Liberator did not blow up in his own hand.³⁴

The Swiss were feeling the effects of desperate Luftwaffe attacks near the frontier with France. The Swiss village of Morgins, a mile from the French border, was bombed and machine-gunned by the Luftwaffe on August 6, as the Germans were conducting an operation against the *maquis* in the French department of Haute-Savoie, where they inflicted severe damage. The population of the French village of Novel escaped injury by being evacuated into Switzerland. Luftwaffe planes also flew over the Valais in western Switzerland.³⁵

On August 15, just as the German front in Normandy was cracking, the Allies landed another army on the French Mediterranean coast. Like the Normandy invasion, the Allied strike into southern France increased the danger of a desperate Wehrmacht incursion into Switzerland.³⁶

In southern Germany, special forces under SS Colonel Otto Skorzeny plotted

to send frogmen to blow up bridges and power plants along the Rhine. They also conspired to assassinate Free French General de Lattre de Tassigny, but the Swiss military warned the Allies in time.³⁷ An American intelligence report dated August 19 noted the formation of two groups: the National Sozialistische Schweizer Bund in Vienna and the Bund der Schweizer in Gross-Deutschland in Stuttgart. These groups consisted of Swiss trained by the Nazis for the purpose of occupying and transforming Switzerland into a National Socialist state.³⁸

As the battlefront neared the border, and in view of the fluid situation, the Swiss Federal Council ordered additional security measures and called up more troops on August 25.³⁹ That same day, American armies reached the Swiss border near Geneva. For the first time since 1940, the Axis no longer completely encircled Switzerland. As Allen Dulles wrote: “Until American troops broke through to the frontier near Geneva in August 1944, Switzerland was an island of democracy in a sea of Nazi and Fascist despotism. Radio communication was our only link with the outside world.”⁴⁰ The Swiss regarded the combat in the Lyons region as dangerous for them, which explained their additional military measures.⁴¹

Because they had entered as refugees, over 9,000 Allied troops who had escaped from Italian and French prison camps into Switzerland were allowed to depart and join the American units at the Swiss border, according to the terms of The Hague Convention. Airmen who had bailed out or were forced down over Switzerland while on combat missions, however, remained for the time being as internees.⁴²

With the Germans falling back toward the Belfort Gap near the Swiss border, on September 5 the Federal Council ordered increased mobilization of first-line frontier troops “in preparation for all eventualities.” The Germans were driven out of two of their last three strongholds in the Jura Department before the Belfort Gap, when Besançon and Pontarlier fell. The remaining German stronghold, Baume-les-Dames, midway between Besançon and Montbéliard, was surrounded. German deserters flowed into the Porrentruy pocket of Switzerland and were interned.⁴³

As the Allies approached the Swiss border, the sounds of artillery fire were easily heard in Switzerland. Remobilized militiamen were taken from the *Réduit* and were positioned, without explanation, in the Plateau. To inform the soldiers of the nature of the current peril, artillery corporal August Lindt drafted a report

dated September 9 entitled “Information on the Situation,” which was then distributed through liaison officers to the Swiss military. Lindt gave lectures for the Heer und Haus (Army and Home) communications center and would become an ambassador after the war.

Those who thought the end of the war was imminent, the Lindt report began, must consider the still relatively high state of morale of the German troops. The Wehrmacht remained a force to be reckoned with. “It would be at the very least imprudent to conclude,” Lindt wrote, “that the German army can collapse in a few weeks. The war is not finished.”⁴⁴

While the Allies had broken through the encirclement of Switzerland, transportation had not reopened to improve the economic situation. The window needed strengthening, as the subsequent German reconquest of Briançon demonstrated. The zone occupied by the Allies was very narrow.⁴⁵

Between June 1940 and June 1944, the reasons for Swiss mobilizations and specific troop movements were cloaked in secrecy. But the present partial mobilization could be readily understood by the soldier: the sounds of combat could be heard in Switzerland, and the war was at the western border.⁴⁶

Gigantic pincers were trying to envelop the German armies, continued Lindt: one from Marseille, the other from Normandy. Both Allied and German military operations included numerous freestanding actions. The danger of Allied or German invasion was clear: “To complete an encirclement, the commander of an armored column could decide that he would reach his objective more quickly by crossing a part of Swiss territory. On the other hand, a German detachment may be very well tempted to escape encirclement, extinction, or capture by entering our borders.” Either side could conduct lightning raids into Switzerland for resupply. Lindt’s report added:

To face all these possibilities, which are not in a faraway future but can become reality from one day to the next, we must solidly protect our borders. . . . In these times, neutrality as such does not count. Armed neutrality alone counts.⁴⁷

The Lindt report specified the threats to Swiss security in the European theater. In Burgundy, the Allies were closing in on the Germans, who might try to escape destruction by entering Swiss soil. In the region of Belfort, the part of German General Blaskowitz’s army that was not annihilated in the Rhône Valley was reforming and trying to break out through a narrow passage. These troops

could also overflow into Switzerland. Swiss bridges on the Rhine were also tempting to both the Germans and the Allies. “It is our duty,” Lindt emphasized, “to avoid at all costs the use of Swiss territory by one or the other for its operations.”⁴⁸

In a reversal of the 1940 scenario, the Allies might intrude into Switzerland to avoid German fortified lines. The Germans might try to prevent this by a quick invasion of Switzerland. Switzerland’s best hope remained that “the belligerents would be dissuaded by our will to defend our neutrality.”⁴⁹

The Lindt report illustrates the view of the most defense-minded, anti-Nazi elements of the Swiss leadership of the peril the country faced in the fall of 1944. Lindt thereafter prepared a weekly report of similar nature, hundreds of which were produced and sent to army commanders.

Once transportation with France was reopened, approximately 4,000 French children arrived in Switzerland in one week alone. Caught in the war zone, they had become destitute after retreating Germans had swept through their towns and villages.⁵⁰

In August, the Swiss government eased immigration restrictions to let in up to 14,000 additional Hungarian Jews. This action was the result of the protests of numerous social-welfare groups, Christian churches, newspapers and political leaders who opposed the government’s restrictive policies and advocated opening the borders to all fleeing Jews. Placing the Swiss record in perspective, David S. Wyman, who wrote a study of United States policies that prohibited Jewish immigration, noted:

In relation to its size Switzerland was unquestionably more generous in taking in refugees than any other country except Palestine. At the end of 1944, some 27,000 Jewish refugees were safe in Switzerland—so were approximately 20,000 non-Jewish refugees and about 40,000 interned military personnel. . . . The country’s borders were wide open to all who were in danger because of their political beliefs, to escaped prisoners of war, and to military deserters. Usually, the following categories of Jews were also allowed to enter: young children (and their parents if accompanying them), pregnant women, the sick, the aged, and close relatives of Swiss citizens.⁵¹

Although Switzerland maintained her centuries-old tradition as a refuge for dissidents and took pity on children and the weak, the authorities would not

allow the free immigration of able-bodied adults without children who belonged to ethnic groups, including Jews and gypsies, that were being subjected to extermination. Many Swiss citizens opposed or protested this policy, which was based on the traditional view that the nation-state has an obligation to protect only her own citizens and others lawfully within her territory. From a humanitarian perspective, the governments of all the democracies, including Switzerland and even the United States, had deplorable policies regarding Jewish and other refugees during World War II.

The Swiss have not been faulted regarding their internment of Allied troops, who were thereby protected from Axis prison camps. British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden cautioned U.S. Ambassador John Winant on August 21 against pressuring the Swiss to stop all exports to Germany and to prohibit all German transit traffic. Eden stated:

We attach very high importance to avoiding forcing the Swiss to take action which would result in a rupture of Swiss diplomatic relations with Germany. This would necessarily mean that Switzerland would cease to act as protecting power at a moment when this may be more necessary than ever before. After the recent murder of our airmen in Germany we are genuinely alarmed at the possibility that the last moment before total defeat the Gestapo might run amok and commit wholesale murder of British and American prisoners of war. Obviously this is more likely to happen if the restraining influence of the protective power is removed.⁵²

Actually, in August Switzerland had already placed a ceiling on exports to Germany. The Swiss response to American demands made clear that Allied progress would enable Switzerland to decrease trade with Germany even more:

The war as it nears the Alps changes aspects of the transit problem and has a bearing on its solution. . . . Traffic in both directions has in general decreased and not increased since spring. In the spirit of true neutrality which guides them, they will see to it that it follows the trend circumstances demand.⁵³

As of October 1, 1944, the Federal Council prohibited the export of arms, aircraft parts, ball bearings, fuses, radio and telegraph apparatus, and other military supplies to any belligerent—the first total prohibition on war exports

enacted by a neutral. The Simplon route through the Alps was closed to transit traffic by the end of the month.⁵⁴ Despite these concessions, in early November the Allies ordered a halt to all Swiss rail and truck traffic into France. Switzerland remained almost completely isolated.⁵⁵

The Swiss also clarified to the Allies that Nazi leaders and Gestapo members would not be granted asylum in Switzerland. The Federal Council declared in November that, while Switzerland retained her sovereign power to grant asylum to worthy persons, “asylum could not be granted either to persons who have displayed an unfriendly attitude toward Switzerland or who have committed acts contrary to the laws of war or whose past gives evidence of conceptions incompatible with fundamental traditions of law and humanity.”⁵⁶

Emphasizing August Lindt’s earlier warning that no one should consider the Wehrmacht defeated, on September 17 British Field Marshal Montgomery launched a massive air and land assault to flank the German Westwall in the north. German divisions that had been considered decimated at Normandy showed surprising new strength, and the British 1st Airborne Division was nearly annihilated near Arnhem.

From September through December, the French and Germans fought one of the last great battles of the war between the Vosges Mountains and Switzerland, whose borders extended perilously near the combat zone. General Guisan wrote: “In case we were attacked, even if it was only in this small projection of our territory, we had the duty to return fire immediately and very effectively. Our parry at this very place was of symbolic value, with considerable effect on our external and internal situation.”⁵⁷ As this statement makes clear, the Swiss would have defended themselves against any aggressor, whether Axis or Allied, though any conflict with the Allies would have grieved them.

A Swiss division guarded the narrow strip near the combat zone. On November 16, the French attacked the Germans between Belfort and Swiss soil. In two days, the French liberated Delle, close to the Swiss village of Boncourt, as combat continued all along the Swiss border in the Montbéliard region. The Allies advanced 18 miles along the Swiss border in three days. Some 200 German soldiers were disarmed and interned by Swiss soldiers. On the 19th, the Americans entered the fray. The Germans retreated eastward, although shelling continued at the border. The border battle lasted until Christmas.⁵⁸

On November 8, German V-2 rockets rained on London and Antwerp. The Führer had a seemingly unlimited capacity to keep striking back with ever more

sinister weapons.

At Yalta on October 13, Stalin had proposed an invasion of Switzerland, supposedly as a strategy to circumvent Germany's Westwall, but the Allies refused. Winston Churchill called the plan both illegal and militarily senseless.⁵⁹ Churchill wrote to Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden on December 3:

I put this down for the record. Of all the neutrals Switzerland has the greatest right to distinction. She has been the sole international force linking the hideously sundered nations and ourselves. What does it matter whether she has been able to give us the commercial advantages we desire or has given too many to the Germans, to keep herself alive?⁶⁰

In an instruction to Eden on the same date, Churchill expressed astonishment at Stalin's "savageness" against Switzerland, adding: "He called them 'swine,' and he does not use that sort of language without meaning it. I am sure we ought to stand by Switzerland."⁶¹ Stalin had always hated the Swiss for their capitalism and democracy.

Gestapo chief Heinrich Müller, who after the war became a paid informant for American intelligence, recalled that "the Swiss did not want any country to invade their territory and would have fought to the death to prevent it." The Swiss feared that the Allies would cross into Switzerland to flank the German lines in the west, and, as noted, Stalin advocated just that. Müller commented:

If the West had invaded Swiss territory, the Germans might well have had to fight these people [the Allies] on Swiss land and the result would have been catastrophic, I'm sure, and I pointed this out in the right circles, that the Americans and British would bomb all the Swiss cities flat in a few days and shoot the refugees on the roads. After all, the Swiss knew what happened in Dresden and had no illusions.⁶²

The cities of Dresden and Hamburg were subjected to massive Allied fire-bomb attacks that resulted in tens of thousands of civilian deaths. Cities in France, Italy and the Low Countries had also been targeted by Allied bombers if they became part of German defense lines. In any event, Müller was certain that the Swiss "would have fought to the death against you, us or the Soviets. They

would have lost but it wasn't worth it. At least not as far as we were concerned.”⁶³

Debate continued in 1944 within the Nazi hierarchy about whether to invade Switzerland. In 1943 SS General Walter Schellenberg had secretly met with General Guisan, who convinced Schellenberg that the Swiss would resist to the end. (Allen Dulles' agents had also met with the SS general to discuss anti-Hitler matters and peace prospects.) In his self-serving memoirs, Schellenberg wrote:

While Hitler's fortunes declined rapidly, I had to make frequent and desperate use of my position with Himmler to insure that at least Swiss neutrality was respected, and I honestly feel that it is largely due to my influence with and through Himmler, which I was never tired of exerting to the utmost, that a “preventive” occupation of Switzerland did not take place.⁶⁴

Schellenberg claimed that his activities almost brought his doom at the hands of Müller's Gestapo, especially after it intercepted a radio message about negotiations with Allied representatives in Switzerland.

In an attempt to prevent the invasion, Schellenberg also contacted former Federal President Musy, who, he recalled, “had one aim—the saving of as many as possible of the hundreds of thousands of concentration camp inmates.”⁶⁵ Secret meetings between Musy and Himmler then took place at the end of 1944 and again on January 12, 1945. Himmler agreed to a mass evacuation of concentration camp inmates in exchange for tractors, cars, medicines and other scarce items. Musy offered foreign currency, to be credited to the International Committee of the Red Cross. Himmler did not understand, according to Schellenberg, “that the freeing of thousands of Jews was important from the point of view of Germany's foreign policy; he seemed only to be concerned with the effect such an action would have on the Party clique and on Hitler.” Schellenberg could tell that Himmler wanted to clear himself from his past activities against Jews. It was suggested that the United States should recognize Switzerland as a place of transit for Jews who would eventually emigrate to America. Musy agreed to confer with certain Jewish organizations in Switzerland.⁶⁶ Himmler reluctantly authorized Schellenberg to coordinate the release of a number of prominent Jews and French. Fighting Gestapo reluctance, Schellenberg arranged for the emigration of some prisoners.⁶⁷

Saly Mayer, a prominent Swiss Jewish leader, negotiated with the SS in an attempt to rescue Jews. Between August 1944 and April 1945, he periodically met with SS Colonel Kurt Becher in St. Margrethen, Switzerland, to discuss “the price of abandoning the gassing.” Becher said he had Himmler’s permission to bargain for the exchange of Jewish lives for matériel and money. While the Allies were not about to provide either, Mayer dragged out the negotiations to buy time until an Allied victory and succeeded in getting numerous Jews released and brought to Switzerland.⁶⁸

As they advanced, the Allies were more able and willing to reopen the world market to the Swiss, who were by then increasingly able to function without imports from Germany. In addition, coal shipments from Germany to Italy over Swiss rails were curtailed, and numerous other concessions were made to the Allies. On the day the agreement was signed, the Allies declared: “The Allied Governments fully understand Switzerland’s unique position as a neutral, a position which they have always respected.”⁶⁹

In mid-December, the U.S. State Department’s Western European experts issued a paper on current policy toward Switzerland. It stated squarely: “For political reasons and for reasons arising out of the benefits to us of Switzerland’s neutral position and her future potential usefulness in the economy of Europe, it was inadvisable to place too great a pressure upon the Swiss Government at this time in order to attain pure economic warfare objectives.” Agreeing with the August statement by British Foreign Secretary Eden, the American paper explained that Swiss neutrality was recognized by the major powers and was important to the Allied cause:

As a result of this neutrality Switzerland performs certain indispensable services for all the belligerents and claims in return the right to trade with such of them as will help maintain its essential economy and internal stability. As far as the United States is concerned, Switzerland serves as the protecting power for our general interest and in particular for our prisoners of war in Germany and Japan. It is the agreed policy of the British and U.S. Governments to avoid forcing Switzerland to a break with Germany. Such a break would make it impossible for the Swiss to continue to represent British and U.S. interests in Germany and might likewise affect their position in so far as Japan is concerned. It is essential as the situation in Germany becomes more and more disturbed that we endeavor to obtain their greatest degree of protection, not only for U.S. general interests

but especially in regard to matters relating to prisoners of war. But it should be remembered that the effectiveness of Switzerland's protection can be much altered by a severe deterioration of its relations with Germany short of complete rupture.⁷⁰

The State Department report also recognized Switzerland's services in assisting refugees:

Related to but not directly connected with the protection of U.S. interests by Switzerland are her humanitarian efforts, undertaken at the request of the U.S. Government, on behalf of the Jews in Central Europe. At our request, she has recently agreed to admit some 15,000 additional Hungarian Jews in spite of the increased strain on her general food problem.⁷¹

Although the Allies' high hopes of summer that the war would be over by Christmas were not fulfilled, the Allied high command nevertheless believed that Germany's collapse was imminent. France had been retaken in the west, and in the east the Soviet army had advanced into Hungary and Poland. The vise was closing, and the Reich's losses in resources and manpower surely had crippled Hitler's ability to stave off an inevitable Allied victory. On December 16, however, two German armies, comprising 300,000 men and thousands of armored vehicles, burst from the Ardennes in a surprise counteroffensive. They broke the American front and SS panzer spearheads advanced on the Meuse. Two weeks later, a Luftwaffe armada of 700 planes hit Allied airfields in Belgium and France. The Allies restructured their front, Montgomery from the north and Patton from the south rushing forces to seal the breakthrough. This Battle of the Bulge continued through January.

The new exhibition of German strength demonstrated the continued threat to the Swiss, for the German divisions launched in the Ardennes would have been sufficient, too, to invade Switzerland. The war was by no means over, and only after his death could the Führer's capabilities and limitations be accurately evaluated.⁷²

As the war wore on, Swiss engineers developed improved designs for the submachine gun, the anti-tank rifle, the tank grenade launcher, the rocket tube, the flamethrower, mines, hand grenades and explosive devices. The air defense was equipped with light and heavy anti-aircraft guns. The artillery was

reorganized and partially motorized. By the end of the war, anti-aircraft guns and artillery together included 5,126 guns of different calibers: 1,317 field cannons and howitzers, 696 fortress guns, 166 mountain guns and 2,947 anti-aircraft guns.⁷³

While the Swiss militiamen had not actually participated in war, explained Hans Senn, who would later become a Chief of the General Staff, “the soldiers received tough physical training and were accustomed to deprivations. They mastered their arms in sharpshooting and under combat conditions.”⁷⁴

Switzerland had produced 240 million rounds of infantry ammunition in 1941, 120 million in 1942 and 60 million in 1943. Chief of the General Staff Jakob Huber explained that there was so much stored ammunition in the *Réduit* by 1944 that “if one assumes only one hit in 1,000 rounds—less would be a disgrace for the Swiss shooting people (*Schützenvolk der Schweizer*)—we could kill one million enemies with rifles and light and heavy machine guns.”⁷⁵ Swiss sharp-shooting skills would have been far more efficient, as the Wehrmacht well knew.

Chapter 10

1945

The Liberation of Europe

AS ONE SWISS RIFLEMAN REMINISCED YEARS LATER, SWISS soldiers had little time to think during the entire period of the war. The young soldier was mostly concerned with making sure his rifle was clean. Most men and women put in double time in their jobs, and the load kept them from thinking about what would happen next. They had only a third of the ration of the average American G.I.; bread could not be eaten until it was two days old, because some government official thought stale bread was more filling. Despite privations, the Swiss did not despair but retained a strong national spirit. Hitler was seen as an unpredictable madman, and the Swiss people feared a German invasion until the very end of the war.¹

As the Allied forces tightened their grip on the Nazi empire, the question of Swiss economic relations with Germany once again came to the fore. American Secretary of State Edward Stettinius announced on January 3 that Swiss-American economic relations would be overhauled. According to one report, the Allies sought a prohibition on all Swiss exports to Germany. The Swiss were still selling Germany a reduced quantity of machine tools, precision instruments, and other non-war items. They allowed the transit of coal to northern Italy but barred the movement of all goods from Italy. During this period, it should be noted, Germany was also still trading with Sweden.²

The Swiss interpreted Secretary Stettinius' announcement as an attempt to force their country to become a weapon against Germany. The socialist Bern *Tagwacht* (*Daily Watch*) newspaper asserted that American pressure was part of a plan that started with the Soviet Union's refusal to open diplomatic relations with Switzerland. The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* noted:

The American demands, as announced, suggest a reckless disregard for the

naked material existence of a nation of 4,000,000 people that for the past five years has been defending its independence and neutrality with a firm hand and even in the most critical hours today is housing and feeding more than 100,000 refugees.³

The press emphasized the fact that the United States had not offered to replace essential German coal with Allied deliveries.⁴

President Roosevelt dispatched his special assistant Lauchlin Currie to Switzerland to negotiate economic matters. The Americans recognized that Switzerland had a commercial treaty with Germany and appreciated Swiss diplomatic services representing the United States to that country.⁵ In fact, Secretary Stettinius' remark about the "overhaul" of American-Swiss economic relations was misunderstood; the Department of State clearly recognized the advantages of Swiss neutrality to the Allied cause.⁶

To counter press reports critical of Switzerland, the Department issued a declaration to the United Press affirming that friendly relations would be maintained between Switzerland and the United States. It noted that Switzerland had to maintain diplomatic relations with the belligerents in order to serve as protecting power for the United States, and that Switzerland's democratic system, as well as her traditional friendship with America, continued to be appreciated.⁷

Why the sudden objections to Swiss trade? According to *Newsweek*, reports critical of Swiss trade with Germany "came from certain government quarters whose objective is to align United States policy with that of the Soviet Union." The accusations did not represent the policy of the State Department, however, and when Secretary Stettinius asserted that the U.S.-Swiss economic relationship was under discussion, his aim in fact was to strengthen ties. An American military mission in Bern was at that time negotiating the purchase of watches and precision instruments for use by U.S. troops in France. While these purchases would deprive the Germans of such goods and compensate the Swiss for German trade losses, they were not contingent on Switzerland's severance of economic ties with Germany.⁸ Furthermore, Switzerland could not protect American interests in Germany, including looking after war prisoners and arranging exchange of the wounded, if she compromised her neutrality.⁹

The Department of State, recognizing the benefits of Swiss neutrality,

avored a balanced approach. The Treasury Department and other agencies narrowly concerned only with issues such as trade with Germany and German assets, instigated various measures against the Swiss toward the end of the war and even after cessation of hostilities.¹⁰

The French exile newspaper *Pour la Victoire (For Victory)* deplored the attacks on Switzerland, which had been, since 1940, “an oasis in the fascist desert.” In the “moral confusion” engendered by six years of war, the Anglo-American press was “launching poison arrows against the only democratic country to hold its own in the face of the passions of its neighbors.”¹¹

Allied-Swiss trade talks, which began on February 12, culminated in agreement on all issues on March 9. The agreement included Swiss trade with belligerents, carriage of goods by rail, export of electricity (which would assist French reconstruction), prevention of the concealment by defeated belligerents of looted property, and the supply of food and raw materials to Switzerland. The report concluded that “the Allied delegates were able to see for themselves how deeply rooted democracy is in the minds of the Swiss.” Under the agreement, trade with Germany was reduced to negligible proportions, and Germany was denied transportation facilities to and from northern Italy.¹²

The Swiss also revoked their bank privacy law for deposits by Nazi officials, froze German assets, and prohibited exchange of German gold for Swiss francs. American negotiator Currie remarked: “This really ends the last hope of the Nazis for establishing themselves through the safe haven of property held abroad.”¹³

The greatest aerial assaults on rail systems in history took place against Germany on February 22. American planes attacking southern Germany just north of the Swiss frontier, between Basel and Stein-am-Rhein, also accidentally dropped bombs on five Swiss villages and towns, killing 16 persons. The bombs hit minutes before American economic delegation head Lauchlin Currie arrived in Schaffhausen to lay wreaths on the graves of the victims of the earlier disaster. The State Department expressed shock and distress at the latest bombing accident.¹⁴ The same day, hundreds of American airmen were released from internment in Switzerland and returned to the ranks in Britain.

Hitler continued to launch surprise offensives. On February 17, the Sixth SS Panzer Army, which had been transshipped from the Ardennes, attacked with 600 tanks against the Soviets around Lake Balaton in Hungary.

In Switzerland, again, on March 4, 6 were killed and 50 injured in Basel and

Zurich when American Flying Fortresses and Liberators dropped explosives and incendiaries and machine-gunned cars on freight-yard sidings. Numerous houses burned or were blasted. Swiss radio called the bombings precision work and not an “accidental release of bombs by a crashing plane.”¹⁵

Lt. General Carl A. Spaatz of the U.S. Army Air Force spent 24 hours in Bern to meet with General Guisan and the Swiss high command concerning the prevention of further Allied bombardments, a problem he called “even more urgent than his conduct of Allied aerial operations over the Western Front.” Swiss Councillor Karl Kobelt of the Military Department expressed the “grave revulsion of feeling” by the public of the bombings of Zurich and Basel, which were easily identifiable from the air.¹⁶ Four more Swiss were killed and extensive damage done on March 11, when a single plane bombed Basel and six planes bombed Zurich.¹⁷

Also in March, the Swiss investigated subversives responsible for a pamphlet which falsely claimed that it was being distributed in the name of Swiss officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers. The pamphlet accused the Federal Council of considering Allied demands that Switzerland enter the war on their side, allow free transit of Allied armies through Switzerland to attack Germany from the south, and the use of Swiss airfields for Allied attacks on Germany. This propaganda piece came in response to the Swiss government’s blunt refusal of a German request for 200 “asylum safe-conducts pending transfer to Argentina” for prominent Nazis.¹⁸

The Swiss refusal coincided with an immediate increase in border patrols to prevent political undesirables from entering the country. Recalling Germany’s surprise attacks on neutrals, as well as considering the Nazis’ increasingly desperate position, the Swiss were not taking any chances.¹⁹

Indeed, the Nazis could still be expected to take the most inhumane and unexpected measures. In late March, after partisans wounded an SS-Obergruppenführer who headed the Gestapo in the Netherlands, German police executed 400 Dutchmen.²⁰ Nazi V-1 and V-2 rockets continued to rain on London, Antwerp and other cities until March 27. Thousands of the rockets remained in the Wehrmacht inventory and could easily have been launched against Switzerland.

A quarter-of-a-million German civilians and foreign worker refugees, the *New York Times* reported on April 18, were headed for Switzerland’s borders. In

response, the Federal Council ordered the recall of army formations to watch for “undesirable individuals.” Strong measures were being prepared to keep out war criminals such as Gestapo and Elite Guard (SS) men.²¹

On the 20th, thousands of refugees fleeing the Reich in search of asylum in Switzerland reached the border at Lake Constance. Some French, Polish and Russian workers were allowed into the country. Panic spread on the German side as the French First Army made its way toward the Swiss frontier, where it was expected to cut off the Reich’s province of Baden, from which six divisions of Wehrmacht, Volkssturm and SS forces were attempting to escape. Small arms and light artillery combat could be heard just across the border.²² In the coming days, thousands of foreign workers continued to stream into Switzerland and were cared for by the International Committee of the Red Cross. No Germans were allowed in. The French advance into Baden accelerated the flow.²³

By April 22, the French had reached the Swiss border at Schaffhausen, cutting off Baden from the Reich 120 kilometers to the north. The Germans prepared an all-out defense of the “Baden Redoubt.” Explosions rocked Basel the next day as the Wehrmacht blew up rail facilities in southern Germany. German deserters seeking to enter Switzerland were treated curtly, since it could not be determined whether they were war criminals. Refugees being admitted were examined for contagious diseases, and several cases of smallpox were discovered. The increasing dangers and the massing of SS troops in Austria’s Vorarlberg caused the Swiss to close their eastern frontier.²⁴

The Allies also continued to advance against the Germans in northern Italy in early 1945. The Swiss received intelligence from partisans, who crossed into the Swiss canton of Ticino where they received material support, that the Germans might retreat with a scorched earth policy. The Swiss feared that Germany’s best combat force, the same Army Group C that had figured prominently in earlier Nazi invasion plans, now led by Field Marshal Kesselring, might finally bring the war into Switzerland in an effort to reach the suspected Nazi mountain redoubt in the Alps of Austria and Bavaria.²⁵

By March 11, General Eisenhower had also received reports that Hitler would command a last stand in the “National Redoubt” in the Alps. General Omar Bradley wrote that “this legend of the Redoubt was too ominous a threat to ignore and in consequence it shaped our tactical thinking during the closing weeks of the war.”²⁶ Allen Dulles noted that German forces on the Italian front

were considered to be as intransigent as those in Berlin. As the Wehrmacht desperately attempted to hold on to the Apennines, German troops in Italy were expected to play a decisive role in a last stand of the Nazis in an Alpine redoubt.²⁷

Just as the Allies feared the Nazi war machine to the end, it is hardly surprising that the Swiss feared a possible Nazi attack until the final days of the war. When Hitler saw the inevitability of defeat, he ordered that Europe be destroyed—not only Italy and France, but Germany itself. Known to be moody and impulsive, he could have easily given the order to attack Switzerland.²⁸ The Red Army was advancing in Austria, and Germany's strategic options were narrowing. German armies retreating from northern Italy would have been the troops best placed, and with the most incentive, to attempt a breakthrough of the Swiss border.

To prevent further catastrophes, Swiss intelligence, acting in a private capacity, began to mediate a possible surrender of the German force in northern Italy. Acting on his own and not as the representative of neutral Switzerland, Major Max Waibel, head of the "N1" intelligence bureau in Lucerne, contacted Allen Dulles in Bern.²⁹ Dulles credited Waibel with playing a major role in orchestrating the early surrender of the German troops in Italy, which was a great relief to Allied war planners:

As we later proceeded to develop our secret and precarious relations with the German generals early in 1945, we would have been thwarted at every step if we had not had the help of Waibel in facilitating contacts and communications and in arranging the delicate frontier crossings which had to be carried out under conditions of complete secrecy. In all his actions Waibel was serving the interests of peace.³⁰

On March 3, emissaries met in Lugano to discuss the unconditional surrender of the Germans. On March 8, SS General Karl Wolff met Allen Dulles in Zurich and agreed to recommend surrender to Field Marshal Kesselring.³¹ To show good faith, Wolff promised to discontinue warfare against Italian partisans, to release to Switzerland hundreds of Jews from Bolzano and to guarantee the safety of hundreds of American and British prisoners.³²

On March 15–19, American and British representatives together with Major

Waibel met SS General Wolff at Ascona, on Lake Maggiore in Switzerland, and agreed that the surrender would take place on March 21 at Caserta, headquarters of the Allied high commander for Italy, British Field Marshal Sir Harold Alexander. The Soviets, who had not known about the negotiations, were invited to attend.³³

Stalin, convinced that the Western Allies were negotiating behind his back, suspected betrayal. Ever since the German attack on the Soviet Union, he had feared the West would make a separate peace. Stalin's pressure on the Allies killed the possibility of a March surrender. In April, the Germans were again ready to surrender. After exchanges between Stalin and Roosevelt, however, on April 21 Dulles was again ordered to inform the Swiss to cease negotiating the surrender of German Army Group C in Italy. Thus, because of Soviet pressure on the White House, surrender was delayed once more, and the war continued.³⁴

Dulles confided to Waibel that Stalin sought to delay the German surrender in Italy in order to give the Communists more time to organize and seize political power in eastern Europe. The Soviets were also worried that a quick German surrender would allow the Western Allies to occupy Trieste, key to the Adriatic. If the Germans delayed a surrender, however, and continued fighting in the area west of Venice, in the shadow of the Alps, then Soviet or Yugoslav Communists could seize Trieste first. Stalin had encouraged Marshal Tito to move quickly across northern Italy all the way to the French border, where the Yugoslavs could link up with French Communist partisans. The result would be a Soviet-controlled belt in western and southern Europe. The spilling of the blood of his American and British allies occasioned by a delay in the German surrender hardly mattered to the Soviet dictator when such objectives were at stake.³⁵ Given Stalin's historic perfidy, such as his previous pact with Hitler and Soviet territorial ambitions, such motives would have been entirely in character.

General Wolff called a meeting of German commanders, who decided that Army Group C should consider itself free to surrender. However, Gauleiter Hofer, who commanded the Tyrolean mountains, suggested an armed retreat into Switzerland and a surrender to the Swiss. Wolff replied that the southern Swiss defenses would repel such a move.³⁶

Thus, a Wehrmacht retreat to Germany through Switzerland, or even surrender there (which meant internment and not prison), was impossible.³⁷ Though Switzerland was not a belligerent on the Allied side, her strong defenses nevertheless assisted the Allies in blocking a Wehrmacht retreat. In contrast, had

the Nazis been able to occupy the Swiss *Réduit* and make it a part of a German National Redoubt, the war might have lasted longer.

On April 23, General Wolff appeared at the Swiss border and requested a meeting with Major Waibel, who may have obtained General Guisan's confidential approval to continue assisting surrender negotiations. Allen Dulles obtained permission to attend the negotiations, which took place in Lucerne. Field Marshal Alexander instructed that they fly to Naples. On April 29, two envoys from German Army Group C, whose forces were estimated at between 600,000 and one million men, signed surrender documents in Caserta, near Naples. This was the best remaining German combat force and the first to surrender unconditionally.³⁸

There was a last-minute hitch. The surrender papers were signed and in the hands of the two German envoys, but the documents needed to be delivered to German headquarters in Bolzano, in northern Italy, to be verified by the high command there. The envoys flew back to Switzerland with Waibel with the intent to drive through Austria and from there to Bolzano. Reaching Allen Dulles' home at 23 Herrengasse in Bern at midnight, they found themselves at the Austrian border the next morning, but Swiss border guards would not allow them to pass. Dulles called on Walter Stucki, acting Swiss Foreign Affairs Minister, early on the morning of April 30, explaining to him that

two German envoys with the signed surrender of the German armies in North Italy were waiting at the Swiss frontier. If they passed quickly and safely to the German headquarters in Italy, the war in North Italy would be over—without further destruction and bloodshed. Guerrilla warfare in the mountains surrounding Switzerland would be avoided.³⁹

Stucki understood that the emergency precluded formal consultations and dispatched orders to let the German envoys pass. Once over the border into Austria, the envoys eluded the Gestapo—which wanted to arrest them—and reached Bolzano with the surrender documents that night. At last Army Group C would be authorized to lay down its arms when the armistice took place on May 2.

According to Waibel's account—credited as accurate by former American Ambassador Hugh Wilson—the delays in negotiating the surrender caused by Stalin's pressure on Roosevelt cost Allied lives. Waibel wrote:

For over two months we tried to work out as quickly as possible a cease fire. On March 7, weeks before the end of the war, our goal seemed reached. In April it was possible to end the war five to seven days earlier had not the Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington, on April 21, given orders to break off negotiations a day before the Germans came in to surrender. On April 23, when the authorities from the German Army arrived in Switzerland, the Allies were still south of the Po. Much blood and destruction could have been saved if the Allied attack across the Po had not been carried out.⁴⁰

In any event, the surrender, assisted by private Swiss citizens, avoided a bloodbath in northern Italy and encouraged the capitulation of the remaining forces. This helped prevent what SS General Wolff himself called the “madness” of a last-ditch German Alpine Redoubt stand. It protected Switzerland from the German armed horde and hastened the end of the war, saving thousands of lives of Allied soldiers and Italian civilians alike.⁴¹

Adolf Hitler committed suicide in his Berlin bunker on April 30. Benito Mussolini had been captured by Italian partisans and killed on April 28. In early May, the French occupied the Vorarlberg in western Austria, and the threat of war for Switzerland finally ceased. The Reich unconditionally surrendered on May 8, and the war officially ended at midnight.⁴²

On the date of surrender, the Swiss Federal Council announced that it no longer recognized the Third Reich as the government of Germany and Swiss authorities proceeded to expel all foreigners considered inimical to the national interest. The Swiss had fought Nazi subversion ever since Hitler came to power, and the closing of the Reich Embassy made it possible to suppress completely the espionage it generated. Immediate action was taken to expel Nazis and Fascists. Anyone who had been a member of a foreign organization known for violence, such as the Gestapo, and anyone who would continue to promote National Socialism by unlawful methods was to be expelled, as would persons likely to engage in sabotage or assassination. The U.S. State Department, in a report entitled *Swiss Policies on Purge of Axis Supporters*, clearly recognized Swiss efforts to rid their country of Nazi sympathizers.⁴³

Though the direct military threat to Switzerland had ended, as in the rest of Europe the economic and social effects of the war were far from over. In May 1945 there were 115,000 people in refugee centers in Switzerland, and thousands of others elsewhere. During the entire war, 400,000 refugees and emigrants came

to the country, and one billion Swiss francs were spent on related assistance.⁴⁴ The *Atlantic Monthly* commented:

To these, as to the refugee problems, the country has steadily responded with generous gifts and help of all sorts, including the providing of temporary shelter during the war for 35,000 Jews. (If we had made a comparable effort, we should have taken in 1,225,000, since our population is 35 times that of Switzerland; actually, we did not take as many as Switzerland.)⁴⁵

Refugees included interned soldiers, sick and wounded, escaped prisoners of war, civilians who escaped either from concentration camps or had fear of being imprisoned, and the frontier fugitives at the end of the war. Throughout the war, the number continued to increase despite repatriation measures.⁴⁶ Between August 13, 1943 and April 20, 1945, 166 American planes landed or crashed in Switzerland. Allied planes sometimes flew to Switzerland as a place of refuge after being damaged in battle or because of spent fuel or mechanical failure. By contrast, Axis planes that landed there did so because they were shot down or made navigational mistakes.⁴⁷ Some 1,700 American airmen would be safely interned in Switzerland during the war.⁴⁸

As a protecting power between nations which had severed diplomatic relations, Switzerland interned civilians and wounded prisoners of war, and facilitated POW exchanges between the Allies and the Axis. Many thousands of prisoner exchanges took place without the public being aware of them.⁴⁹

The following table sets forth the national origins and numbers of foreign soldiers interned in Switzerland from June 20, 1940 through December 31, 1945, as reported by the Commission for Interned and Hospitalized Military Persons.⁵⁰

<i>Country of Origin</i>	<i>Soldiers</i>
France	32,621
Italy	29,213
Poland	14,972
Russia	8,415
Germany & Austria	7,532
Britain	5,139

Yugoslavia	2,921
United States	1,742
Greece	846
Belgium	783
Czechoslovakia	516
Finland	105
Diverse	81

By interning these soldiers Switzerland fulfilled her obligations as a neutral under international law, but more importantly, demonstrated singular humanitarian concern as the numbers were great in proportion to the Swiss population. Fully 68,141, or 65 percent, of the internees were Allied soldiers, most of whom had been interned since 1940. Most of the Axis internees were Italians, not Germans, and they were interned relatively late in the war. (By being interned, many of these Italians escaped having to fight for the Germans.) Large numbers of Allied soldiers would have lost their lives had they been kept in Nazi prisoner-of-war camps.

Headquartered in Geneva, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is a voluntary association of citizens recognized by governments for its humanitarian work in war zones around the world. When the war began, the Central Agency for Prisoners of War was established pursuant to the Geneva Convention Relating to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Beginning with 50 volunteers in September 1939, by the end of the war the ICRC employed over 2,500 workers in Switzerland.⁵¹

The ICRC kept lists of all prisoners of war and transmitted messages between prisoners and their families. Millions of communications involving both civilians and prisoners were generated during the war. Besides locating missing persons, ICRC personnel visited prisoner camps, sent relief packages to military and civilian prisoners, provided information about violations of the Geneva Conventions, supplied medicine and protected captured partisans. Except for the Soviet Union, all warring nations relied on the ICRC,⁵² which assisted or registered 477,000 Americans, most of them POWs and a few civilian internees, during the war. A total of 10 million Allied prisoners and civilian internees were assisted overall by this uniquely Swiss organization.⁵³

The ICRC also succeeded in convincing the Germans to recognize Free French partisans as legitimate armed forces, thereby preventing some massacres.

As rumors of the Holocaust spread, the ICRC sought access to concentration camps to seek freedom for children and the aged and to provide relief. After a period of refusal, in 1942 the ICRC gained permission to provide food parcels to the Theresienstadt concentration camp, which imprisoned 40,000 Jews, and to other camps. However, the Allies prohibited the use of food imported into Switzerland for these prisoners. It took two years of work before the ICRC could overcome Allied objections. Not until 1944 was permission granted for such provisions.⁵⁴ By the end of the war, ICRC delegations had conducted 2,200 visits to prison camps. Delegates helped arrange the surrender of German concentration camps to the Allies and prevented last-minute executions.⁵⁵

Swiss diplomats, particularly Carl Lutz and delegates of the ICRC in Budapest, were able to save thousands of Jewish lives in late 1944 and early 1945 by extending Swiss diplomatic protection.⁵⁶ A total of 1,355 inmates, mainly Hungarian Jews, of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp arrived in Switzerland in December 1944. As their destination was Palestine, the U.S. Department of State argued to the British in January 1945: “This is an excellent opportunity to demonstrate to the Swiss our good faith in promising to find temporary havens for all refugee Jews arriving in Switzerland from Hungary.”⁵⁷ Acting Secretary of State Joseph C. Grew cabled Bern that the United States “would deeply appreciate continued Swiss cooperation in this humanitarian endeavor by admitting all such refugees who may be able to reach Switzerland, without regard to numbers.” However, for months the Allies had refused to permit the Swiss to use French roads and railways to import some 300,000 tons of foodstuffs warehoused in a Spanish port.⁵⁸

The U.S. War Refugee Board asked the ICRC to “distribute food, medicine and clothing to concentration camp inmates in enemy controlled areas and to remove them, if possible, to safety in Switzerland without unnecessary delay.”⁵⁹

According to SS General Walter Schellenberg, in mid-January Himmler promised former Swiss President Jean-Marie Musy to release 1,200 Jews to Switzerland every two weeks. The program began in February. However, through a decoded message, Hitler discovered the agreement, and ordered that any German who helped a Jew or a British or American prisoner escape would be executed immediately. Schellenberg persuaded the chief of the Prisoner of War Administration not to pass on Hitler’s order. He further arranged to countermand the order to evacuate concentration camp inmates liable to be

liberated by the Allies, and arranged for meetings with Dr. Carl Burckhardt, the ICRC president.⁶⁰

The end of the Pacific war also involved Switzerland. On July 22, 1945, after three-and-a-half years of war with the Western powers, Japan finally agreed to comply with international law permitting neutral observers to visit prisoner-of-war camps. As reported by the *New York Times*, the Swiss had recently agreed to represent Japan in the United States (replacing Spain) only on condition that Japan allow Swiss observers to visit all camps where Americans were held.⁶¹ After the atomic bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan capitulated on August 14. The Swiss transmitted Japan's surrender offer to the United States and handled the subsequent dispatches between those powers.⁶²

Between 1939 and 1945, Switzerland spent 4 billion Swiss francs for arms and another 4 billion to maintain the army, for a total of 8 billion francs or, at today's rate, 80 billion francs.⁶³ In 1940, defense expenditures were fully 12 percent of the entire Swiss national income as Switzerland concentrated her efforts on fortifications and the *Réduit National*; in 1945, the figure remained high at 7 percent.⁶⁴ The monetary costs of defense and preparedness, together with the personal efforts related to the mobilizations, required great sacrifices on the part of Swiss citizenry during the war. When the average Swiss man was at his military post along with the farm's pack animals, his wife and children had to do all of the grueling farm work alone. Urban workers likewise lost wages.

The National Defense Commission concluded at the end of the war that the SSV shooting federation would continue to promote rifle skills for the entire nation in the interest of national defense.⁶⁵ The armed citizen had played a deterrent role against invasion and would remain the cornerstone of Switzerland's democratic army.

The army demobilized in July 1945, and active service officially ended on August 20. In Bern, Guisan spoke of future defense as the nation celebrated.⁶⁶

While the Allies had accepted Swiss neutrality through most of the war because it suited their interests, some became critical of Switzerland toward the end of the war and afterward. At the Swiss National Day on August 1, 1945, Foreign Minister Max Petitpierre responded to this criticism:

Those who reproach us today for our neutrality forget that this country, even when in mortal danger and practically alone as the representative of democratic

ideals in the subjugated continent of Europe, resisted all pressure from the outside (Axis) and maintained that independence of which she is justly proud today.⁶⁷

Petitpierre asked rhetorically: “As a belligerent state, invaded as the other countries of the continent, would we have been more useful than by remaining neutral?”⁶⁸

On October 4, 1945, Federal Councillor Karl Kobelt gave an account of the Swiss perception of Nazi Germany’s wartime threat and revealed some wartime secrets to the Swiss public. Kobelt noted that Swiss intelligence “stretched right into the *Führer*’s headquarters” and kept the Military Department informed of Wehrmacht plans. The danger of invasion was greatest after the fall of France, after the Italian surrender, and as the war approached its end. The German General Headquarters also planned an invasion in March 1943, when 30 German divisions were massed on the Swiss frontier, but it was canceled at the last moment, according to Kobelt.⁶⁹

Beginning almost immediately after Hitler’s rise to power, Switzerland expended large sums of money and human effort to arm herself and to have the capacity to resist a Nazi invasion. Most other European nations failed to make these expenditures or efforts and would become prey to Nazi military invasion and, afterward, economic exploitation and worse.

European nations that failed to resist or that were quickly defeated and occupied contributed to the Nazi war effort, albeit involuntarily— clearly far more than any neutral country that traded with Germany. The Nazis plundered every country they occupied. Production of goods, crops, slave labor—all was free. The Nazis extracted immense resources from the occupied countries: France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, Italy, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Poland, the Baltic states, Ukraine, large portions of Russia and the Caucasus, Norway, Bulgaria and parts of North Africa.

Switzerland is now being criticized for not joining the war on the side of the Allies and for trading with Germany. Yet this relationship of trading partners required Germany to pay for what it purchased, instead of getting valuable resources at little or no cost. By sustaining her economy through trade, Switzerland maintained the strength to resist a Nazi takeover. Had Switzerland declared war on Germany, she would have been overrun from the borders to the

Plateau, and the Swiss Jews and the Jewish refugees in Switzerland, as well as resisters in general, would have been exterminated. Nazi control of the Alpine transit routes, as well as the superb defensive terrain of the Swiss Alps, would also have greatly damaged the Allied cause.

As the war neared, Switzerland at first embargoed all arms exports, but lifted the embargo in April 1939 at the insistence of the Allies. The Swiss munitions industry then exported sizable amounts of matériel to France and Great Britain and virtually none to Germany, until the surrender of France in June 1940. The Swiss did supply some armaments to Germany after the fall of France, but for the duration of the war Swiss arms deliveries amounted to less than one percent of Germany's total armaments. Albert Speer, the Reich Minister of Armaments and Munitions, does not even mention Switzerland in his lengthy memoirs, although he wrote extensively on how Germany harnessed industry in France and other occupied countries to serve the Reich's war needs.⁷⁰

Speer also wrote of the importance of Germany's trade for raw materials with other neutrals. In December 1943, Speer informed Hitler that, should supplies of chromium from Turkey be cut off, the manufacture of tanks, planes and U-boats would become impossible and that the war would end about ten months after the loss of the Balkans.⁷¹ His prediction came true. Iron ore from Sweden was just as important to Speer's efforts, and keeping open Germany's supply route from Sweden was an important factor in Hitler's decision to invade and occupy Norway and Denmark.

In every country they occupied, the Nazis seized the gold in the national bank. They also imposed occupation costs on these countries, which by the end of the war amounted to a cumulative total of 60 billion marks (\$15 billion). France paid over half. Banks were also forced to grant "credits" to the Nazis. The total occupation costs and credits extracted from all occupied countries totaled 104 billion marks (\$26 billion). This does not include the value of crops, raw materials and products which were taken. From France alone, those amounted to about 185 billion francs.⁷² The Nazis stole no manufactured or agricultural products from the Swiss. Nor did the Swiss pay occupation costs.

At the end of September 1944, Germany held 7.5 million foreign slave laborers from occupied nations who were simply kidnapped and railroaded there. There were also two million prisoners of war, half a million of whom worked in munitions plants.⁷³ Switzerland supplied no slave labor force to the Third Reich.

The Nazi arms industry could not have functioned without this human war booty. Even the subjects of the Final Solution were fodder for the Nazi war machine. Emmanuel Ringelblum of the Warsaw ghetto, writing in 1942, described the plight of Jews in Eastern Europe:

Only those Jews have a right to live who work to supply the German Army. . . . Never in history has there been a national tragedy of these dimensions. A people that hates the Germans with every fiber of its being can purchase its life only at the price of helping its foe to victory—the very victory that means the complete annihilation of Jewry from the face of Europe, if not of the whole world.⁷⁴

Many of these workers were literally worked to death or died from starvation. It bears repeating that Switzerland was almost the only country in the whole of continental Europe where such horrors did not occur.

The collective determination to resist, at any cost, at the national, group and individual levels throughout Europe might have stopped Adolf Hitler far earlier. There should have been more and earlier resistance, including armed resistance, by states and peoples alike. More than most European countries, the Swiss prepared themselves for such resistance. Spiritually, they made the commitment to expend the national resources to make their military preparedness credible.

General Henri Guisan symbolized the spirit of the Swiss citizen—the citizen who was a trained marksman since youth and who gained confidence from the announcement that surrender was never an option. The genius of Guisan was that he masterminded a strategy that was entirely within Swiss historical traditions. Throughout the war, the Führer had simply not been willing to pay the bloody price that the Swiss would have extracted. Both when Germany was at the peak of its power and later, when it sought to create a “Fortress Europe,” the Nazis declined to launch the Wehrmacht against Switzerland. Guisan, the Swiss riflemen and their mountains, alone out of all Europe, deterred Hitler from swallowing them up.

A half-century later, the place of General Guisan in history is indisputably positive. He will be remembered forever as the leading figure of Switzerland who led the nation honorably through its darkest hour by fostering the will to resist.⁷⁵ While military leaders are usually remembered for their combat activities, Guisan will be remembered as the general who stood up to Hitler and made him blink—saving the country from devastation.

Chapter 11

ARMED NEUTRALITY TO THE 21ST CENTURY

IT WAS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE WORLD WAR WOULD be replaced by the Cold War, and an economically and militarily strong Switzerland continued to be vitally important to Europe. In a 1950 policy statement, the U.S. State Department praised the Swiss contribution to the reconstruction of Europe and confirmed American endorsement of Swiss armed neutrality:

The Swiss Confederation is an important factor in European economic recovery and a positive force in the maintenance of free democratic institutions in Europe. While traditional neutrality precludes their political or military alignment with the West, the Swiss can nevertheless be relied upon to defend their territory resolutely against any aggressor.¹

The Swiss emerged from World War II convinced of the value of their militia system. A decade after the end of the war, now retired General Henri Guisan praised the virtues of military rifle shooting as the national sport: “It is not for nothing that in every Swiss house is a firearm with its ammunition, always ready to defend our freedom and independence.” In no other country was “keeping a weapon by everyone the symbol of free men.” The present generation was obliged, Guisan continued, to impart shooting skills to their youth.²

Total Resistance (Der Totale Widerstand) by Swiss Major H. von Dach, written in 1958 with the Nazi experience still fresh in mind, expressed the Swiss philosophy: “We believe it is better to resist until the last. We believe that every Swiss woman or man must resist.”³ Civilian resisters would have no shortage of arms, because practically every Swiss family had either a Model 1911 rifle or K31 carbine, not to mention the arms held by hunters and marksmen.⁴

Most of von Dach’s work concerned how to organize and wage guerrilla

warfare and conduct underground operations. He admonishes that the arms found in every household “must be cleverly concealed as their illegal possession may mean a death sentence.” The enemy will set a deadline for surrender of arms, will assure those who comply that they will not be punished, and will initially adhere to this policy, to create trust. The sense of security will be false:

Should you be so trusting and turn over your weapons, you will be put on a “black list” in spite of everything. The enemy will always need hostages or forced laborers later on (read: “work slaves”) and will gladly make use of the “black lists.” You see once again that you cannot escape his net and had better die fighting.⁵

In such a struggle, the imperative for the Swiss must be: “Death rather than slavery!”⁶ Some Swiss authorities looked askance at von Dach’s thesis because it did not consider international law, under which partisans not in an official force are not protected if they become prisoners of war and can be executed.

However, this was the philosophy successfully applied by the Swiss in the war to dissuade a Nazi attack. It must be surmised that many Swiss civilians, men and women, would have resisted a Soviet invasion in the Cold War era, just as they would have resisted a Nazi invasion a decade before, by waging partisan warfare. The official *Soldier’s Book* (*Soldatenbuch*) of the postwar period equated the citizen and the soldier and instructed on how to wage total war.⁷

After the Soviet Union swallowed up one Eastern European country after another—some of them not very far away—Swiss defense policy was directed toward protection from Soviet aggression. The air force, tanks, and artillery were modernized. The growing nuclear threat led to increasing civil defense measures, including massive construction of fallout shelters. Civilian defense was professionally organized and taught to the population at large.⁸

The threat was real. As Czechoslovak General Jan Sejna would later disclose, in the 1970s the Warsaw Pact planned, in the event of a European war, to make strategic air landings in Switzerland and to capture all vital centers within three days.⁹

To this day, the Swiss Constitution provides that every Swiss male is subject to military service and is to be issued arms which he may retain. “In this, Switzerland is unique in the world, exhibiting a remarkable degree of trust in her

citizens, whose right to bear arms is considered as natural as the right to vote, and as such showing that Swiss direct democracy, armed and based on the idea of a social contract between rulers and ruled, is real.”¹⁰

In the late 1950s, the Model 1931 bolt-action carbine was declared obsolete and the Model 1957 Sturmgewehr (Stgw 57 assault rifle) began to be issued to the citizen soldiers. Using a 24-round magazine, the Stgw 57 is selective fire, meaning that it shoots in semiautomatic (one shot per trigger pull) or full automatic (continuous fire as long as the trigger is held back), at the option of the user.¹¹

Following the adoption of a new service rifle, the roughly 200,000 Stgw 57 rifles remaining at arsenals, pursuant to the 1997 Federal firearms regulation (the first ever passed by the Swiss Parliament), are being rendered exclusively semiautomatic and are being sold to Swiss citizens, male and female, at the bargain price of about 60 Swiss francs each.

The current service rifle is the Model 1990 Sturmgewehr (Stgw 90 assault rifle). This handy selective-fire rifle, which also features a three-shot burst, holds twenty 5.6mm cartridges (which are interchangeable with 5.56mm NATO cartridges), has a folding stock, a bipod, high-tech plastic, and precision diopter sights.¹²

The K31 carbine and the models Stgw 57 and 90 rifles are the three rifles typically used in 300-meter rifle competitions that are held every weekend all over Switzerland except in winter. These rifles are commonly seen being carried by ordinary citizens on trams and buses or on the shoulders of pedestrians and bicyclists en route to and from shooting ranges. Swiss shooting traditions also live on in the annual Feldschiessen, shooting festivals held everywhere in the country on the same weekend each year, except in Geneva, which holds its festival a few weeks later. There are also countless cantonal and local matches, in which women have been participating in increasing numbers. Historical shoots are held to commemorate the great events of the Swiss past—the Rütli, Morgarten, and St. Jakob an der Birs shoots are only a few.¹³

The Federal shooting festival (Schützenfest) is conducted over a three-week period once every five years. Last held in Thun in 1995, it attracted 72,000 competitors, over one percent of Swiss citizenry, making it by far the largest rifle match in the world.¹⁴ By comparison, the 1995 National Matches at Camp Perry, Ohio, America’s “World Series” of the shooting sports, in which both civilians and military personnel participated, had only 4,000 competitors. Had

the same percentage of the population participated as in the Swiss matches, 2,500,000 Americans would have shot at Camp Perry.

As has been the tradition since medieval times, the young are instructed in the use of weapons. One of the highlights of the year in Zurich is the Knabenschiessen. The city closes down for the afternoon as boys and girls compete with the Stgw 90 rifle. In 1997, the shooting queen and king, aged 15 and 17, respectively, won out over some 4,000 other teenagers and were crowned in the traditional festive ceremony.¹⁵

Swiss male citizens, with few exceptions, serve in the army and keep their arms at home, even after retirement. Major bus stops display not only the bus schedule but also a large poster with the training schedule of every unit of the Swiss Army for the year. Uniformed soldiers carrying their assault rifles are regularly seen at train stations and in other public places. Today, climbers in the Swiss Alps may witness army helicopters darting among the peaks on maneuvers. A close look at a rocky mountainside might also reveal a hidden bunker with a cannon.

Despite the prevalence of arms in the population, Switzerland is an exceptionally peaceable and safe society—not in any sense militaristic. Her tradition of defense preparedness and a citizenry trained in martial skills is allied to her tradition of nonaggression and neutrality. Virtually the only European country able to stay out of European wars since the fall of Napoleon, Switzerland renounced all imperialist ambitions as long ago as the Battle of Marignano in 1515.

Evidence of World War II defenses abound. Concrete tank obstructions litter the cow pastures along the Rhine. Bunkers for heavy machine guns dot farms and hillsides. Almost all bridges still have cavities to hold explosives; the major ones are still wired. Fortifications consisting of scores of rooms carved inside mountains are still maintained, either as museums or for current training and defense.

Today, Switzerland's citizens army is equipped with state-of-the-art weapons that include a wide array of advanced-design machine guns, mortars, rocket launchers, anti-tank guns, Stinger missiles, tanks, artillery, helicopters and anti-aircraft guns. Jet fighters include the Mirage, the Tiger II and, most recently, the American-built F/A-18 Hornet.¹⁶

Switzerland has banned, however, the use of antipersonnel land mines. The Federal Law on War Matériel prohibits the use, production, or possession of

these weapons.¹⁷

The robust Swiss democracy provides for citizen initiatives at the Federal level to be voted on by the populace. In 1989, the year the Berlin Wall fell, 64.4 percent of the voters rejected an initiative to abolish the army outright. Majorities in all cantons other than the Jura and Geneva voted no. The supporters of this initiative then adopted a piecemeal strategy, but the voters again, in 1993, rejected initiatives to preclude purchase of the F/A-18 fighter jet from the United States and to deny funds for the building of a military training facility. More recently, attempts have been made to bring initiatives to cut military expenditures by one-half and to prohibit exportation of armaments.¹⁸

The portion of the Swiss political spectrum consisting of pacifists has thus gone full circle. After campaigning against the army in the 1920s and early 1930s, the pacifists, who were mostly socialists, finally entered into a coalition with the other political parties to strengthen defense against the threat of the Third Reich. This alliance created the will and ability of the entire populace to resist Nazism and Fascism to the end. The Socialist Party had resolved in 1942 that “the Swiss should never disarm, even in peacetime.”¹⁹ Opponents of the 1989 initiative to abolish the army thus contended that the lessons of World War II were being completely disregarded. Once again, it was argued, pacifists were willing to believe in the inherent goodness of surrounding governments and to assume that Switzerland needed no defense.²⁰

A current Swiss armed forces publication, *The Army of a Small, Neutral Nation: Switzerland*, explains the militia system of national defense, with the purpose of convincing foreigners that any aggression would be extremely costly and not worthwhile to the aggressor.

The militia army is also a force for social cohesion in the nation. Active units consist of 20- to 30-year-olds, although soldiers to age 50, and officers to age 55, can be called. “The acceptance of a superior, especially an officer, by his men,” says the publication, “is less a problem than might be expected in an egalitarian society where one is accustomed to making his own political decisions, right down to the last detail.” This democratic militia takes advantage of the experience and skills of its members in their civilian capacities, resulting in appropriate assignments to specific weapons or services. Bank presidents and farmers serve together, and this provides important unifying experience in the society at large. For total mobilization, the Swiss Army can rely on over 600,000 soldiers, including a number of specialized women volunteers.²¹

Based on its Constitution and international law, Swiss defense incorporates permanent neutrality and the pledge never to start a war: “The nation’s goal is peace in freedom.” The repulsion of armed aggression against Swiss territory is the imperative. “Should the army suffer reverses, it is to continue resistance in the form of guerrilla warfare. The aim of such action is to ‘make it impossible for the aggressor to control the occupied area and to prepare that area for liberation.’”²²

The policy of dissuasion which kept the Nazis out of the country in World War II continues today:

The army clearly contributes to the avoidance of war by demonstrating its ability and readiness to fulfill the tasks expected of it under the conditions just described, by convincing foreign observers that the Swiss army is capable of maintaining long-term resistance and inflicting heavy losses on an aggressor, by minimizing a potential aggressor’s chances of success in view of the will of the Swiss people to resist and the material means of resistance available to their army.²³

The Swiss armed forces today are organized according to the concept of “Army 95,” named after its reorganization program, which became effective in 1995. As formulated in the Federal Council’s report leading to the adoption of this program, Swiss security goals include: peace in freedom and independence; maintenance of freedom of action; protection of the population; defense of the national territory; and contribution to international stability, mainly in Europe.²⁴

According to former Chief of Staff of the Swiss Armed Forces Hans Senn, the “Army 95” plan will reduce the army from 800,000 to 400,000 by the year 2005, by reducing the age of active service. The plan, however, retains the important principle that every male will continue to serve, and the maintenance requirements of technologically complex weaponry will increase the small number of full-time professionals.²⁵

The lessons of World War II remain relevant today. As Dr. Senn states, timely preparation and the will to defend are decisive. Why did Switzerland have the means and will to resist and others did not? She was not a kingdom; she had her traditions of democracy, a citizens army and independence.

As a youngster in 1933, Dr. Senn recalls that the Swiss were already anti-Nazi. That year, he was engaging in military exercises with his fellow cadets in

the canton of Aargau. A Berlin newspaper published a picture of the youngsters with the caption: “The Swiss make propaganda of their defense capability.” That “propaganda” would inspire the nation to keep the Nazis out, and it has kept out most intruders since 1291.

In a 1997 interview, Lt. General Arthur Liener, Chief of Staff, explained the character of the Swiss armed forces. The Swiss system is unlike any military force in the world. Nor does it bear any resemblance to the American National Guard. Composed primarily of civilians, its members are professional in that their military duties often reflect their jobs in civilian life. Military duty is not mere training for some other occupation.²⁶

“There are 400,000 small arsenals in Switzerland,” stated Liener. “Personal arms and ammunition are kept in the home of every militiaman.” The ammunition consists of 50 rounds of 5.6mm cartridges for the Stgw 90 assault rifle, sealed in what looks like a thin coffee can. Given that 400,000 militiamen possess their own small arsenal at home, the entire army can be mobilized in 24 hours, and much of it can be mobilized in as little as 4 hours. All matériel is dedicated to a fixed unit. This is unlike all other military forces in the world; Germany, for instance, has an armed force of 330,000 but matériel for 650,000. (By comparison, the U.S. Army numbers 480,000 active-duty soldiers. While this does not include other branches of service, the Army is by far the largest.)

Unlike World War II strategy, mobility rather than fixed position is emphasized. Military forces can reach anywhere in Switzerland within two hours. The new fleet of F/A-18 fighter jets purchased from the United States is the backbone of the air defense.

Why does Switzerland need a military force, in view of the peace that currently prevails in Europe? Who are Switzerland’s potential enemies? These are questions asked today by Swiss youth for whom World War II is a distant memory. Liener replied that Switzerland, as a neutral, belongs to no traditional alliances. The armed forces must be able to defend the country against *any* aggression. As long as other countries have armed forces and the potential for aggression, Switzerland must be able to defend herself. For evidence of turmoil not too far away, one need only look at the Balkans or the former Soviet Union.

Liener was being diplomatic when he failed to mention the historic enemy to the north. Although a peaceful neighbor now, Germany’s sheer size and might, particularly since the reunification of the country, raises questions that go to the heart of Swiss defense preparedness. How can a small nation like Switzerland permanently maintain her independence in the shadow of such a powerful

neighbor? For much of its history, Germany has not shared Switzerland's democratic tradition, and its overwhelming economic power is potentially threatening.

Soviet Russia was a bitter enemy of Switzerland during much of this century. The end of the Soviet empire, which held Swiss democracy and capitalism in contempt, does not, however, mean that Switzerland will not be threatened from the east in the future.

Consistent with her policy of neutrality, Switzerland is not a member of NATO, which is now expanding into Eastern Europe. Referenda voted on by the people have also mandated that the country remain outside the European Union and the United Nations, although this could change in the future. Switzerland's lack of membership in the UN has not prevented her from participating in initiatives against chemical warfare or providing medical assistance in war-torn areas. Switzerland also contributes sizable sums to various UN humanitarian organizations. Membership in NATO would allow the armed forces to participate more fully in joint training exercises, but the historic commitment to strict neutrality has prevented this. Still, the Swiss military has played certain roles outside the country in cooperation with NATO, including the Partnership for Peace program, and has participated in certain United Nations activities. Whether the Swiss armed forces should join other countries in armed intervention in countries torn by civil war, such as the former Yugoslavia, continues to be debated.

The deeper political question is whether Switzerland should continue to maintain her traditional neutrality in the absence of an immediate threat. Some in Switzerland endorse membership in NATO while others call for the abolition of the Swiss Army because there is no further need for it. Yet neglect of defense in times of apparent calm is an act of naïveté in view of the volatile nature of people and governments. The threat that Switzerland parried in the 1940s—because of its will to prepare for the worst—arose in a blink of the eye in the context of history. The question of membership in a binding military alliance is, ultimately, a question of sovereignty. Switzerland's robust independence has worn well—for Switzerland, for Europe and for much of the world. It should not be too readily compromised.

Epilogue

IF THE EXAMPLE OF SWISS RESISTANCE IN WORLD WAR II PROVES anything, it proves that federalism, with its concomitant idea of limited government, and democracy, with its distrust of rule by the few, go hand in hand. During the years 1938–41 country after country was served up to Hitler, as if heads on a platter, after a political elite decided, either following brief resistance or no resistance at all, to surrender. The radically democratic Swiss, by contrast, retained their tradition of the armed citizen and refused to recognize a Führer, whether their own or someone else's. Instead, they prepared, beginning at the level of the individual citizen, to resist with arms to the end.

Although Germany originally consisted of a collection of states, after 1933, as noted by William Shirer, Hitler “abolished the separate powers of the historic states and made them subject to the central authority of the Reich, which was in his hands.” Reichsminister Frick explained: “The state governments from now on are merely administrative bodies of the Reich.”¹

The benefits of direct democracy are clear. At the cantonal level, the ability of citizens to vote on the laws that affect them means that the people are sovereign. At the federal level, the initiative and the referendum offer the people the ability to govern themselves.

Again, federalism and direct democracy go hand in hand. True democracy means power from the bottom up rather than from the top down. In Switzerland, the individual and the family influence local affairs at the community and cantonal levels. The cantons govern according to the will of their citizens. The federal government is simply the unified cantons. In this system of federalism, the U.S. Constitution parallels that of Switzerland in that limited sovereignty is delegated to the federal government, but residual sovereignty is retained by the states or the people.

To defend her independence and unique system of government, Switzerland continues to maintain a citizens army, which by its very nature could never be used to institute tyranny or to wage imperialist wars against her neighbors. Though not militarist, this militia was strong enough to successfully deter

aggression in World War II, while the standing armies of almost every other European army either collapsed or were ordered not to fight by fainthearted ruling elites.

In the United States, the original federal and state militias were abandoned. Although the armed populace was considered the militia, it was supposed to be “well regulated” and trained under federal and state law. The maverick private groups in the United States today calling themselves “militias” are not what the Framers had in mind when they affirmed the concept of a unified citizenry in arms. Switzerland’s citizens army is equivalent neither to America’s National Guard, the membership of which is restricted, nor, of course, to the so-called “militia” movements.

The institution of neutrality means, in theory, that one fewer country is available to initiate, or to participate in, a potential war. Historically, wars are started by rulers, who order commoners who have nothing against each other to kill or be killed. Swiss armed neutrality has been dictated by necessity but has also been a benefit to the world in that it enabled Switzerland to work in humanitarian causes and provided a site where conflicts could be resolved among belligerents in a climate of security.

World War II was the supreme test of these fundamental principles. The Swiss capacity for universal armed resistance by the entire population and spiritual resolve to resist to the death were major factors in deterring Adolf Hitler’s anticipated attack. This proved the success, not the failure, of Switzerland’s institutions of federalism, the citizens army and limited government.

For over two centuries, the United States and Switzerland have been recognized as “Sister Republics” because of their common ideals. Americans admire the little man standing up to the big bully. And Americans of the war generation were well aware of the story of how the Swiss stood up to Hitler. They read the newspapers and saw the maps of Nazi Europe as it expanded from 1938 onward, always making democratic Switzerland seem ever smaller in the sea of Nazi tyranny. The fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II captured great public interest, but the Swiss story has not heretofore been widely shared with the postwar generation. Many Americans seem to be only vaguely aware of Switzerland’s reputation as a democratic nation of riflemen who offered armed deterrence to the prospect of an *Anschluss* by the Führer.

Influenced by English writers, America’s Founding Fathers, who made the Revolution and then adopted the Federal Constitution and Bill of Rights in the

late eighteenth century, were inspired by the Swiss example. The Founders depicted Switzerland as a democracy standing alone in a continent of tyrannical monarchies.

The American republic was founded on the principles of federalism, democracy and neutrality, which were strongly influenced by the Swiss model. Switzerland's policy of armed neutrality in World War II, which stemmed from these ideals, was morally sound because it did not constitute moral neutrality. The Swiss well understood what a Nazi victory would have meant for all of Europe and publicly opposed Nazism despite the threat of invasion. The ideals of human rights and the sanctity of individual life remained the motivating ideals of Switzerland throughout the war, even as they were abolished elsewhere in Europe wherever the Third Reich and the Soviet system advanced.

Switzerland has entered her eighth century as Europe's only direct democracy. Since 1291, this country has preserved her independence by mobilizing her entire population of armed men to resist any and all foreign aggressors. In recent centuries, with the exception of the Napoleonic incursion, Europe's tyrannies have been deterred from attempting to invade Swiss soil.

From the late eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries, Americans have studied the Swiss militia as the model of a democratic fighting force. The Swiss model required every man to serve in the militia and to keep a rifle at home. When World War II came, Switzerland was the only country in Europe whose entire populace had the capacity to wage a partisan armed struggle against an invader. Over three-fourths of a million soldiers, out of a population of just over four million, were mobilized, and boys and old men were armed in local defense organizations. Women, too, would have fought in the event of a Nazi aggression, just as they did when Napoleon invaded.

Switzerland's institutions played a key role in her being the only country on continental Europe to be surrounded but never conquered by the Nazis. The Nazis despised Switzerland because of her democratic traditions. Propaganda Minister Goebbels called Switzerland "this stinking little state," while Hitler implored that "all the rubbish of small nations still existing in Europe must be liquidated."

Had the Germans attacked, the Swiss were instructed to disregard any alleged "official" surrender as enemy propaganda and, if necessary, to fight individually. A nation of sharpshooters was prepared to snipe at German soldiers at long range from every mountainside.

Switzerland had few heavy arms, although any Nazi panzers that made it

past mined roadways would have found the mountains impassable. During the war, Swiss fighter planes shot down 11 Luftwaffe aircraft over border skies.

The Warsaw Ghetto uprising exemplified what a small number of oppressed people could do by obtaining even a few arms. Jewish resistance fighters drove the Nazis from the Ghetto and inspired the free world with their heroism. While the revolt was crushed, its participants killed many Nazis. Similarly, Switzerland, with the highest percentage of trained citizen soldiers in the world, posed an obstacle that was unacceptably costly to the Nazis.

The Swiss strategy of defense from their *Réduit National* was simple: An opposition to the death by select troops at the border would be followed by a relentless war conducted from the Alps—the place the Swiss chose to engage the invader. The vast majority of Swiss strongly opposed Nazi ideology. There was no Holocaust on Swiss soil.

As so often in the history of World War II, the final verdict belongs to Winston Churchill: “Of all the neutrals Switzerland has the greatest right to distinction. . . . She has been a democratic State, standing for freedom in self-defense among her mountains, and in thought, in spite of race, largely on our side.”

For centuries, Switzerland has symbolized the ideals of individual rights, direct democracy, federalism and armed strength for defense, never for aggression. She has been neutral in military conflicts, but was never morally neutral; her people have always sided with freedom. Swiss traditions were put to the supreme test during World War II and were vindicated.

Chapter Notes

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30 Dulles, *The Secret Surrender*, 27.

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