CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SWISS ARMY’S COMBAT METHODS AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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“It is difficult for every author of Swiss field manuals to free himself from foreign field manuals. But it is clear, that they must be consulted because they contain vital experiences from the last war. The good is to be taken where it is provided.”

1. Introduction

As is generally known, Switzerland’s armed forces did not actively participate in the power struggles of the First World War and were not directly confronted with the changes in warfare between 1914 and 1918. Nevertheless, after the end of the war, the Swiss military leadership was confronted with the question as to what future direction the national defence should take in the face of the bloody trench warfare, new combat methods and the adequate weapon systems from previous years. What conception of war should future considerations be based on? Also, how did the Swiss military leadership want to wage war? According to what combat methods should regiments and divisions of the Swiss armed forces be aligned to in the future? Thus, at the beginning of the interwar period, the Swiss Army was confronted with the same questions as the combat-proven armed forces of neighbouring countries. Apparently, an international period of military innovations and modernisation began. However, this period was marked by complexity and opacity, as stated by military historian W. Murray. The victory of German tank forces in 1940 tends to obstruct the view of military innovation in the interwar period. Examining the state of

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2 The author thanks Jens Amrhein (Zurich) for his assistance to compose this article.
warfare at the end of the First World War, the future development into mechanized warfare was barely conceivable.3

In Swiss military historiography, the period between the World Wars is a research field which has scarcely been studied.4 Only Hans Senn’s book from the series on the history of the General Staff gives an overview.5 Senn pursues the earlier mentioned question on future combat methods of the Swiss army in his book and criticises the Swiss military leadership during the interwar period, due to the fact that this period is said to be one of the poorest where military innovation and development is concerned. Additionally, Senn holds the alleged stagnation of the Swiss army after the First World War responsible for its deficient readiness at the beginning of the Second World War.6 Furthermore, an essay by Giulia Brogini Künzi and Markus Pöhlmann is constitutive for this research, since it examines the discussion on warfare development within the Swiss officer corps during the interwar period by analyzing the military press.7 However, with this systematic, but limited selection of historical sources, the authors only pursue part of the discussion. Other relevant sources such as the General Staff’s operation plans, the internal discussions of the military leadership, or the independently written records by higher officers, were not acknowledged. Additionally, because of the strong focus on military magazines, the relevance of the different voices could not be discussed.

This essay is, therefore, an addition and discusses the following question: How was the military knowledge of the First World War concerning combat methods imbedded in the independent publications by proper Swiss officers dealt with, and how was this knowledge

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4 In this context the author of the article points on his dissertation thesis “Kampfkonzeptionen und Identität: das schweizerische und österreichische Offizierkorps 1918–1938/39 im historischen Vergleich” (dissertation thesis, University of Zurich, assumedly to be published in 2010).
5 H. Senn, Der Schweizerische Generalstab, vol. 6, Erhaltung und Verstärkung der Verteidigungsbereitschaft zwischen den beiden Weltkriegen (Basel: Helbing und Lichtenhahn, 1991)