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Switzerland's Militia

You're in the army now: an expat recruit's experience



As one of Europe's most culturally mixed immigrant nations, Switzerland is witnessing the rise of a steadily growing group of citizens known as the 'new' Swiss. These are citizens of expatriate background, some born in Switzerland, others not, ranging from Kosovars and Spanish to British, Americans, Bangladeshis and Ugandans who have embraced Swiss nationality either through birth or naturalization. For many young people, joining the Swiss army is considered part of their new responsibilities. Nikita Artamonov, a 20-year-old student with a Russian-British-Swiss background who recently completed his four-and-a-half months' basic training, offers his personal view.

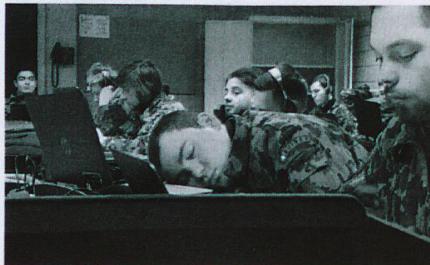
I am dismayed to find myself awake, at around 2 a.m. My eyelashes have frozen shut. It is -14°C. I am lying outside on icy mud, covered in dead, frosty leaves. The commanding officer has tasked our company with a survival bivouac exercise in the forest, despite warnings of 'Siberian' weather.

My friend Alexei, a fellow recruit, thinks it funny to wake me up by poking my backside with his rifle. Despite my violent protests, he persists. Mercilessly, he drags me out of my sleeping-bag to start my night shift. My job is to keep the campfire going. I am also supposedly on 'guard duty' keeping a lookout for enemies, though what exactly that means in 21st-century Switzerland is uncertain. The pathetic fire we struggled so hard to light earlier is sputtering, evidently dissatisfied with my offerings of frozen sticks. Frustrated, I swear profusely in

recently learned but broken Swiss-German, a dialect which even Germans let alone French or English speakers find hard to understand. And even then, there are many dialects depending on which part of the country you come from. The army, however, is keen that we learn each other's tongues.

Sleep-deprived, miserable and delirious I hear Alexei giggle as he tucks into his warm sleeping-bag for an enviable night's sleep. I am jealous because every minute of sleep counts in the army, and I am severely sleep-deprived. We get less than six hours of sleep, six nights a week, and tonight I barely got two.

I am aching and cold, even after sticking my feet to cook in the fire. Thankfully though, I am not the only one obliged to wake up for duty. At least I get some comfort from seeing another fellow-recruit, Amaran. He is suffering even more than me. He has woken up to find that the empty, plastic packets from yesterday's minced meat (which looked suspiciously like cat-food) have covered him with their slime, swept up by the wind. We are so miserable that we have become delirious. We quickly cheer ourselves up by imagining more and more



ridiculous scenarios of mutiny against the major. I am chuckling heartily until Amaran turns the conversation to make fun of me reminding me sadistically of a brutal truth. I am on my gap year and should be on a beach in Thailand. Instead, I am here in the Swiss army. I curse him, but he does have a point; Why did I sign up for this nightmare?

Hang on, but why does Switzerland have an army?

Most people know Switzerland for its mountains, luxury watches, chocolate and cheese. Some might even recount that this small, wealthy European country is famous for its neutrality. So most non-Swiss are surprised when I tell them that I served in the Swiss army. They are even more astonished when I tell them that my experience is closer to that of a Hollywood-style bootcamp rather than summer camping in the Alps.

Furthermore, Switzerland's "Rekrutenschule" or "Ecole de Recrues" in other words, basic training, is replete with tightly choreographed marching, target practice and crawling in mud – not much different from the American or British armies, all the while being constantly yelled at by abusive sergeants. In fact, some 65 per cent of Swiss men still undergo military training, victims of a seemingly antiquated system of conscription most developed countries have long abandoned.

Over the past years, various reforms have significantly cut back on Switzerland's militia-based defence force, which is not unlike the Israeli army. In the 1990s, the army consisted of some 800,000 troops, but this decreased progressively to 400,000 and then 200,000. Today, it stands at barely 140,000 men with less than 10,000 full-time professionals. The age limit for serving was also reduced to 34 with only 260 days of service. The ultimate goal is 100,000. Furthermore, the duty to serve only affects 40 per cent of the country's 8.5 million people, those with Swiss nationality. Today, barely one in four young men are selected to do service either as conscripts or volunteers. (Women, who represent less than 1,000, or barely 1 per cent, can volunteer). Military-age citizens can also opt to do civilian service, which is generally longer, and even includes the possibility of overseas development service.

Switzerland has a unique tradition of 'armed neutrality' that can trace its roots to the decisive defeat of Swiss mercenary forces at the Battle of Marignano

in 1515. Officially established in 1815 at the Congress of Vienna, Switzerland harbours the oldest policy of military neutrality in the world. Yet this relies on drafting recruits to make up the brunt of its armed forces, which are commanded by a much smaller professional officer core.

Using this hybrid militia-professional system, it is able to, in the event of war, mobilize an impressive proportion of its population. During World War II, it mobilized some 800,000 troops out of a population of four million) – half the size of today – and threatened to mount a stubborn resistance in the heavily fortified Alps. The Swiss hoped that the cost of a protracted guerrilla war and blown-up trade networks would provide enough of a deterrent against a German invasion. Today, the commitment to armed neutrality is still there, though the accompanying heroic narrative lost some credibility amid revelations of extensive financial collaboration with the Nazis.

A truly 'Swiss' experience

Another reason for the continued existence of the Swiss army, and one which encouraged me to serve, is its cultural significance to Switzerland. Until 2018, I had lived in Geneva in an expat bubble, attending an international school and socializing mainly in Anglophone circles. The army, I reasoned, would not only transform me into an invincible terminator, but also break the bubble and show me the real Switzerland.

As our readers know Switzerland is a country divided into four main linguistic groups: German, French, Italian and Romansch, the latter a form of modern-day Latin spoken by a small minority of Swiss as a first or second tongue. In the army, all these young men are finally brought together en masse, and must learn to communicate and cooperate. So there is a strong incentive to help bring the country's culturally and linguistically-diverse population together.



Often, orders are barked out in all three languages, so recruits must quickly adapt to the multilingual environment, regardless of whether or not Swiss-German sounds more like Pingu on steroids than a real language. In today's world of iPhones and portable bluetooth speakers, it also means being subjected to a medley of French, German and even Italian rap, blasted at maximum volume whenever there is down-time. Not surprisingly, most of the positive language immersion my mother had looked forward to me having in fact produced proficiency mainly in military jargon and profanities.

I also learned that any mistake, no matter how trivial, has consequences. In the Swiss army, this applied particularly to things being in order, down to the minutest detail. For instance, one day I left one of my multiple pockets slightly unzipped. A sergeant, noticing that my uniform was 'totally inadequate', decided to teach me a lesson. He handed me an orange-sized stone that I was required to carry at all times in this pocket. From then on, I was to be appropriately called 'Rekrut Stein'. This burdensome stone lived in my pocket for a full two days until I was told to pass it on to another unfortunate recruit who repeated the same unforgivable offence.

Switzerland is also keen on civic responsibility. Not only does the population vote on almost every important decision through direct democracy, including referendums every three months, but every male citizen is still expected to readily take up arms to defend the homeland. Thus, after finishing military service, soldiers keep their personal military gear at home. My semi-automatic assault-rifle is now proudly exhibited on a shelf in my grandmother's sitting-room in Geneva. (Editor's note: Unlike the United States with its lack of effective gun control, there are relatively few 'incidents' given Switzerland's unusual gun culture, both as a hobby and a civic duty, as part of a "well-organized militia". Switzerland has one of the lowest gun-related homicides in the world, 0.5 out of 100,000. Switzerland also voted in 2019 to respect European Union regulations restricting high capacity magazines).

As you know Switzerland is a melting-pot of different languages, ethnicities and cultures. One in five Swiss hold dual citizenship (almost 50 per cent in Geneva). Many more have immigrant backgrounds, particularly from the Balkans. Swiss of Kosovar background, for ex-

ample, are widely considered as among the best officers in the Swiss army. In a country that has become so globalized, militarization helps to preserve some of its identity and build an overarching feeling of cohesion and patriotism.

National service: Is it a good idea?

The idea of some kind of national service, even if not as rigid as Switzerland's version, is quite appealing to many people, especially to those who are too old to actually have to do it. Recently there has been a resurgence of interest in national service in some European countries (France, Germany, Italy, Nordic countries) with a similar rationale of bringing cohesion to societies with much increased immigration. Some desperation is also detectable – 'how to induce a sense of civic responsibility in a growingly individualistic bunch of screen-addicted teenagers?' (as my mother laments). In Switzerland at least, such measures are seen to help, perhaps partly explaining the 2013 referendum vote (over 73 per cent) to keep conscription.

While some young men do enjoy aspects of military life, many actively seek to avoid it. I did find benefits from the army; the friends made, languages practised, camaraderie through enforced and senseless hardships and, of course, the money earned (we are, after all, in Switzerland). In hindsight, I may also have learnt some valuable life-skills to drop into my CV, such as discipline, organization, sharp-shooting and chemical warfare protection.

But I must also admit that much was a complete waste of time. We spent hours and days relentlessly repeating mindless tasks, such as mounting and then dismounting transmission antennas, or waiting around. The brain-numbing military routine of limited, non-sensical tasks coupled with intense fatigue beats you down. You become an unthinking cog in a machine. In the army, I counted every hour, every day, every week and every month until demobilization. Would I go back? No! Am I glad I did it? Yes. Would I recommend it? Depends on the person. But if you are Swiss, you may not feel you have a choice.

Nikita Artamonov is a second-year student at Durham University in the UK, studying history and Russian. He was 18 when he started basic training, comparatively young compared to most other recruits who were in their early 20s.