

Switzerland between 1939 and 1945: neutrality and encirclement

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When war broke out in September 1939, Switzerland proclaimed its neutrality and mobilised its army. After the defeat of France in June 1940, the country found itself almost entirely surrounded by the Axis powers and the territories they controlled. The military command adopted a defensive strategy centred on the Alpine redoubt, intended to deter an invasion.¹

Encirclement placed Switzerland in a position of economic dependence. The country had to import foodstuffs, raw materials and fuel, whose delivery depended on the agreement of the belligerents. It also had to export in order to finance those imports. Trade agreements were concluded with Germany, which obtained deliveries of Swiss industrial products and clearing credits, and with the Allies, who sought to limit that trade.²

Swiss neutrality during the Second World War was long presented as the result of the country's will to defend itself. Historical research has shown that economic relations with Germany also played a part in the fact that Switzerland was not invaded, and that those relations contributed, to a degree that remains debated, to the German war effort. These findings provoked passionate debate in Switzerland, between those who saw in them an unjust questioning of the wartime generation and those who saw in them a necessary historical clear-sightedness.

Geneva, a border city surrounded by France, experienced the war in its own particular way. After the German occupation of the southern zone in November 1942, the city found itself in direct contact with Germany and its auxiliaries.³ The Geneva border became a crossing point for refugees, resistance fighters, intelligence agents and smugglers. The international organisations based in Geneva, in particular the International Committee

of the Red Cross, carried on their humanitarian activities in difficult conditions.

Key points. During the Second World War, neutral Switzerland was encircled by the Axis powers and depended on the belligerents for its supplies. Its economic and financial relations with Germany, long passed over in silence, were subjected from the 1990s onwards to a thorough re-examination.

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Guerre mondiale, Deuxième”: 430,000 men mobilised in August–September 1939, 450,000 in May 1940, then around 120,000 on average under a rotation system; “When the Franco-German armistice came into force (22 June 1940), Switzerland was entirely encircled by the Axis powers”; DHS, art. “Réduit national”: Colonel Germann’s proposal of a pre-emptive withdrawal into the Alps, regrouping completed on 25 July 1940, the day of the Rütli report, five and then six divisions and three mountain brigades in the redoubt. ↩
2. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Guerre mondiale, Deuxième”: agreements of 9 August 1940 and 18 July 1941 granting the Reich “a clearing credit of 850 million francs”; Allied blacklists kept from August 1943; ICE, *La place financière et les banques suisses à l’époque du national-socialisme*, summary (uek.ch). ↩
3. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Guerre mondiale, Deuxième”: after the occupation of the southern zone of France in November 1942, Switzerland severely restricted the admission of refugees through more restrictive police directives adopted on 29 December 1942; Wikipedia (en), “Bergier commission”: more than 20,000 refugees turned back or expelled during the war. ↩

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