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Militia army in search of a future

The Swiss army is shrinking and has been seeking a new concept of the enemy since the fall of Communism in the Eastern bloc. By Peter Amstutz

In the middle of the Cold War, when the Swiss militia army was still practising its neutrally correct policy of "All-round defence against all foes" (dissuasion strategy of 1973), the German magazine "Stern" published a comparative study on armed forces that startled our neighbours. With the exception of what was then Yugoslavia, no other European country was able to call up more trained conscripts to arms than Switzerland: almost one million men aged between 20 and 50.

But times change. Admittedly, general conscription is still part of the constitution (Article 59: "Every Swiss man must render military service"), and the army's mandate is clear (Article 58: "The army contributes to prevent war and to maintain peace; it defends the country and protects its population. It lends support to the civil authorities when they must repel serious threats to internal security or master other exceptional circumstances"). But such lofty sentiments contrast starkly with the identity crisis

in which the Swiss army has found itself since the fall of the Communist Eastern bloc. As Franz Steinegger, former FDP President and ex-National Councillor for Uri, so aptly puts it: "Switzerland is surrounded by friends. If the army can't be shown a new enemy soon, it risks being completely dismantled."

Given past referenda results, it may be a long time before there is a majority vote in favour of a Switzerland without an army. But "the army needs clearer perspectives" (NZZ, 2./3.4.05). The ongoing reforms to Switzerland's armed forces, starting when Federal Councillor Kaspar Villiger took up office in 1989 as head of the Federal Department for Defence, Civil Protection and Sport (DCPS) and continuing when Federal Councillor Adolf Ogi moved there in 1995, oscillate between national deployments and foreign assignments in line with the motto "Security through cooperation". But what is still



Chalet, 1941, infantry bunker, Hilterfingen BE: concrete building with tiled saddle roof and overhang. Windows, shutters and balcony balustrade are painted on wood cladding. Under the balcony is the bunker entrance, disguised as a window with the roller blinds half-closed.

lacking is an intellectual concept as a foundation for this drastic change of purpose. This is most apparent in recent Federal Assembly debates on the military: The Federal Council's proposal to purchase transport planes for future assignments abroad became a tug-of-war between left-wing opponents of the army and national army traditionalists.

This dilemma was best described indirectly by Samuel Schmid, currently head of the DCPS and Federal President, in a speech to SVP delegates in Fribourg on 20 October, 2001: "The army contributes to the security of our people and country in a variety of ways. It defends Switzerland in the event of a military attack. Admittedly, there is little possibility of a conventional military threat at present. But we must acknowledge the fact that terrorist groups are becoming increasingly capable and willing to resort to military means. In actual fact, however, the ben-

efits and necessity of the army can be demonstrated without any military attack on Switzerland. It is consistently deployed to provide assistance to people and civil authorities in times of crisis. Think of the floods and forest fires, avalanches and landslides, hurricane Lothar, and Gondo. The army also supports the police in surveillance operations in the event of a particularly high level of threat, for special tasks, and if civilian resources are insufficient. One recurring example is the guarding of international organisations and embassies in Geneva and Berne. The army also helps to keep the peace beyond our national borders. In so doing, it helps to improve the situation in crisis regions so that people are not forced to flee or, if they have already left the region, are able to return. It also helps to reduce violent conflict and prevent such conflict spreading to the extent that it poses a threat to our country."

According to the latest decisions of the Federal Council, this set of priorities is now to be incorporated in an "Optimisation of Army XXI". The emphasis will be shifted from mechanised fighting troops to infantry-based security forces. The number of troops remains the same, having already been reduced to 220,000 (120,000 actively serving, 80,000 [unarmed] reserves, and 20,000 recruits). 33,000 of the actively serving troops will be reorganised for territorial security duties. 18,500 will form a fighting brigade, and 85,500 will be deployed for general army tasks. The aim of the security forces is to protect the population and infrastructure. The conventional defence forces will continue to receive appropriate military training in order to ensure combat readiness in the event of a serious military threat.

Tank, armoured infantry and tank sapper battalions as well as artillery units will be



Stalls and house, artillery bunker, Ennetberg GL: The bunker on the left dates from 1979, the bunker on the right from 1980. The photographs are taken from «Falsche Chalets» («Faux chalets») by photographer Christian Schwager (Edition Patrick Frey)

retrained as infantry battalions. Numbering 32 in all (including 20 active battalions), these will be conventionally trained and provided with equipment for territorial security purposes.

The tasks of the infantry include protecting major transit axes and guarding frontier areas. Specially trained security forces will be held on standby to support civil authorities in

specific areas (surveillance, conference protection etc.). Peace-building capacities are to be doubled to 500 personnel. These reforms will be implemented between 2008 and 2011 and

PRAISE FROM THE CENTRE, CRITICISM FROM LEFT AND RIGHT

The four parties represented on the Federal Council have reacted in different ways to the Federal Council's latest plans for implementing the next stage of Army 2008/2011. The toughest stance has been adopted by the SVP: The government, it says, wants to cut tank, armoured infantry and artillery units in order to increase its engagement abroad. The SVP says it will not countenance any further moves for Switzerland to join NATO, and will not allow Switzer-

land to give up its independence. The SP regards the defence force cutbacks as a step in the right direction but accuses the Federal Council of inconsistency, claiming that the army will continue to be a drain on cash. On the grounds that Army XXI, with 120,000 soldiers that can be mobilised within days, will still be too big, the SP is calling for the abolition of conscription and a reduction of the army to 50,000 men, with the future focus on peace-building opera-

tions abroad. This, says the party, would lead to a significant drop in the CHF 4 billion a year currently spent on the military. The Greens are alarmed by the increase in subsidiary assignments in Switzerland and in operations abroad, and want to prevent the army becoming an alternative police force.

The FDP and CVP support the Federal Council's decisions. The CVP regards the shift from defence to zone security as legitimate and responsible. It also supports the

move to increase capacities for deployment abroad. The FDP even calls for this instrument to be further expanded, arguing that peace-building operations abroad could prevent migration movements and stem the flow of asylum seekers. In terms of defence costs, the FDP urges that priority be given to funds for high-tech reconnaissance, communications and control systems for defence applications.

P.A.



Villa, 1940, infantry bunker, Gland VD: solid construction with tiled hip roof and dormer window. Behind the template windows, curtains are painted directly onto concrete. The bunker is now used as a museum.

result in annual savings of around CHF 150 million.

Scarcely had the proposal been presented on 11 May, 2005, than the criticisms began (see box). The Pro Militia Association of Former Members of the Forces complained that "On the one hand, the proposal aims to build an army that in no way resembles what was touted to voters as the 'greatest reform of all time'. (...) The reform is also completely unacceptable because it entails a reduction in the defence budget. 'Pro Militia' is concerned about the absence of any consensus on military matters among centre-right parties." The Swiss Society of Officers (SSO) had the impression that "the Federal Council is organising the army less in line with security policy objectives than according to the cost-saving objectives of the 2004 programme of cutbacks". Since the vote on Army XXI two years ago, the SSO believes that

the situation regarding security policy has not changed. In the opinion of the SSO, a shift of emphasis from conventional defence to protection and security operations would not be possible since the bulk of the army would then be deliberately geared to mandates of a subsidiary nature. Building peace-building capacities is "not a priority, as long as the resources for other army mandates are not secured."

The following two statements best illustrate the opposing views: The Working Association for an Effective, Peace-Keeping Militia Army is concerned that the army will be turned into a pure auxiliary force for policing and aid duties, and give up its defence capability; The Group for a Switzerland without an Army (GSwA) complains that, due to a lack of enemies abroad, the army appears to be increasingly seeking enemies at home. Finally, even the Neue Zürcher Zeitung comments that "Territorial defence

alone would be too narrow a platform on which to justify the maintenance of a fighting force of today's dimensions". The paper goes on to say that it is primarily the task of parliament to provide the army with clear perspectives. Exactly how this is to be achieved, given the current polarisation of opinions, is another question.

The author is an accredited parliamentary editor and was head of the parliamentary editorial team of the Basler Zeitung from 1978 to the end of 2003.

FAUX CHALETS: Between 1938 and the end of the Cold War, the Swiss army built dozens of «faux chalets» all over Switzerland: camouflaged bunkers with the outward appearance of normal houses, whose true function was hidden behind the architecture and construction style of the region in which they were situated. Since the 1990s these bunkers are no longer official secrets. The photographs by Christian Schwager reveal these constructions for the first time.



Hut, 1939-43, armoured turret of the Magletsch fortress, Oberschan SG: The turret is covered with planking and a corrugated metal roof. The tank gun barrel is not camouflaged and the mouth is covered.