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Book Review

By L. B. Kuppenheimer

Stephen P. Halbrook. *The Swiss and the Nazis: How the Alpine Republic Survived in the Shadow of the Third Reich*. Philadelphia: Casemate Publishers, 2006. 353 pp. Source notes, bibliography and index.

For hundreds of years Switzerland has been recognized as a nation committed to not being involved in military conflicts. However, in WWII it was confronted by the most serious and credible threat to its neutrality since the inception of the policy. To begin with, Switzerland's wartime population of 4,200,000 was outnumbered nearly eighteen to one by its most lethal contiguous neighbor, Germany. When Austria and Italy were thrown in, the ratio jumped to thirty to one. In addition, the Axis powers of Italy and Germany shared over seventy percent of Switzerland's border. And although her industrial production was of the highest quality, it was limited in both breadth and quantity. This made Switzerland trade-dependent, even in the area of war material. Because she was also landlocked, Germany was, per force, one of her most important trading partners. Certainly, the odds in 1939 that Switzerland would remain free were very much against her. What made them even worse was the fact that the native language of over sixty percent of the Swiss population was German, and Hitler had made it well known that one of his prime objectives was the uniting of all German speaking peoples. Yet, somehow, despite all of the odds against it, Switzerland managed what other countries of Europe were unable to do – remain free. Analyzing how the Swiss accomplished this was the objective Stephen Halbrook set for himself in *The Swiss and the Nazis: How the Alpine Republic Survived in the Shadow of the Third Reich*, his second book on the subject and the sequel to *Target Switzerland*.

The history of Switzerland's neutrality is a long and honored one, but prior to the 16th century, it was a warrior nation so renowned for its courage and loyalty that its armies were often hired out as mercenaries. In fact, so respected were the Swiss fighting forces that in 1506 Pope Julius II invited a contingent to serve as his personal bodyguard, which they do to this day even down to the uniforms they wear and the pikes they carry. However, as early as 1515 at the Battle of Marignano, the Swiss discovered realities about themselves and the changing power dynamics of Europe that began to alter their way of thinking about war. On this particular occasion, the Swiss were acting as mercenaries to a number of Italian Dukes when the French invaded. The Italians naturally called upon their mercenary allies to aid them in their defense. At the time, the

Swiss confederacy consisted of thirteen states, but three of them declined their assistance, deciding that it was too risky for what they considered essentially a commercial venture. In the end, the Italian and Swiss forces were defeated. The Swiss realized that there likely would be further disagreements, especially since half of their population was Catholic and half Protestant. In addition, they were only a loose confederation; there was not yet any central authority strong enough to implement a united foreign policy. The origin of a united and independent Switzerland began in the meadow of Rutli near Lake Luzern in the year 1291, when the people of Uri and Schwyz agreed to support each other in the event that the German Counts tried to reassert their hegemony over either of them. By the time of the Battle of Marignano, Switzerland had been *de facto* independent, but it wasn't until the treaty of 1648 between all the European powers that Swiss independence was formally recognized and accepted. And it was not until 1674 that the Confederation Council made the first Swiss declaration of neutrality.

There could not have been two countries more different in every way than Germany and Switzerland in 1939. The peace movement that had swept Europe following WWI had a strong following in Switzerland to the point that the Social Democrats were opposing any military spending at all. In contrast, Germany, which was smarting under the harsh reparations and armament limitations of the Versailles Treaty, was already making secret preparations for a war of conquest and revenge following Adolph Hitler's consolidation of power as absolute leader. While Germany was embracing the Fuehrer principle of "one leader, one people, one mind," the Swiss were reaffirming civilian leadership and the democratic principles of their ancient republic. In fact, it was not until August of 1939 that the Federal Council finally deemed the situation critical enough to elect a Commander-in-Chief for only the fourth time in its history. In the selection of General Henri Guisan, the Council had found a man who, like Winston Churchill, understood both his people and his foe. Guisan fully grasped the character of the Fuehrer and the scope of his ambitions long before the allies and even many in his own country. In a short thirty minute speech to his entire officer corps at Rutli in the same meadow where the Swiss Federation had its origins, Guisan sought not only to unite and bolster the resolve of his officers, but to send a message to Hitler that any violation of Swiss sovereignty would be vigorously defended.

Halbrook has organized his analytical study into four basic topics that the author considers critical to a full and balanced understanding of Switzerland during the war years. In fact, the inspiration for this work was in part a response to the seemingly exhaustive twenty-five volume Bergier report entitled *Switzerland, National Socialism and the Second World War*, (2002). Curiously, this commissioned work failed to include any consideration of German invasion plans. Even more surprisingly, it did not address Swiss ideological resistance or the courageous ability of ordinary citizens who, despite the constant threat of attack, not only were able to get on with the daily

challenge of survival but also compassionately shared what little they had with thousands of interned refugees.

Part I, *A War of Words and Nerves*, introduces the reader to the concept of “Geistige Landesverteidigung” or spiritual national defense. Not content with merely a stoical determination to resist Nazi aggression in all its forms, the Swiss newspapers and cabarets kept up a constant flow of provocative satire and criticism in response to the torrent of Nazi propaganda directed at them. Given their circumstances, this demonstrated remarkable courage on the part of the Swiss.

Part II, *Preparing for Invasion*, is dedicated to the military preparations of both the Swiss and the Germans. And it is here that the author first employs reminiscences of ordinary citizens, in this case Swiss soldiers and officers. Instead of restricting interviewees to rigid categories, the author encouraged speakers to exercise their own prioritization in what they chose to relate. The author also added variety and a change of pace by broadening the spectrum of anecdotal evidence, going beyond the ordinary to the unexpected. Such was the case with two blind members of an anti-aircraft unit whose acute hearing was used to identify types of enemy aircraft and with the minister who refused to conduct the funeral of a German man who was dressed in his Nazi uniform. The result is an interesting, if not eclectic, collection of experiences that taken together communicate a common theme, the consistency and breadth of the Swiss attitude of spiritual national defense. Specific detail is also devoted to Switzerland’s plan of defense that evolved with the war and circumstances. For Switzerland, unlike the major powers, the question was not victory or defeat; if invaded the Swiss knew that defeat was certain. Its defense plan was centered on making the German victory too costly to undertake in the first place.

Halbrook makes clear that General Guisan’s draconian plan of defense was absolutely reliant upon the total commitment of the people who defined themselves more by the ideas of freedom and democracy than by the land of their country, adding yet another shade of meaning to “spirited national defense.” General Guisan’s redoubt plan was based upon not even contesting the flat land and rich valleys. Rather, it contemplated withdrawing the army and much of its citizenry to the high craggy peaks of the Alps, where huge caves had been constructed to hold enormous amounts of food, ammunition and many thousands of citizens. The plan was brilliant on several levels: one it showed a deep understanding of the nature and priorities of the Swiss people. Two, it took maximum advantage of the strength of the Swiss army, every soldier a trained marksman. And three, it exploited the Achilles heel of the German Blitzkrieg strategy and in so doing reflected just how keen a military mind General Guisan possessed. He recognized early in the war that this devastatingly effective “lightning war” depended on the very close coordination of its air force, mechanized ground forces and infantry. Troops dug in high in alpine crags would render the air force ineffectual and the mechanized forces unable to reach them. This would leave the unsupported infantry vulnerable to an army of snipers. The truth of this insight was proven

in the rubble of Stalingrad, when the Panzer Corps could not be committed because of its inability to maneuver and the Luftwaffe was unable to bomb because the opposing forces were locked so close together that German losses might exceed Russian. This created a stalemate that was ultimately broken by the always reliable Russian winter. The result was the total loss of the entire German 6th Army and the first surrender of a Field Marshall in German history.

In Part III, *Struggle for Survival: Food, Fuel and Fear*, Halbrook turns once again to the voices of everyday citizens as the most effective way to convey just how imaginative and determined the Swiss were to resist the forces of tyranny. In addition to their own survival and the continual fear of invasion, the Swiss people also provided safe harbor and sustenance for thousands of fleeing refugees. It was here that I encountered one of the few disappointments in this work. There were all too few voices of the refugees themselves, considering the fact that by the end of the war they represented roughly seven percent of the Swiss population. A chapter dedicated to their experience would have added greatly to this study and certainly remains fertile ground for additional exploration.

The fourth and final section, *Espionage and Subversion*, focuses on the intelligence activities that took place within Switzerland throughout the war. The scope of this section is broad, extending from the larger strategic issues down to the anecdotal level, a technique which avoids the pedantic and adds depth and color to the study. It is a further testimony to the courage and character of the Swiss government and armed forces that even after the fall of France, when Switzerland was completely surrounded by the Axis, they continued to risk German wrath by smuggling precision-made material as well as intelligence information to the allies. However, a detailed examination of the fascist movement both in and out of the Swiss military would have made this section more complete and certainly better balanced.

The Swiss and the Nazis has been well researched and the source material is a balance between secondary and primary. Source notes are dense and conveniently organized by chapter. Halbrook's rhetorical style is also straightforward and easy to follow. During the course of the war, many "secret weapons" were developed by the principal combatants. All of those have long since been revealed and analyzed by scholars. What is surprising is that after fifty-seven years, innumerable studies and even the twenty-five volume study commissioned by the Swiss Historical Commission, the secret weapon of Switzerland awaited revelation until now. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's wonderful fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes, used to say that the best place to hide something was to leave it in plain sight. Stephen Halbrook in giving voice to the ordinary people of Switzerland has filled an important and surprising gap not only in the history of Switzerland but of World War II in general. It is remarkable that in all of the studies commissioned after the war, none until this work has discovered Switzerland's secret weapon: the resolute character of her own people. Of course, the brilliance and inspiring leadership of General Guisan can never be underestimated, but had the everyday citizen not been

imbued with a complete dedication to preserving his and her own freedom, there would have been no one for him to inspire.

Now, sixty-two years after the war, when library shelves are groaning under the weight of all the studies that have been done on every aspect of the war, there are those who might question why yet another work on the subject is important, especially since it deals with a country that was not actually engaged in active combat. This reviewer would argue that, on the contrary, this study could not have come out at a more propitious time for the western democracies, which are now under attack by forces that fight by stealth and seek our destruction not by meeting and defeating our armies on the field of battle, but by terrorizing our civilian population until they lose the heart to continue our way of life and belief systems.

Through his careful analysis and by giving voice to ordinary people in and out of uniform, Stephen Halbrook succeeds not only in achieving a thorough analysis of Switzerland's armed neutrality, but also in revealing through their own voices the willingness of ordinary citizens to accept total war in order to preserve their freedom. Their story serves as an inspiration for America today as we face our own dark time. In 1944, the eminent American Jurist, Judge Learned Hand, expressed his thoughts on the mysterious and often elusive nature of liberty to over a hundred thousand newly naturalized citizens in New York's Central Park: "Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women. When it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it... While it lies there, it needs no constitution, no law, no court to save it."

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