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**The Swiss Concept of Soldiering in Practice**  
The Swiss Case

PRIF- Research Paper No. III/8-2009  
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Research Project „The Image of the Democratic Soldier: Tensions Between the Organisation of Armed Forces and the Principles of Democracy in European Comparison“  
Funded by the Volkswagen Foundation 2006-2010

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## 1. General Remarks on the Swiss Armed Forces

In terms of its military system, Switzerland represents an odd case in present day comparison. At a time when more and more countries withdraw from maintaining conscription based armed forces, Switzerland continues to enforce compulsory military service for all male citizens. The maintenance of standing troops is prohibited in the constitution of the Swiss Federation. The military is organised in the fashion of a decentralised militia which is mobilised only for training. The militia systems shapes a mass reserve corps of a 'nation in arms' that is supplemented by about 4,300 of professionals. They are divided into the career military (*Berufsmilitär*, ca. 75 % of the employed soldiers) and soldiers who hold a fixed-term temporary contract of five years maximum (*Zeitmilitär*, ca. 25% of the employed soldiers). The employed military personnel serve in the Central Staff, in training and international peacekeeping missions. The Swiss Armed Forces have the following man power (data from 2008):

		<b>Man Power</b>	<b>%</b>
Active members (without recruits)		134,886	
	Thereof officers	17,506	
	Thereof non-commissioned officers	22,650	
	Thereof women (all ranks)	1,050 <sup>1</sup>	< 1 %
Recruits		~ 20,000	
Reserve		77,000	
Professionals & contracted military personnel		4,230	~ 4 %

Source:

<http://www.vbs.admin.ch/internet/vbs/de/home/documentation/armeezahlen/eff.html>  
(27.11.2008)

<sup>1</sup> Only about 30 women hold the rank of a captain or higher.

In 2007 over 66% of the almost 40.000 young Swiss men liable to serve were regarded as fit for service and joined the army. Like in other European countries, the conscription system was challenged also in Switzerland

(1) by a societal value change which procures the military with less prestige, and

(2) by unconventional conflict scenarios and

(3) a technological development both of which relativise the concept of large numbers of an armed militia ready for self-defence.

In contrast to other countries, however, Switzerland has *not* turned its defence and recruitment policies upside down. Instead, a happy medium is sought after, so as to keep the country's core traditions in this policy field whilst also adapting them to new environmental circumstances. What are the reasons for this caution?

When asking active soldiers how they judge the traditional militia system, especially the professionals among them praise the system for generating "complete" soldiers who bring the experience from their civil profession into the army while at the same time the system guarantees a strong relationship of army and society. A further obvious advantage are the low costs: a militia system allows quite a big army to a low price. But there are also negative aspects which cannot be denied anymore: In our fieldwork, the leading instructor of the bachelor's programme, colonel Hasler, told us, that each year one third of all soldiers are not able to do the repetition courses due to job obligations. This curtails the availability of troops enormously and cuts down the time for training. It gets harder and harder under such circumstances to train the soldiers on systems that get more complex and it is almost impossible to keep the soldiers updated with the quick developments in techniques.

Also in terms of its membership in international organisations and in defence communities in particular, Switzerland follows a distinct policy: The Swiss defence concept is tied to a foreign policy of neutrality, and the country is therefore keeping an isolationist profile in all of those international organisations that aim at collaboration in their foreign policies. The Alpine country has for that reason neither become a member in NATO nor in the European Union. With the end of the Cold War and its changes in the security policies of both formerly divided political hemispheres, the Swiss notion of neutrality required to be rethought, and indeed it was. Switzerland joined NATO's Partnership for Peace in 1996 and became a member of the United Nations in the year 2002. In the past years, Switzerland has sent military units into humanitarian UN missions, into peacekeeping missions of the OSCE, and the SWISSCOY unit takes part in NATO's KFOR mission in Kosovo with about 220 people. This engagement has just been prolonged until 2011. Deployments of Military Observers have taken place since 1990. At the moment, there are 20 Swiss officers with the rank of captain or higher deployed in UNTSO (Middle East, 10), UNOMIG (Georgia, 4) MONUC (Democratic Republic of Congo, 3), UNMIN (Nepal, 2) and in BINUB (Burundi, 1) as the extended arm of the Security Council on the spot.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See: [Hhttp://www.vtg.admin.ch/internet/vtg/de/home/themen/einsaetze/peace.html](http://www.vtg.admin.ch/internet/vtg/de/home/themen/einsaetze/peace.html) (28.11.2008).

In 2002, the Federal Council decided that, for budgeting reasons, the Swiss Armed Forces should be made use of more extensively to meet the growing demands for general protection tasks such as border control, protection of property, the guarding of embassies and consulates, of international conventions and summits, or of public events like international soccer matches. So today, these are the three main missions of the Swiss Armed Forces. The focus is still on a potential defence of the home country and subsidiary missions within Switzerland:

- Civil affairs support
- Area protection and defence
- Peace support

When looking at the days of service in 2007 it becomes obvious that the emphasis of the Swiss Armed Forces is on education and training. Out of 6.5 million days of service, 90% were spent in training. About 4.5% were spent in subsidiary operations, while about 1.5% were spent in peace support missions abroad.

## 2. Education and Training in the Swiss Armed Forces

### 2.1. Basic Education

Swiss conscription starts with enrolment of all able-bodied men at the age of 18. Women may volunteer. The Swiss militia calls its recruits to service then at the age of 20. The training start may be postponed in order to finish high school, but due to a reform enacted in 2005, it is no longer possible to postpone it so as to finish university. Young men who are found eligible for military service but attest their physical or mental inability to serve the military must pay an additional 3% of income tax, or they must serve in an institution of civil protection like the Fire Department, or a medical help institution.

Recruits have to absolve 260 days of service: three days for recruitment, a 124-145 days cycle of training (depending on the service branch) to be spent in a training camp of recruit school and 6 to 7 courses for recapitulation of training, each of which lasts for 19 days. Alternative to doing the recapitulation courses, the so called “single term conscripts” (*Durchdiener*) absolve their whole service at one time within 300 consecutive days.

The key elements of the recruit school are meant to impart practical military skills; non-military contents like civic education range secondary. Only basic facts in security policy and the fundamental principles of the Law of Armed Conflict are part of the general education of all recruits (see Amadeus 2008: 2-5).<sup>3</sup> According to the military Service Regulations (*Dienstregelment DR 04*), chapter 4 (33), the aim of the military education is to enable all members of the Swiss Armed Forces to fulfil their mission during war time and in other situations of crisis, even under the risk of life. In some positions of the Swiss Armed Forces the recruits can acquire certificates during their recruit school time, that are also accepted in civil economy, for example a certificate for the profession of a medic or a blacksmith (*Führungsstab der Armee*: 33).

## 2.2. Cadre

For reaching the rank of a non-commissioned officer or higher one has to absolve more days of service, for example 430 days to become a non-commissioned officer. These cadre ranks may be filled on a volunteer basis; however, soldiers may also be commanded to absolve the cadre career. According to the experience of a career officer's at the Military Academy, about half of the cadres continue voluntarily, the other 50% have to be obliged to do so. Subaltern officers are obliged till the age of 36, for staff officers and higher ranks, obligation ends with the age of 50.

In the new system, introduced with the reform package "Armed Forces XXI" in 2004, many future officers are selected during their initial training already, meaning after 6-7 weeks of recruit school, and sent to officer training immediately after that. For one, this procedure reduces the time to train an officer. Secondly, since many young men have no employments yet at the time they enter the obligatory military instructions, the conflict of interest with employers is avoided largely. In the consequence many cadres are extremely young when they start taking on leading responsibilities and are chosen after only 6 or 7 weeks of training, so that wrong estimations on the prospective cadre's leading abilities are likely. The traditional militia career strand exists still, but the new option is favoured during today's training of recruits.

<sup>3</sup> All contents of the curriculum for the recruit school are classified in a taxonomy from 1 to 6, which signifies the ranking of importance: 1 signifying the bare knowledge of facts, dates and name, 6 signifying the capacity to evaluate a situation on the basis of own criteria. Those contents of civic education which are part of the recruits' training, are classified to fall into category 1.

### 3. Findings from the Field Research

I was able to spend three weeks at the Military Academy (MILAK) in Zurich. MILAK is an internationally recognized centre of excellence for military sciences and the career officers are trained here. I took part in three different courses of training for prospective career officers. The first week was a Leadership Training for Militia Cadres (*Führung Untere Milizkader, FUM*) for the members of the military school.<sup>4</sup> During the second week I observed a course in Military Didactics, the third week was dedicated to Dilemma Training and Leadership, both courses were part of the bachelor programme.<sup>5</sup>

Besides, I could interview over thirty members of the Swiss Armed Forces, from career officers over different cadres ranks of the militia to recruits during their basic training, as listed below:

- five interviews with prospective career officers attending the Military School; age: 27 to 36 years old; rank: captain or major; two of them had already served in Kosovo
- five interviews with prospective career officers attending the bachelor's programme in the third semester; age: 27 and 32 years old; rank: lieutenant or captain
- one interview with a female officer in the rank of a captain
- eleven interviews with single term conscripts in the 15<sup>th</sup> week of recruit school; age: 20-21 years; rank: soldier
- four interviews with recruits, doing the "normal" recruit school in the 17<sup>th</sup> week; age: 20-21 years; rank: soldier
- four interviews with members of the militia after the recruit school, in different cadre positions; age: 28 and 30 years
- four military instructors in the rank of a major or colonel
- one civil instructor

<sup>4</sup> Officers with a fixed-term temporary contract can become career officers by absolving one year of Military School twice and doing three years of practical training in between, so that the education lasts for five years in total.

<sup>5</sup> The programme is called "Armed Forces Officers' Program/Public Affairs" and lasts for three years. The programme is run in cooperation with the university of Zurich and at the end the aspirants get a civil degree as well.

I also accompanied a section of the armoured artillery at the recruit school of Bure for one day in the field. Furthermore I spent one day at the recruit school of Chur, where an open day for friends and family of the recruits took place.

Compared to some other countries in our project sample, it was relatively uncomplicated to gain access to the institutions. The Swiss Armed Forces handled our request for the research access without requiring too many formalities. Once the department of military sociology had declared support of our endeavour, a staff member of the department organised the formal access. He prearranged all the interviews and showed me around. During the entire time at MILAK, I could move freely and all students and instructors were glad to assist me wherever possible. They answered all my questions and I never had the feeling to get preconceived opinions or that the soldiers are answering my answers according to the official military doctrine.

Also during the three different lessons I received the impression, that there are no off-limits topics and that disputes were discussed openly. I was integrated well in the courses without getting the impression that the instructors are performing in a different way than usual because of my presence.

### 3.1. Leadership Training for Militia Cadres (FUM)

Regarding the content of the three courses, the FUM-course is meant to enable the prospective carrier officers to *train* the militia cadres in leadership. It is a new element of the training schedule since 2005 and its contents are still subject to development. The leadership concept procured in the course, is in large part taken out of civil management and leadership courses. It was developed in cooperation with the Swiss Association for Leadership (Schweizer Vereinigung für Führungsausbildung – SVF).<sup>6</sup> The militia cadres can obtain civil certificates for each leadership module by taking voluntarily an exam. The Swiss Army pays for the courses as well as for the exams, which would cost around 10,000 to 15,000 Swiss francs in the private economy.

The army assumes a civil-military win-win-situation, when promoting the FUM-course. However, the prospective career officers were rather sceptical about this new education. One participant described his attitude towards FUM as:

“very critical, because FUM is kind of a red rag for all of us, actually. Because it is very difficult and depends on how you communicate it to your cadres. The danger is, that you try to teach in a classroom how to lead a group. [...] Because FUM, if you teach it the wrong way, is mere theory and they [the prospective cadres] learn nothing.”  
(prospective career officer; captain)

<sup>6</sup> For more information see: [Hwww.svf-asfc.ch](http://www.svf-asfc.ch)

Taken together, the critique is, that FUM is first and foremost an acknowledgment to the economy and a lure for recruits to voluntarily continue with a cadre education. The benefit for the military education is seen rather sceptically. In addition, some of the participants in the Military School argued that FUM takes too much time – for example a platoon leader absolves 280 hours of FUM during his/her training – time that is then missing in other fields of education.

What I could see during the week of FUM was impressive though. Also the participants were interested in the contents and they found especially the exercises and questionnaires to the field of ‘self-perception’ very helpful. The structural problem in this part of the training is, that these prospective career officers have to teach FUM themselves after having had a two-weeks crash course only whereas they were taught by well-trained instructors who are specialists in FUM. Furthermore the target audience for the career officers will later be young men and women at the age of 20 or 21, which might be too young for some of the contents.

### 3.2. Military Didactics

This is an obligatory course for the bachelor students in their third semester, which is called the “practical semester”. While they spent their first two semesters at the university at Zurich together with “civil” students, they are at MILAK for the entire third semester. Here they appear in uniform and stick to military rituals, like the saluting in the morning.

The course was mostly composed of presentations by the students on various topics, all connected to the educational system of the Swiss Armed Forces. They introduced in detail the different ways of education in each unit – and it got obvious that there are great differences in the educational system of each of the eight training units in the Swiss Armed Forces.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore students introduced the most important manuals and regulations. All in all there exist 3,684 such documents in the Swiss Armed Forces, so that it is very complicated to keep track with all alterations. Also the students were confused at some points and did not know, which version of which manual is the most recent one. Such grievances were subject to vivid discussion and criticism, and the instructor called upon the students to develop a system, how to handle the mass of manuals in a more convenient way.

All presentations about the educational practices, and especially about the cadre education, stressed the difficulty to find willing and able soldiers who want to continue and take part in a cadre training voluntarily. The prospective officers made a lot of

<sup>7</sup> Training Unit Infantry (Infanterielehrverband); Air Force Training Unit 31 (Lehrverband Flieger 31); Air-Defence Training Unit 33 (Lehrverband Fliegerabwehr 33); Central School (Lehrverband Zentralschule); Logistics Training Unit (Lehrverband Logistik); Military Engineering and Rescue Training Unit (Lehrverband Genie und Rettung); Training Unit Tanks and Artillery (Lehrverband Panzer und Artillerie); Command Support Training Unit (Lehrverband Führungsunterstützung)

suggestions, how to best convince more recruits, for example by showing them a calculation with the higher pay in a leading position, or by alluring with the civil leadership certificates. Because of low rates of volunteers, cadre positions are also filled by forcing able soldiers into them.

At the end of the week, the class visited the largest recruitment centre of the Swiss Armed Forces in Windisch. There they got to see, how the recruitment is handled, how the new recruits are grouped along abilities and tendencies. In a final discussion with the head of the recruitment centre, colonel Koenig, it became obvious that the recruits match the expectation of the army less during the last years, due to changes in society. Colonel Koenig pleaded for an easier start in the recruit school in order to meet the recruits' abilities. This statement provoked a discussion in how far the army can concede societal changes and demands at the cost of traditional values and principles.

#### 3.4. Dilemma Training and Leadership

In this course, a civil instructor, professor for communication and human resources management, trained the students in handling difficult situations. The students got different scenarios, which all really took place either in the Swiss Armed Forces or in international military operations. The students were supposed to develop individually different solutions to the scenario and point at the (dis)advantages of each solution. Subsequently the students discussed their solutions in small groups and presented one solution in the plenum at the end.

The students fulfilled their task very seriously and discussed in the small groups a lot about how to balance moral and ethical against job-related issues. The aim of this training is, to enable the students to balance different solutions quickly in a difficult situation and to raise their awareness for the fact that there is always more than just one solution. The training, which was developed at MILAK Zurich, is widely acknowledged and also foreign armies, e.g. Canada, have meanwhile adapted the training.

At the end of the training, some students remained a bit unsatisfied, because they expected that the instructor would present *the* right solution to every scenario and for them it was hard to accept, that easy answers do not exist, and that in this course, one cannot stick to any manual or apply some exactly prescribed procedures. But again, the instructor is open to all criticism and the students do not hesitate to openly express their concerns.

### 3.4. Main Findings from the Interviews

Concerning the interviews, there were a row of questions, where I got at large answers, which are in full accordance with the official doctrine of the army. For example when asking about ideals of leadership, all stress the importance of a human style of leadership which responds to individual strengths and weaknesses and meets the other with respect. This corresponds widely with the army's doctrine that clearly avoids physical toughness, or the drill with weapons. It is rather soft skills like the judging ability, empathetic behaviour, moral impeccability and personal credibility that are normatively declared to be most relevant as sources of prestige and pride in this leadership concept. Also the recruits characterized their ideal style of leadership like this, though many complain that the kind of leadership they experience is different: there would be too much shouting, needless orders and no explanation for what they have to do. Especially the lower cadres were found incompetent by the recruits. Almost all had good experiences on the other hand with the higher cadres, e.g. the school commander which is usually a career officer.

When asking about civic education, all agreed that it is very important, that soldiers of all ranks have at least a basic knowledge about matters concerning the political system of Switzerland as well as the basics of the foreign and security policies. But the question remains, who should be held responsible for teaching these issues: The army? The school? Oneself? A major, aspirant in the Military School, told me the following:

"I think, one has to understand the complete system, in order to be able to also understand certain decisions. For that we do not need any highly academic education, but many people lack the very basics. They do not even know in which system they live. [...] According to my experience, the differences [between the recruits] are huge. From people with very basic education who know actually only very little about politics to those with a higher education who are aware of all those things. And here it is difficult to find the right way of training, so that all reach at least a certain level."

In further interviews it became obvious that especially in the recruits' training, the importance of civic education varies a lot from school to school, depending on how much room the respective instructor wants to give it. Regarding missions abroad, especially the prospective career officers, find them right and important – also to give sense and entitlement to the Swiss Armed Forces. One officer, who had already spent six months in the Kosovo, said:

"For me it [taking part in missions abroad] is the job of a soldier. [...] Imagine you have fire fighters who train only, but no one has ever felt the heat of a real fire. But still, everybody talks about it and teaches other fire fighters, because he has spoken to someone who has been to a real fire – this is not authentic!" (Major in the Military School)

This is a personal view, that many of his colleagues shared but which contradicts the fundamentals of the Swiss Armed Forces, where the defence of the home country is still in the very centre of the army's *raison d'être*. But all interviewed soldiers agreed, that even though in favour with the engagement abroad as it is now, peace enforcement or any mission endangering the Swiss policy of neutrality would be out of discussion. When asking the recruits about their aims and their ideals of being a soldier, most of them were not able to give a true answer. Many of them do not see the purpose of their training, they do not understand exactly what they are doing and why they are doing it. Especially the single term conscripts often told me:

"I do not have any special aims. I am absolving the recruit school, because I have to do it. I just carry out orders. I am trying to be a good soldier, but I do not exaggerate it."

A second recruit stated:

"For me it is a means to an end. I want to finish my military service and I do not have any ambitions. I do not see any higher sense in being a soldier, and therefore I am just trying to absolve my service here as good as possible."

Obviously, the young soldiers do not identify with the army. And many of them do not understand why they should do service, nor do they see any sense in being a soldier. In brief, this shows that even the 'hardcore conscription system' in Switzerland does not guarantee to create an identification of the civil society with its armed forces. A more general value change in Swiss society has started to question the once quasi-organic relation between civilian society and the armed forces: participation in international peace-keeping requires more and other skills than the traditional defence of the country. Moreover, many people do not take the latter for a realistic scenario any more. The militia training appears thus meaningless and creates frustration among recruits. The conclusion that has been drawn from these well-known developments is that military training has to take on more and other leadership qualities than in the past: The approach to foster "leadership with values" aims as well at a re-inculcation of traditional values which matter functionally for the military organisation; and at a redefinition of military leadership in such a way that the increased demand of inter-operability, team skills, and empathy is taken into account. However, this new approach has obviously not reached the recruits yet. The questioning of the sense of the Swiss Armed Forces is also at the centre of public discussions: there is no debate on the image of the ideal soldier, but rather a rudimentary discussion on the sense of the armed forces in general, as a 33-years old captain stated exemplarily:

"There is rather a debate if we need an army or not. That's the debate during the last months. But a debate on how the soldier should be? I don't think so. The Swiss people and especially the politicians put more a question of principle. I think the whole threat scenario has changed, that was the trigger, certainly with 9/11. And then the question arose also here, if our army is still on track."

## 4. Conclusions

Thinking about our hypotheses in the theoretical framework of our project, the Swiss concept of the citizen-soldier aims at the lowest possible degree of institutionalising military structures and at a maximum of immediate democratic control. Neutrality, universal conscription and direct democracy are intertwined in this understanding. For the normative image of the soldier, the concept of the militia implies the immediate identification of democratic participation rights with the civic obligation to be prepared for defending the polity on equal share. Therefore the system aims at an ideal soldier, who is a representative of the polity and of the political culture of his/her homeland. This ambition does no longer seem to convince the majority of the young generation – as we saw in the interviews with recruits. The Swiss conscription system is challenged by this lack of voluntary support.

A second major challenge is of an economical nature: companies do no longer regard it their national duty to subsidize the militia system by sending waged staff to repetition courses. For multinational enterprises, the link with the polity is probably too weak. Also, it is questionable if the leadership skills acquired in the Armed Forces are regarded so useful in civilian life. The fact that civilian management courses were introduced for soldiers illustrates that military leadership as such would no longer be an asset on the job market. Likewise, for the smaller Swiss companies that were traditional pillars of the system, the militia requirements mean a competitive disadvantage. In sum, economical aspects make up the second structural weakness of the militia.<sup>8</sup>

A third prospective force of change relates to the Swiss foreign policy. Though sticking to the principle of neutrality, the Swiss Armed Forces started supporting their partners in peace keeping missions abroad and joined the United Nations. Therefore they expanded the cooperation with partner nations, yet without stepping back from their tradition of neutrality and from their militia system. It is particularly the latter which is in many aspects not very suitable for these new tasks and will therefore remain to be under reform pressure .

<sup>8</sup> We could not verify the attitude of the Swiss economy towards the militia during our field trip. Here we rely on an empirical bachelor thesis written by Nico Kern at the faculty of military sociology at MILAK Zurich. See: Kern, Nico: Die Bedeutung der militärischen Ausbildung und Karriere bei Stellenbesetzungen für zivile Unternehmen und Verwaltungen. Personalverantwortlichen-Befragung in der Deutschschweiz. Bachelorarbeit an der Dozentur Militärsoziologie an der MILAK/ETH. Zürich 2006.