

Swiss dig in to protect neutrality

CAN A small nation realistically maintain a posture of neutrality in the nuclear world? And can it protect its citizens in the event of a nuclear holocaust? The Swiss think they can — and for 20 years have been preparing intensively for war, while remaining internationally the most neutral of non-aligned nations.

This readiness is apparent to the casual eye the length of the land, from mobile radar stations protected by Oerlikon anti-aircraft guns to ski-troops prone in the snow for small-arms exercise, right down to the quaint if practical practice of stockpiling boulders for use as emergency road blocks.

According to the army commander, Joerg Zumstein, up to 2,000 key bridges and tunnels are constantly mined while the land-locked state maintains its private version of the modern submarine — immense ammunition dumps and artillery bases chiselled deep into the moun-

tains. There are even a dozen static but highly armoured Swiss "aircraft carriers" — fighter-aircraft bays, each a kilometre under the Alps, from which Tiger Northrops and Mirage III's can be catapulted into action for later recovery from high-altitude pocket-airstrips.

Swiss neutrality goes back centuries and, since the famous 1815 Congress of Vienna, which carved up post-Napoleonic Europe, has been an established fact of European political life.

But the six million plus Swiss do not confuse their independence with pacifism — and in fact their country is in a permanent condition of readiness for war, with a citizen-militia found nowhere else in a Europe of professional standing armies. And this militia can mobilise half-a-million men in just 48 hours, according to Western defence analysts, who consider it to be one of the best armed forces of any of the small countries of the world.

During the Second World War (during which just 120 bombs fell on Swiss territory) the strategic thinking of these forces was to abandon two-thirds of the country to an invader, and harass him mercilessly from the mountains. But now, the plan is to use the mountain perimeter as a first line of defence, holding off tank columns (which, the Swiss tacitly recognise, would only come from the Soviet bloc) with airstrikes and armour supported frontier infantry.

Sharing a border with four neighbours and highly vulnerable to blockade, the Swiss maintain, to service these forces, huge emergency food and fuel supplies, and their Defence Ministry estimates that they could hold out for up to four years in the event of encirclement and war, while roads have been designed to serve as emergency aircraft runways, and hundreds of temporary hospitals and barracks

have been dug into the mountainsides.

Though figures are officially released, the food stockpile alone is reckoned to reach 650,000 tonnes, distributed in 600 underground stores and command centres, some of which are linked by subterranean roads large enough for heavy military traffic. Even the mountain aqueducts that serve hydro-electric power stations are convertible, with watertight gates, to the same purpose in an emergency.

But it is the extraordinary part-time nature of its armed forces that sets Switzerland apart from the rest of Europe. The air force, controlled in time of war by periscope radar from underground command posts, can field 350 modern combat planes, and only a third of their crews are full-time military fliers — the rest are civilians, or pilot Swissair's passenger airliners.

And the land forces comprise

just 1,500 full-time soldiers, almost all of them non-commissioned instructors. For every year some 40,000 20-year-olds are inducted for a four-month basic training service, while up to another 400,000 men are required to regularly do a month's refresher training in the army.

This system of conscription is comprehensive and life-long — after basic training the new recruit is sent home with his Sturmgewehr 57 assault rifle and he will not turn it or its successor in until he has reached the age of 50, retires from periodic military training, and moves over to the civil defence network.

Conscientious objection is not allowed — and every year some 400 Swiss are court-martialled and gaoled on this account.

In any case the citizen militia is popular, and this consensus allows it to deploy an elite mountain division and three

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field corps, disposing of 1,000 tanks, German and British Swiss.

Nor do these formations cost much (around 2 per cent of the gross national product a year) for army training pay is minimal, and most of the cost is borne in effect by employers. Thus, in the event of conventional war in the European theatre, the Swiss are more than ready to defend themselves. And in the event of nuclear war in the northern hemisphere, they are also prepared.

Such a war, it is calculated, will kill 1,500 million people, and up to 90 per cent of civilian populations subject to missile strike. The Swiss, however, expect roughly the same proportion of their own civilians to survive — for over the last 20 years they too have been preparing to move underground, if — or maybe when — the big weapons of NATO and the Warsaw Pact take to the skies.

Council officials criticise civil defence plans

BY FRANCES HORSBURGH
Local Government Correspondent

Following a meeting of the protective services committee of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities in Edinburgh yesterday, the chairman, Councillor James Irvine of Strathclyde, emphasised that the views were collected from chief executives and did not necessarily represent those of councillors.

He said that, following complaints of wholly inadequate proposals for cross-border planning and communications in times of emergency and an apparent lack of recognition by the Government of the catastrophic effects of nuclear war.

Commenting on the new responsibility of local authorities to make plans to use suitable buildings as civil defence shelters, some chief officers express concern about new housing estates where they say suitable buildings for communal shelters do not exist.

Some also claim the Government's plan that buildings should be able to be adapted for civil defence use in seven days is "totally unrealistic" in the light of the financial provisions being made.

With reference to the Government's "stay put" policy in time of emergency, it is asked if planned evacuation is not preferable to possible "chaotic unplanned" popular dispersal.

It is also said that the Government has failed to make provision for the inevitable panic-buying of food stuffs which would occur in the lead up to possible war.

Members of the committee also agreed to seek a meeting with the Secretary of State to press for Government funding for suitable buildings as civil defence shelters, changeover for police and fire services radio communications, which is the result of international decisions on wavelengths.

Councillor Irvine said councillors had expressed "great concern" about the expenditure involved and it was felt that as the changes were being imposed on the authorities the Government should meet the capital costs.

Central Regional Council has already estimated its bill at just over £2m and information about the costs.

Scottish Home Affairs Minister Mr Michael Antram has already stated that while the Government has failed to make provision for the inevitable panic-buying of food stuffs which would occur in the lead up to possible war.

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