

# Swiss Army

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The war caused by Putin's invasion of Ukraine is shaking the foundations of Swiss neutrality. Needless to mention that neutrality is a main staple of Switzerland, held and cherished since the end of the Napoleonic Wars, just like mountains, milk chocolate, militia, billionaires, overpriced mechanical watches, Victorinox knives, banks, and Nespresso capsules.

The Swiss neutrality is at stake, because the invasion of Ukraine is such an egregious and abject act, not even the Swiss could actually stay put, and rightfully so. And challenging neutrality pisses the hell off our local far-right party, which is always a good thing in my book.

The Swiss government has aligned itself with the sanctions put forward by the European Union, but in spite of that, the USA ain't happy; understandably enough, the Russians ain't happy; NGOs ain't happy; and not even Zelensky is happy with Switzerland, either.

The legendary Swiss Army is unhappy, too, like this very highly ranked Swiss official who was recorded praising Putin on a crowded train and openly criticizing the Swiss government. Oops. Not very neutral, Herr Oberst.

Poor Nestle are also unhappy; first they had to stop selling chocolate in Russia because of consumer pressure, and then they had to scrap their plans to sell cocaine-flavored Nespresso capsules. I guess that's what George Clooney means when he says "what else?"

It is true that Bern has become a real shitshow at the political level. If there's one thing Swiss politicians are bad at, is handling crisis. But I don't blame them for the lack of practice; they haven't had any in 170 years! We have our foreign minister trying to shush those denouncing war crimes. Our head of the military department saying that this war is not such a big risk for our country. The centre parties denounce lack of coordination and coherence in our foreign policy regarding this invasion. What a mess.

The Swiss People's Party ain't happy, either. Because they, like the officer in the train mentioned previously, overwhelmingly support Putin (who, as we all now know, has provided juicy contributions to far-right parties, like in the case of Madame Le Pen in France, oh là là!)

Case in point: the billionaire daughter of a major figure of said Swiss People's Party has openly forbidden her employees from talking about the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a "war" and instead to refer to it as a "conflict". Ah, words. Her company, as you might imagine, is busy busy making money money in Russia. It all checks out now. And, to a certain degree, it's understandable: nobody shits in the dining room, innit. As R.E.M. once said,

Shiny happy people holding hands...

There are some Swiss people fighting for Ukraine right now, which happens to be against Swiss law; technically speaking, they could be prosecuted as soon as they return. I wonder if they took their *Sturmgewehr 90* with them? I'm pretty sure they have their faithful, MacGyver-approved Victorinox *Taschenmessern* in their pockets, next to their daily portion of chocolate and cookies.

There was a time when Swiss mercenaries were actually a thing, taking part in major historical events such as the French Revolution of July 1789. I guess the sacrosanct *Pontificia Cohors Helvetica* is the last remaining officially approved Swiss mercenary army?

The Swiss army has been searching its soul for a long time. I know it, because I've unfortunately been selected to participate in it, a rather somber honor that I would have gladly skipped if it weren't for the fact that the only alternative to enlisting was, well, prison. Yes, the "civil service" was introduced years after it was my turn to wear a uniform. Timing is everything.

As a Swiss citizen, I was drafted in 1992 through a series of physical tests that I failed miserably (seriously, I've never been good at gym), and thus found myself in July 1993 as a member of the rather unremarkable *Fliegen und Fliegenabwehr Rekrutenschule 2/243 Dubendorf 93*, wearing a *Tarnanzug 83*<sup>1</sup>, holding an outdated and overweight *Sturmgewehr 57*, and learning how to do a full *Zerlegung* and *Zusammensetzung* in less than 5 minutes without losing any piece in the process. A fundamental and useful skill that I promptly forgot as soon as I could.

I witnessed quite a bit of racism in the Swiss Army. Thanks to extensive Swiss making, my unit had people from various different origins (with matching family names): Burundi, Ivory Coast, Chile, Argentina (myself), Poland (myself), Hungary, England, and more. Of course we were called the "foreign legion" (that's cute), and those with darker skin were promptly harassed and insulted (that's not so cute) not only during service, but also in public transportation. Nothing generates warmer patriotic feelings than watching a drunk, two meter high white officer from the special forces of Isona make fun of the dark skin (or the family name) of one of your peers (of yours truly) in front of everyone in the train.

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<sup>1</sup>yes, I do have pictures of myself in uniform. I even have one of myself in the cockpit of an F-5 Tiger fighter. No, you won't see them.

(Record scratch sound clip) Kids: this was the world before smartphones with HD recording capabilities existed.

Besides this blatant discrimination and harassment, being a Swiss soldier meant that I had my fair share of Riz Casimir, Jass (I prefer playing Truco, to be honest), *Fassmannschaft*, and hours and hours of theory in Swiss German (which I didn't understand).

Such theory tried to teach us how to manipulate the quite useless, clumsy, heavyweight, unusable, and often downright nonfunctional "Funksystem SE-430", which in spite of its name couldn't belong to a universe further away than Jamiroquai's. I thus became a radio operator, or as German-speaking Switzerland calls them, a "Funker".

So bad was the SE-430, that we often used our shiny new PTT Natel C cell-phones to notify our headquarters that our assigned units didn't work (which made us wonder, how did prior generations without cellphones handle this situation? Pigeons? Smoke signals?)

We usually only discovered such shortcoming after having spent 5 hours setting all the equipment up (about 100 kilograms of electronics, antennas, and kilometers of wires covered in cow shit) in some remote part of the country, plugging everything to a portable generator, and trying to send a simple telex message with all of this advanced technology.

The Swiss Army still loves cutting-edge technology. So much in fact, they have decided to beef up their cyberwarfare unit... two months ago. Better late than never, I guess.

We once inadvertently invaded Liechtenstein with our radio system. Really. We planted its antenna system in a field in Kanton Graubünden, and we didn't realize there were small stones lost in the grass with the Liechtensteiner flag... anyway, all I'm going to say is that we rarely disassembled a station faster than that day.

But then I heard the true story of a Swiss tank being stopped and sent back home by the French Gendarmerie Nationale... in our case only a few birds witnessed our brief incursion into foreign territory.

(Record scratch sound clip) Kids: this was the world before GPS existed.

Since we're mentioning blunders, let's not forget about the time we switched our emitter to the same frequency as (the now defunct) Swiss Radio International, again inadvertently. My apologies to the audience who were greeted with some R2-D2-kind of noise in the middle of their weekly episode of "Yodeling with Reto".

The SE-430 had an "anonymous broadcast" mode, which of course was formally forbidden for everyone to use, but which we played with at two AM in the morning, in the middle of our shift (don't ask). One time we found an old German bible in the barn where we stayed somewhere in Kanton Solothurn,

and started broadcasting select chapters of it to all stations, much to the ire and dismay of our superiors. “*Am Anfang schuf Gott Himmel und Erde*” and stuff like that.

OK, so we had some fun. Not all was negative in the Swiss Army. During trainings we had a mandatory daily box of chocolate available for each soldier, every day. I got free rides all over Switzerland, on top of a very (not) comfortable and very (not) silent Steyr 4x4 “Funkwagen”. I don’t know if you heard this before, but Switzerland is quite a sight. Anyway, I’m digressing.

Oh, and so it happens that I was in that same unit together with Pierre Nebel, nowadays a well known political journalist on national French-speaking Swiss television; actually we had also been together to high school in Geneva from 1991 to 93. Very glad to see him doing something he always seemed gifted for: writing and speaking in public.

But I’m digressing again. I remember in July 1993 a colonel came to explain to us how important it was for Switzerland to buy the 34 F/A-18 fighters that the Swiss people had just approved a month earlier. The main reason being the Yugoslav Wars happening at the time. Marketing at its best. Those planes would replace the aged F-5 Tiger fighters of the Air Force.

(While writing this article, I realized that the F-5 was 30 years old in 1993... which is exactly the age of the F/A-18 fighters as this article hits the website. Geez, time flies like a fighter. And soon the F-5s will be replaced by F-35 fighters. F-5, F-18, F-35, it all follows a clear progression every 30 years. If the algorithmic progression continues, in 2050 they should buy a couple of F-53.)

I also remember missing the first two weeks of university because of this damn *Rekrutenschule*. I am actually angrier with my professors, who wouldn’t even help me afterwards providing me with copies of whatever they gave to their students during that time, arguing that “it was my duty” to be there on time. Oh, je suis désolé Monsieur le professeur, I was at my “service militaire” protecting your country. Or something like that. Dammit.

Not only could I not see the end of the tunnel during my *Rekrutenschule*, I had to endure a few 2- or 3-weeks long *Wiederholungskurse*, once a year from 1994 to 1997, and then again from 2003 to 2006. These sad exercises in futility promptly interfered with my studies, my personal life, my jobs, my everything, every year, once and again, like a neverending curse.

(Record scratch sound clip) A neverending *Wiederholungs curse*. Drumroll.

Let’s talk militia, shall we? Need to skip a *Wiederholungskurs*? Good luck getting your request approved. Those bastards they liked to see you begging for your own fucking time. Oh, but you couldn’t be fired from your job while you’re mobilized, how about that. You can miss exams, though, and that’s your problem, you lazy student.

Hah, “mobilized”; that’s a cute way to describe going for beers dressed in khaki

every evening for two weeks year after year. You have no idea how much the Swiss militia supports small pubs in the middle of fucking nowhere. I actually believe that the army owns those bars, because believe me, they are strategically located next to *Kasernen*, *Flugplätze* and other military locations far away from any other human settlement, and in many of those you just don't see anything else but soldiers in and out. Nobody else. Remove the militia system and the GDP of Switzerland would drop by 10 percent.

(Record scratch sound clip) One thing in common of *all* bars next to military bases is playing Status Quo's version of In the Army Now every evening. Every. Fucking. Evening.

What else? Oh, did I forget to mention the official shooting exercise to be done every year, too? Ah, yes, here goes another lost Saturday morning per year, to deal with a weapon I was mandated to keep at home, but which I would otherwise not touch, not even with a 10-foot pole.

The whole *Rekrutenschule* plus *Wiederholungskurse* thing took too long for my taste. This is the reason why I recommend kids these days to do their whole service in one shot, which takes 9 months, give or take. It's still a bummer, but at least you won't need to do any refresher courses afterwards.

My memories of the Swiss Army are those of a clunky, expensive, old, outdated organization, yet one that is so deeply rooted in Swiss culture, it's going to take a major crisis to change it.

And maybe, dunno, major crisis we have here and now. Maybe it is time for a redesign of this organization, thanks to those two additional billion Swiss Francs we're going to pay for it, and even better, to align it to higher values? The invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces is a good moment to ask ourselves the question: how selfish are we as a country? Or as the American would say: how stupidly do we want to spend our taxpayer money? Supporting bars in the fucking middle of the *Berner Oberland* playing Status Quo, or actually having a purpose and some integrity?

(Record scratch sound clip) You can guess the answer we'll give as a nation to the question above.

Because, seriously, can we stop this whole militia thing, please? Instead of quantity, let's strive for quality. Having seen what I've seen during my short tenure in such illustrious institution, I'd vote to have a few good men in service rather than a force unfortunately populated with enough drunk rapist nazi nostalgic junkies to make it unpalatable to anyone with a thinking mind.

Instead of such waste, why not having a professional army, made of selected, capable volunteers? My personal take is that it would be a perfect system for Switzerland: knowing the love of Swiss people for their Army, you can be sure its ranks will fill up quickly as soon as the job ads come out. Even better if the

pay is good, imagine that. There is a lot of actual patriotism<sup>2</sup> in the Switzerland collective psyche; the militia system is just the wrong way to put it to work.

The Swiss Army must change, Putin must be stopped, and far-right parties must be held accountable and exposed to public scrutiny. All of these events could happen very soon if we want them to happen, as a consequence of the current war in Ukraine.

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<sup>2</sup>pay attention to the choice of words here: I say patriotism, not nationalism.