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# HENRI GUISAN - A MILITARY LEADER FOR THE PEOPLE



(Photograph by courtesy of Ringiers Swiss Illustrated)

General Henri Guisan was born on 21st October, 1874. The centenary of his birth last October gave rise in the Press to many retrospects on his life and impact on Swiss history. The following is an assessment by Colonel Jean-Jacques Chouet in *La Tribune de Genève*.

There can be no doubt that General Guisan appeared to a Switzerland surrounded by war as the man at the heart of her destiny for six years. He was the man that they needed to embody, express and translate into action its will to live. Opinions on this point have remained unanimous, and this is indeed a rare thing. But to recognise that Switzerland was lucky to have such a man should not prevent us from examining how Guisan became the man of destiny that he was.

## A military calling

It is necessary to go back to the military calling of the future General, a calling of a particular kind. Son of the earth and raised in the traditions of Canton Vaud, Guisan was trained as a farmer and obtained part of his formation in German-speaking Switzerland. But when, in 1896, he took charge of a farm at Chesalles-sur-Oron and personally ran it for six years, he had already risen to the rank of Lieutenant and accomplished a first period of voluntary military service.

During these years, Guisan followed the courses that enabled him to rise to the rank of Captain. Besides accomplishing his obligatory military duties, all of which were quite naturally

accepted by a man of his character and background, he also served as a voluntary instructor. His interest and attraction towards the Army thus led him early on to accomplish more than his normal military duty. That he didn't choose a military instructor's career had two explanations: he wished to continue to manage his estate; and he wanted to remain free from the Army machine. This dual aspect of his personality already foreshadows the independence of mind which was to be the mark of his thinking and decisions as Commander-in-Chief of the Army.

His personal experience and its success have doubtless contributed to Guisan's belief that higher Army posts should be open to non-career officers. Without necessarily supporting this view, we must recognise that in Guisan's particular case, and even though his life and career were given an early military orientation, his civilian origin strengthened his feeling for the indispensable cohesion that must exist between the people and its Army. This was of the greatest benefit to the country in the years of "war without war" which the nation experienced from 1939 to 1945. It is impossible to say whether Guisan would have been the best of leaders in *battle*, but it can be said that, *preparing* for this battle, he was admirable in the way he conducted the preparation, and in the way that he made it understood and shared by his compatriots.

This was of course not Guisan's only quality. Guisan not only took the Army seriously, but also the people as a whole. He always saw a citizen in a soldier and a soldier in a citizen. The people were therefore naturally inclined to consider Guisan as the symbol of their will to resist so that the identity between the General and the Swiss people was achieved quite naturally. This identity was also achieved within the Army because, as Mr. Max Petitpierre so rightly said: "He was both a leader above, and a man in the midst of those he was called to command."

## A leader ready for his task

The leader was well prepared for his task, or at least as well as the training offered to officers of his day would allow. As far as Guisan was concerned, this training was improved by his many voluntary periods under the flag and his rise to Division-Colonel as a full-time officer. He had served in artillery and in infantry. He had lived through the 1914-18 mobilisation and had commanded so many different units, both French- and German-speaking, that he knew two-thirds of the Army before his election as Commander-in-Chief. He had furthermore been on several information tours in neighbouring countries, and had visited the French-German front in 1916 and 1917.

His military credentials were, it can be seen, solid and indisputable. And why shouldn't one also add to this the share of

the luck that is indispensable to all those called to big tasks, a luck that mingled with the elegance of class and his humanity deprived of demagogy? It is a well-known fact that, in war, unlucky leaders must be put on the sidelines. Guisan had been fortunate throughout his tenure as Commander of the Army. But this takes away none of his merits. His long command may not have been exempt of errors since only those that do nothing never make mistakes. But it should be noted that the mistakes for which he has been criticised, such as his advanced plans for a military co-operation with France or the suggestion, made to Federal Councillor R. Minger in August, 1940, to diplomatically appease Germany's irritation were inspired, like his more fortunate decisions, by a wish to neglect nothing that might strengthen his country's security at the eventual cost of being understood badly or too late.

### A style of leadership

No one, the Germans least of all, could have been mistaken. On 25th July, 1940, on the Ruetli, the General had said what had to be said and gave the word to the 650 officers he had called on the historic field: "The events that have happened on our borders will not in the least alter our determination to resist . . . it is not only necessary for the men under you to realise this, but Switzerland as a whole, the Government, Parliament, all the citizens, to whatever party and religion they may belong. Your wives and

your children must know it. You will radiate around you the confidence which comes from this determination and this belief in resistance."

This order to resist was transmitted to thousands of mobilised citizens. "Nothing can stop the Army now, because it can now breathe," observed the writer Bernard Barbey.

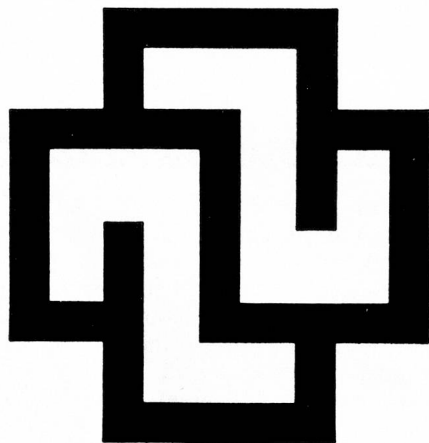
The national profession of faith proclaimed on the Ruetli had a fundamental impact at home, and also abroad. The 25th July address also illustrated, in a most remarkable way, Guisan's style of command. The style shown on the Ruetli was to be seen again in the way he addressed orders to the Army as in the solemn promotions of superior officers at Sempach in 1943, and les Rangiers in 1944. Conscious of the importance of direct communication, personal presence, setting and tone, Guisan always practised this form of direct order, managing to convey his presence to each and every man. Soldiers and citizens saw in this way that their leader really believed in them. This was of immense benefit to the country. While he knew how to communicate efficiently, Guisan left no room for improvisation and precipitation. His subordinates, from whom he claimed as much precision as he did on himself, and who could appreciate his eye for details, were often astonished to see him weigh pros and cons at length – like a good peasant from Vaud – reflect, consult and meditate before arriving at a decision. But they also knew that when this decision had been made, Guisan carried it out thoroughly and to the end.

### Strategic decisions

The great decisions for a Commander-in-Chief, even for a man, who like Guisan, was concerned with total national resistance, are of a *strategic* nature. In the introduction to his report to the Federal Assembly at the end of the war, the General resumed in a few lines the guidelines that he had followed during six years.

"From the 30th August, 1939, onwards I understood that the role of the Army was to present all the belligerent parties with an obstacle which, adding military arguments to political and economic arguments, would discourage any aggression and give the country the greatest possible margin of security. The measures that I was to take to this end, constantly adapting them to the unceasing fluctuations of the situation abroad and to the requirements of the national economy, were those which would have enabled the Army to face the ordeal of war."

Guisan's strategic measures are the result of four major decisions taken between 1939 and 1944. The first was, with the first mobilisation, to deploy his forces along the border in expectation of various possible developments and to demonstrate Switzerland's will to resist any aggression. The second decision, taken in May, 1940, was to implement the "Northern Plan" consisting in occupying, from Sargans to Gempen, positions that had been fortified during the preceding autumn and which were extended in the Jura when the



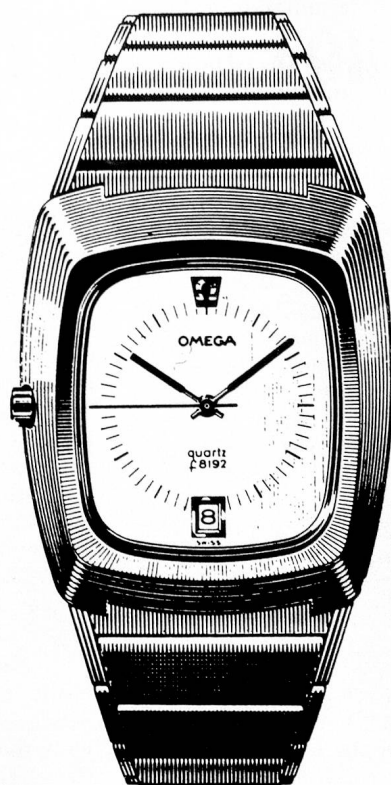
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Wehrmacht had passed round the Maginot Line. The third decision, by far the most important and daring, concerned the "National Redoubt". It fully applied the principle of troop concentration in the realisation that by holding to geographically limited but easily defensible objectives comprising all the Alpine routes of strategic importance to potential aggressors, the Army was offering a better protection than by spreading out thinly along the border. The fourth decision, taken in the autumn of 1944, was to redeploy the Army along the border to conform to the completely new pattern of forces in Europe and to the movement of a battle that was following the border from east to west.

These decisions were the right ones since the essential goal — to preserve Switzerland from war — was attained. They were also adapted to available means. Guisan's wisdom was to resist the temptation to make preparation for a war of *movement* for which there wasn't sufficient equipment, and to fully use those assets which were available, above all the *terrain*.

Peace was thus won. Guisan could have gloried on a political and strategic



(Photograph by courtesy of Ringier Swiss Illustrated)

success for which he was so largely responsible. His greatness was to assume

responsibility without a claim to glory. This was the mark of a true soldier.

## A PARADISE WHICH TURNS OUT TO BE HELL

Mr. Marcel Rey, Director of the Lausanne Relief Centre for Drug Addicts, went on a month-long mission to Nepal and India at the request of Swiss

diplomatic officials on the Indian sub-continent concerned with the repatriation of an increasing number of young Swiss who set out for this distant

land with the dream of finding a paradise free of all constraint, but who in fact end up there as complete wrecks.

"After a month in Nepal, I could no longer bear the terrible sight of young drug addicts from the west, many of them Swiss, virtually dying on the spot," he reported. "They have no money, not even enough to pay for the squalid hotels of Katmandu, and live in parks. They survive on their daily injections of morphine."

The problem of these young wastrels has worried the authorities for some time, and the public's awareness of the situation was aroused last year by the repatriation of a few drug addicts found in India in a pathetic state. The Political Department was submerged by calls from the embassies in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Nepal, all countries lying on the drugs route, calling for help in dealing with these young people.

According to a despatch by the Swiss Telegraphic Agency, the Political Department is looking for specialists who could decide which young drug addicts should be repatriated. Mr. Rey stated in his report that these hippies lived even more marginally out in the East than they did in their native Switzerland. They had left their homeland moved by dissent and refusal of the realities of life, and turned out to be "the only ones that complain when they have to queue to buy postage stamps, and the only ones who are as unsatisfied over there as in Switzerland."

Many of these young Swiss present an additional problem to embassy personnel because they are without passports, having sold them. They are so destitute that they survive on begging and

## "Spanischbrötchen"

The origin of the name of this speciality of Baden, a spa in the Canton of Aargau, is not quite known. It was chiefly during the 18th and 19th centuries that the "Spanischbrötchen" (literally translated "Spanish Buns") enriched this jovial spa. The Zurich poet and painter David Hess wrote in 1815 in his work "Badenfahrt" (trip to Baden): "Most of the guests of the spa like to improve their breakfast with 'Spanischbröchten', a baker's speciality of the spa. Some do not hesitate to engulf each morning, as hot as possible, five or six pieces of this rich and indigestible puff paste. So that friends and relatives at home may enjoy this delicacy as well, they fill big boxes with it and send them by messenger. Large supplies are also taken along by guests when leaving and after a few weeks they wonder why they did not benefit more by their cure and had an upset stomach."

According to David Hess, an incredible quantity of those light but rich buns was consumed. Some 720,000 "Spanischbrötchen" were reportedly sold

in Baden each summer. This consumption might have been reduced, had the guests known where their favourite delicacy was kept, namely "in the kennel laid out under the big staircase leading from the courtyard to the inn," as David Hess maliciously put it.

Did the Zurich poet intentionally fail to mention that, after Baden, his home town was the biggest consumer of the buns which he so maligned? According to the chronicle, young boys and girls from Baden started to run the long road to Zurich in the early morning hours "long before cockcrow", so that the ladies and gentlemen of Zwingli's town may have the "Spanischbrötchen" still hot and on time on their breakfast tables. Those daily dawn runs to Zurich came to an end in 1847 when Switzerland's first railroad, which ran between Zurich and Baden, took over the transport of this delicacy and as a result became popularly known as the "Spanischbrötlbahn", i.e. the "Spanish-bun railroad."