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So Much For Neutrality: Switzerland Almost Fell Victim to the Nazi War Machine

May 14, 2021 | By: **Michael Peck**

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Here's What You Need To Remember: Nazi Germany had defeated France—reputed to have the finest army in Europe—in just six weeks. They would have made short work of Switzerland.

Switzerland emerged from World War II unconquered but not untarnished. Switzerland did survive as a free.



Handling [gold looted by the Nazis](#) in return for minerals that kept the German war machine running, or keeping billions in assets belonging to Holocaust victims, is hardly something for the Swiss to yodel about. Yet it is equally unfair to brand the Swiss as Nazi puppets.

In fact, Nazi Germany almost invaded Switzerland. “Switzerland possessed the most disgusting and miserable people and political system,” Hitler complained to Mussolini in June 1941.



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the German military devised a plan to conquer Switzerland. Operation Tannenbaum called for German troops to invade from France, Germany, and Austria, while the Italians invaded from the south.

“Concentrated surprise penetration from Lake Geneva to Lake Constance toward the center of the country with strong and fast outer wings,” stated the plan. “We must force the quick subjugation of Switzerland by using extremely superior forces.”

The Axis would have faced formidable opposition. As with Sweden, Swiss neutrality was an armed neutrality (in the fifteenth century, Swiss mercenaries were the most feared in Europe). All Swiss men were liable for conscription and all were issued with rifles that they kept at home in case of mobilization. For a nation of just four million people, the Swiss could have mustered an army as large as 850,000 strong. Largely mountainous Switzerland, where German tanks would have been useless, would have been a tough nut for blitzkrieg to crack.

That porcupine image has also been a bastion of Swiss public relations. Indeed, after World War II, the Swiss claimed that the only thing keeping Hitler from invading was their nation-in-arms. That seems scarcely credible. Nazi Germany had defeated France—reputed to have the finest army in Europe—in just six weeks. Switzerland would have confronted Germany with what was essentially a popular militia, lacking tanks, artillery, and aircraft. While Switzerland has many mountains, the most populous and industrially productive part of the nation is on flat terrain that would have been quickly overrun. While the Swiss had built fortifications, they naturally concentrated them on the border with Germany and Austria, rather than with France. That left their defenses outflanked when the Germans occupied France.

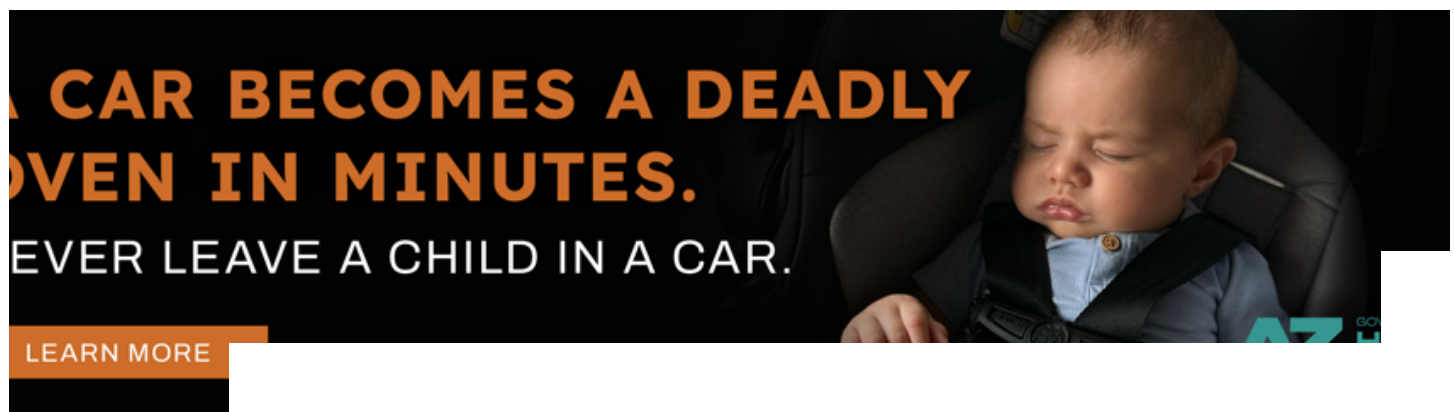


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Perhaps if Germany had invaded in 1944, the Swiss could have counted on outside help from Allied troops and aircraft. But there was no chance of that happening in 1940-41. Had Germany invaded Switzerland between the conquest of France in July 1940 and the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Switzerland would have been alone. The Soviet Union had signed a nonaggression pact with Germany and was shipping resources to the Third Reich. The only nations fighting Hitler were Britain and its Commonwealth, which were too weak to offer more than token support to a country isolated in the middle of Europe.

True, the Swiss can argue that the thought of conquering their nation-in-arms deterred the Germans. Yet Yugoslavia was a mountainous nation populated by extremely fierce people, and the Germans still chose to conquer it in April 1941.



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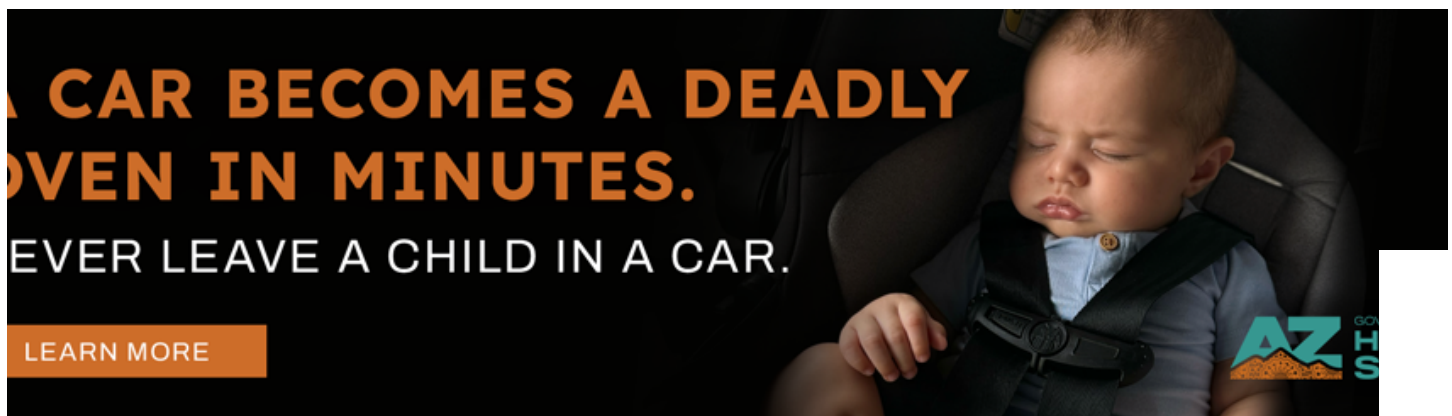


So why didn't Nazi Germany invade Switzerland? One reason might be that Hitler considered the Swiss to be sort of German (though that didn't stop him from grabbing Austria). A more likely reason was the invasion of Russia, though the Germans still mustered the resources to invade the Balkans in the spring of 1941. Or perhaps Switzerland was too useful as a middleman between Nazi Germany and the global economy.

Either way, Switzerland almost became another one of Hitler's conquests.

Michael Peck is a contributing writer for the National Interest. He can be found on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#). This article first appeared in 2017.

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