

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1949)
Heft: 1108

Artikel: Swiss national defence, to-day and to-morrow [continuation]
Autor: Dürrenmatt, Peter
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689373>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 09.07.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

SWISS NATIONAL DEFENCE, TO-DAY AND TO-MORROW.

A series of twelve talks given by the Swiss Short Wave Service — Berne.

By PETER DÜRRENMATT.

(Continuation.)

V. Peculiarities of the Swiss Militia System.

The Swiss Militia is something quite special within the framework of the various military systems. Its particular character is responsible for the existence of a number of peculiarities in the organisation of its military service, which are unknown in other armies. To begin with, we would like to mention the nature and manner of the principle in accordance with which our general compulsory military service is carried out. This principle is conceived in so general and democratic a manner that it does not allow of any exceptions or any facilities in respect of any citizen capable of bearing arms. Every Swiss who is found to be apt for military service must attend an identical school for Recruits, whatever may be his social or financial position. Recruiting is carried out in such a way that only those who are suffering from physical or mental disabilities are dispensed from military service. The future officer or N.C.O. has to attend the same preliminary courses as the soldier and he trains in the company of comrades who will, perhaps, serve under his command at a future date. It is the personality of the man, rather than the rank he carries which will have the greatest influence on the troops under his command. The absolute equality which exists in the first period of military training through which everyone must go — and which is known as the "recruits school" — signifies also that the Militia system fulfils a most important social task. For the School of Recruits, as we said a moment ago, brings together people of all classes and professions: educated men and labourers, workmen and farmers, merchants and craftsmen, the sons of big business men and those of their employees — and because they are set at learning the same lessons, and must undergo the same physical hardships, they, also, at the same time learn to know and respect each other. In this sense the recruits school is an essential factor in the democratic education of the citizen.

Another peculiarity of the Swiss Militia system is the intensity of the work accomplished. This is a thing which never fails to strike the foreign observer. The four months spent in the school of Recruits or the three weeks demanded by refresher courses, necessitate a very careful and thorough employment of this short time. Mornings and afternoons, as well as a couple of nights per week, are devoted to military instruction. It is only in this way that it is possible to attain in so short a time the results which are so surprising to the foreign observer.

The Swiss Army possesses neither decorations nor Generals. The rank of General is only applicable to the Commander-in-Chief and only in the case of a General Mobilisation, when the country is in a state of so-called "Active Service." In peacetime it is the Federal Council which is invested with the supreme authority in military matters, an advisory council of high-ranking military experts being available for consultation. Commanders of Brigades, Divisions and Army Corps are ranked simply as "Colonels"; in order, however, to designate their specific function they are styled, in

accordance with their grade, as "Brigadier Colonel," "Divisionary Colonel" and "Colonel Corps Commander." These designations remain in use even when their possessors are transferred to other military functions, as for example, to the General Staff. The appointment of a Commander-in-Chief is made by the Federal Council. The appointment of a General and of the Chief of the General Staff, when the Army is on active service, is a matter which is decided by the Federal Assembly. The absence of any form of decorations and of high ranks, is due to the particular attitude which prevails as regards military matters in this country, where the soldier is considered to be subordinate to the civilian and where any form of ostentatious display is heartily disliked for a democracy whose army is purely defensive and has not taken part in any wars for a long time. If military displays do occur occasionally, this only happens as a result of some external necessity. Thus, during those years when National Socialism was looked upon as being a great, imminent danger, the people demanded military parades and displays, because for them the will to be free and the spirit of resistance was embodied in their Army. In peacetime, however, all such demonstrations are avoided. And this shows a further peculiarity of our system, namely, the practical manner in which our military instruction is directed. Drill is cut down to a minimum and — by the way — even this minimum is criticised by our public opinion. Modern warfare demands that the greatest care should be expended on the training of the military technicians, in order that they may be thoroughly conversant with the use of mechanised weapons. It must be stressed, however, that it is only possible to curtail drill in the Swiss Army to such a minimum because of the very high standard of education which exists in the country and the good upbringing which the generality of recruits have had in their homes.

VI. The Swiss Officer.

The aspect of every Army is moulded to a considerable extent by its Officer Corps. We have only to recall to mind the old Prussian Army, of which the most marked characteristic was its strict Officer caste. The French expression for the entire body of officers pertaining to the Army is "Le cadre", that is to say "the framework", this expression arising from the idea that the Officer Corps encompasses the nucleus which determines the real spirit of the Army. In the Swiss Militia Army there also exists, naturally, an organisation of officers, N.C.O.s and soldiers. But there is no

SAVOY HOTEL CHELTENHAM SPA

2 minutes walk from centre of town, yet secluded amidst 3 acres of beautiful garden. Ideal for visits to Cotswold Hills. Early Spring or late Autumn specially recommended.

LICENSED — GARAGE

Resident Proprietor: A. P. WALLIMAN (Swiss)
Telephone: 5419

question of any officer's caste, which alone is responsible for the spirit of the entire army and is consequently in a privileged position. The Swiss are citizens and soldiers. The military spirit and the firm determination to defend their country with arms against any attack from outside, prevail to the same extent in all classes of the population. This is the reason why there exist so large a number of Military Associations and Rifle Practice Societies in Switzerland. The refusal to tolerate any spirit of caste among the officers was made clearly manifest a few years ago when an attempt was made to introduce a change in respect of the standard-bearer of the Corps Troops. It was suggested that the most junior Lieutenant should carry the standard, instead of the senior N.C.O., whose function it had always been in accordance with the traditions of the Swiss Army. This proposed change aroused so much displeasure among the people that it had to be abandoned, and the standard continues to be borne by an N.C.O.

In accordance with our system, the Swiss officer is much more the first among his equals than the privileged representative of a caste. His entire training is based on this conception. There exists no possibility for educated or rich men to evade preliminary military training in the School for Recruits. In these schools those young men are picked out who give promise of being good officers, the first condition for their choice being their military capacities and the second their origin. Naturally, great attention is paid to ascertaining whether the man who is believed to be suitable for the career of an officer possesses the requisite aptitude to lead and command men, and that his demeanour is such as to serve as a model for his subordinates. In a Militia Army it is of special importance that an officer's behaviour should be such as to inspire emulation, for the officer, who has, of course, risen from the ranks, must build up his authority, to a large extent, on the confidence and respect of his men. There is no spirit of caste to back him up and support him, should he be lacking in personality.

Those soldiers in the School of Recruits who find themselves recommended for promotion to the rank of Officer Cadets, are transferred to a School for N.C.O.s. These schools are attended by two groups — those who will become N.C.O.s and whose military ascension will stop there and those who are training to be officers. The newly promoted N.C.O. will then be sent to a School of Recruits to "pay for his stripes" and it is only after he has shown himself to be really competent

in that capacity that he will be allowed to attend courses in a School for Officers. Should he pass the test there, he will be sent once more to a School for Recruits to "pay for his stripes", this time as a Lieutenant. It may be said of this principle, that the Militia trains itself. It creates a certain atmosphere, in which an officer must prove his worth, and in which his influence must be felt, but not to the absolute exclusion of the men's spirit of initiative. As regards the technical aspect of the service, which the young officers must learn, this is imparted to him by the regular Instructor Officers and, when he attends Refresher Courses, by elder Militia Officers. The Instructors, by the way, are professional soldiers and experts in military matters. But they also do not form any constituent part of a caste. The number of career officers in the Swiss Army, belonging to all the different Arms and ranks, does not attain quite one thousand.

The Militia Officer can attain the highest military rank. Should he attain the rank of a Divisionary Colonel, military leadership would then be his chief profession and he would have to sacrifice part of his civilian career. The specialised training for higher ranks is based on exactly the same principle as that used for the training of junior officers. Captains and commanders of units are sent for a period of thirty days to attend courses at a Central College for Military Science, after which they are posted as Commanders of units in a School for Recruits. There they are responsible for a unit composed of recruits; at the same time, there is an Instructor at hand, to whom they can turn for advice. The same applies to Majors and Colonels who are put in command of a Regiment. Thus, it may be said that the Swiss officer's training is practically the same as a soldier's. It can be rendered short and be limited to essentials because the trainees already possess a good, fundamental civic and general education and are imbued with a deep civic consciousness, which makes them look upon universal military service as being the most natural thing in the world.

VIII. The Organisation of the Army.

The spirit of an army is very strongly influenced by the manner in which it is organised. One can go even further and say that when the Military Administration plays a decisive and central role in a country, it is very easy for this to give birth to an exaggerated militaristic spirit. There are, of course, people who might accuse us Swiss of being militaristically inclined. They base this absurd assertion on the manifest eagerness for defence shown by the Swiss people, but they forget that this readiness to take up arms for their country has nothing in common with an offensive militarism, and is nothing more than a legitimate determination to defend their land.

This non-militaristic eagerness for defence — as it may quite aptly be termed — finds expression also in the somewhat special form of the military administration in Switzerland. According to the text of the Federal Constitution, the organisation of measures for the defence of the country is one of the oldest and most important duties of the Confederation. This duty is regulated by a Law on Military Organisation, which dates back to the year 1907, but which has been modified several times, and which has been brought up to date in order to meet the requirements of modern conditions. The Administration of the Swiss Army rests on three pillars, the most important of which is the

INSURANCE SERVICE

The members of the SWISS COLONY in this country can obtain free expert advice on any insurance matters.

Please phone or write for particulars to:—

**ANGLO-SWISS INSURANCE
AND REINSURANCE AGENCY LTD.,
29 & 30, HIGH HOLBORN, LONDON, W.C.1
Tel.: CHAncery 8 5 5 4 (5 Lines)**

Federal Military Department, with its numerous sections; then there is the Cantonal Military Direction and finally the voluntary administrative activities of the militia officers, carried out in their free time, outside military service. In other words: although the Swiss Army is subject to a central direction and is trained and conducted in accordance with standardised principles—it could not be otherwise—its administration, however, is decentralised in so far as is possible. The Cantonal Military Administrations, which have retained a certain amount of independent authority, are, it is true, mainly executive organs of the Government; their officials, however, are not appointed by the Central Executive in Berne, but by the Cantons themselves. In other words, even in those questions which pertain to military administration, the Swiss have to deal with officials who are in close touch with the population, who come into direct contact with the people, and in this way there is no possibility of the formation of a cast of military bureaucrats.

The voluntary administrative activities — which we have already mentioned — of the Militia officers should not be underestimated. These officers have to attend refresher courses during three weeks every year, and very often other short special courses. Their military duties, however, do not end there — far from it. They have to keep a nominal roll of their men and their depot staff (*cadre*), they have to correspond with the officers, N.C.O.s and men of their company, a few weeks before the refresher courses take place they must proceed, in collaboration with the experts appointed for that task, to make all the necessary arrangements for the commissariat, to reconnoitre suitable places for military exercises and to elaborate a working programme. All this constitutes a considerable amount of work, which is both voluntary and unpaid, and is looked upon as being a matter of honour. Its effect is to bring the people into close and active touch with the problems which beset army life and to save large sums of money which the State would have to expend otherwise if this work were to be carried out by paid officials.

At the present moment Swiss public opinion is engaged in a discussion as to whether the cost of our military administration is not too high, in comparison with other expenditure. A survey of the figures for military expenditure in Switzerland during the last 25 years shows that the appropriation for military administration amounts approximately to one quarter of that allocated for the administration of the Confederation. Under present conditions this amount may become a little higher. Should one, however, make a comparison between the total for *all* military expenditure — and not merely that in respect of administrative purposes in the Army — with the total for State expenditure, then the figure amounts to only 14.5%. It is true that this is a large percentage when one takes into consideration the narrowness of the economic basis of our country, which is so poor in raw materials; nevertheless, it is small in comparison with what other countries spend on their armies. For instance, in the United States the amount allocated for military expenditure forms 35.6% of the country's total expenditure, in Great Britain the figure is 28.3%, and in France 27.09%. A comparison with Switzerland and her decentralized military administration shows that this system not only has the advantage of being unmilitaristic, but also operates in a relatively inexpensive way.

VIII. *The Structure of the Army.*

And now it is time that we should get to know the structure of the Swiss Army a little. We shall begin by studying the greater army subdivisions and gradually come down to the lesser ones. The general principles of the army's structure are laid down in the Federal Law on military organisation. This Law prescribes such things as the number of the different arms in which the army must be subdivided, the age at which men must begin their military service, and how the army is to be organised. However, the Law only lays down a number of general principles and lines and leaves their application — and the details — to the judgment of the military leaders of our army. The organisation of our army has undergone a number of modifications during the last ten years. The most important was in 1938, when the number of the divisions composing the army was increased while, at the same time, the number of the men in each division was reduced. The 1938 reform also brought with it the tripartite division of our forces in the field army, the territorial troops and the frontier-protection troops. As far as the Territorials are concerned, they include the older age-classes, as well as the Landsturm and Landwehr II contingents. They are meant to be engaged behind the front according to the ideas of the Army Command: they are mainly meant for guard duty and only secondary for combat. The organisation of the third category of the army's forces, the frontier protection troops, is secret. They can be mobilised and ready for action within a few hours. Their mission consists in fighting an enemy penetrating into our country at the frontier and in hindering his progress enough to enable the leader of our army to gain the time necessary for his own mobilisation.

The organisation of our field army as it was decided upon in 1939, has been changed several times during the second world war, in application of the experiences made during the conflict and in view of technical progress. Actually our field forces number 9 divisions, three mountain brigades, the fortification-command of Sarganz, three Light Brigades, the Air and Aerial Defence forces and certain special contingents, mainly belonging to the services behind the front, and which are known as "Army troops." The Divisions and Brigades are welded together into four army corps. Actually, the basic army unit is the Division, a combined force which generally has the following composition: a division staff, three regiments of infantry, an exploration group, a regiment of field artillery, a group of heavy artillery, a group of motorised infantry (anti-tank) guns and also a number of special units, mainly technical, such as pioneers, health troops, etc. Certain divisions are exclusively mountain divisions, while others are a mixture of plain and mountain troops. In this connection, one may well point out that in Switzerland the distinction between plain and mountain forces is not very finely drawn.

The mountain brigades which partly compose the garrison of fortifications also count as army units; but they are smaller than the divisions and their commanding officers are not professional soldiers, but militia officers. The mountain brigades only dispose of two regiments of infantry and of a number of special units and troops that are proportionate to their importance.

A further type of army unit is the Light Brigade, which is the successor of the former cavalry division. The name implies great mobility, for as far as their

somewhat clumsy organisation and their armament are concerned, they are anything but light! The Light Brigades are made up of a brigade staff, two light regiments (cavalry regiments, two cyclist battalions, two battalions of motorised dragoons and different motorised combat and technical units. They are intended to function as mobile reserve for the army corps commander. This means that they also dispose of considerable motorised firepower which are specially meant for use against enemy armoured forces.

As far as the organisation of the Air and Aerial Defence forces are concerned, they will be dealt with in a separate talk. That only leaves the corps troops to be mentioned — which are mainly composed of our motorised fire reserves, composed of artillery and anti-aircraft artillery, and also the Army troops, which include specialists and services such as Military Justice, the Army Police, the Reprovisioning Troops, and so on.

IV. The Organisation of the Army.

In our last talk we dealt with the organisation of the larger formations of the Swiss Army. We would now like to glance over the smaller formations, the so-called "Corps troops", regiments, battalions and companies. As a rule, a Swiss Infantry Regiment consists of a regimental Head Quarters, three Fusilier or Rifle battalions, one Grenadier Company and one Signals Company. It should be noted that the only difference between Fusiliers and Riflemen is their name, which is a matter of tradition. In the old Swiss Federal Army the so-called "sharp-shooters" or Riflemen, formed an elite troop. The old name and old numbers have been kept as part of the army's tradition, but in practice they are identical with other Infantry formations. A more pronounced difference is made between the Mountain and the Field Regiments; this finds its chief expression when the recruiting takes place. Most of the men called up to serve in Mountain Regiments — but certainly not all — come from mountain regions. Moreover — and this is quite natural — the equipment of Mountain troops is different because of the specialised nature of the tasks they have to perform; for one thing, equipment and supplies are carried by pack-animals. An Infantry Battalion is composed of five Companies, of which three are Fusilier or Rifle Companies, one Machine Gun Company and one so-called Field Company, which is a unit provided with trench-mortars, anti-tank guns, transport and Army Service Corps. The Grenadiers, a Company of which is attached to every Regiment, consist of highly trained and specialised infantry troops, which have undergone a longer training period than that usual in the ordinary Schools for Recruits. They have been specially trained in close combat fighting and as shock-troops; moreover, they are thoroughly versed in all the principles of defensive works in the fields and the technique of blasting and demolition. The Grenadier Company is directly under the command of the Regimental Commander, who decides how it is to be used. And lastly, we come to the Signals Company, a unit which is provided with all the most modern technical appliances and which, when a battle is being fought, is generally distributed among the Battalions, in order to ensure liaison with the Regimental Head Quarters.

As regards the arming of a Swiss Infantry Regiment, it should be stressed that the soldier's principal arm is his rifle, a carbine, Model 33, a very exact fire-

arm, which is the property of the soldier. He does not buy it, but receives it in the School for Recruits, and he can keep it, unless he is prematurely discharged from the Army. In addition to this principal weapon, there is, of course, the so-called unit material, with which each Company is supplied as soon as it is mobilised, as for instance, light machine-guns, armour-piercing hand grenades, Tommy-guns, and anti-tank guns. Together with the firing reserves of the M.G. and the Field Companies, the Swiss Infantry Battalion possesses a remarkable fire power.

It should also be added that on active service the Regiment is provided with Artillery by the Division. It is a characteristic of the decentralisation of our Army that an Infantry Regiment should thus be combined and equipped with other special arms.

Whereas the Artillery Regiments constitute simple formations, which represent the firing strength of the Division, the Light Regiments also form an independent fighting group. This could be observed the last time when the Light Brigades were composed of a combined force of cavalry, cyclists and mechanised troops. It is probable that when the proposed Army reform takes place, this combination will be abandoned, in view of the fact that the component parts of such a unit are too diverse in character. The Dragoons belong to the Light Regiments; three Squadrons form a Regiment. These are formations which are best defined as "mounted infantry". The cavalryman has identical weapons with those of the infantryman and for close combat he has long ago discarded the traditional cavalry sabre, being provided with a bayonet. The cavalryman also owns the horse which is given him by the Confederation, when he is called up to the School for Recruits. That is the reason why the Light Regiments are composed for the greater part of farmers' sons, and it is no doubt because of their belonging to the same class and having the same background that there exists such a strong "*esprit de corps*" among them, a factor which must in no way be underestimated in connection with their fighting spirit. The Cyclist Battalions, which also belong to the Light Brigade, are Infantry formations, though, of course, they are much more mobile than ordinary Infantry. In so far as they are not incorporated in the total formation of the Light Brigade, they are employed for special duties. Their position is to be reviewed and probably changed when the Army Reform takes place.

(To be continued.)

Nouvelle Société Helvétique (LONDON GROUP)

OPEN MEETING

on Tuesday, March 15th, 1949, at 7 p.m.
at the Vienna Café,
Berkeley Arcade, Opposite Baker St. Station.

"Swiss Social Problems"

Lecture by: M. THEO CHOPARD,
Swiss Trade Unionist (in French)

All Swiss and Friends are heartily invited.