



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on September 20, 2013

## Swiss Expected to Reject Elimination of Military Draft

[Voters in Switzerland will head to the polls](#) on Sunday to decide whether the Alpine nation should continue with its military draft or rely solely on volunteers to man its military forces.

A recent survey conducted by the Swiss market research firm GFS.bern for SRG SSR, the Swiss public broadcasting company, indicated that 63 percent of voters are opposed to the initiative that would eliminate mandatory universal militia service, 31 percent are in favor of it, and six percent are undecided. The survey was conducted from August 30 to September 7 among 1,406 people.



“The armed forces are like a fire brigade,” said Philippe Hertig, an executive-search consultant at Egon Zehnder in Zurich, identified in a Bloomberg report as a captain in the Swiss air force. “You never know if it will be used but without it, you don’t feel secure.”

[Bloomberg reported](#) that Swiss voters rejected attempts to abolish their draft in 1989 and 2001.

Sunday’s vote is the result of a campaign launched by the pacifist Group for Switzerland without an Army (GSOA) which collected the 100,000 signatures within an 18-month period needed to force a constitutional initiative. Under Swiss law, in order to pass an issue must be approved by a majority of voters and a majority of cantons — the Swiss equivalent of states.

A [Reuters report](#) noted that most Swiss regard military service not only as essential to preserve their freedom and independence, but also as an important character-building experience. Those who serve in Switzerland’s military, especially those who become officers, learn leadership skills and make connections that serve them well in the business world.

“The Swiss army offers the best practical leadership training in Switzerland,” Lieutenant General Andre Blattmann, identified by Reuters as Chief of the Swiss Armed Forces, told a news conference in Bern in August.

Reuters also cited Josef Ackermann, the former Deutsche Bank CEO and former chairman of Zurich Insurance Group, who once said in an interview that military service was better preparation for crises and competition than any business school.

Defense Minister Ueli Maurer explained his reason for supporting the traditional system, Reuters noted. While conceding that a direct military assault against Switzerland was unlikely, the nation could become a target due to its location at the heart of Europe and its important transport links. During a media tour of a barracks in Lyss in western Switzerland, Maurer said a cyber attack could destabilize the transport network, for example.

Maurer explained that the military wants to be able to recruit the country’s best IT specialists, engineers, and laboratory technicians as warfare becomes more hi-tech. He said that conscription was



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important to accomplish that goal.

“The army does not consist of people in trenches with bayonets between their teeth who are waiting to defend their native country,” he said.

Noting that Switzerland is a diverse country with four official languages and many ethnic groups, supporters of universal military service, including [Maurer](#), regard it as a way to unite Swiss from all backgrounds under a common umbrella.

“Abolishing military service would break the genuine link uniting the people and the army,” the Defense Minister was quoted by [Expatica.com](#).

Though the concept of a military draft is abhorrent to libertarians and others who cherish individual freedom, Switzerland’s history and geography — as well as its long-standing neutrality in foreign policy — seem to reinforce the wisdom of its 165-year-old policy.

As the oldest neutral country in the world, Switzerland has not fought a foreign war since its neutrality was established by the Treaty of Paris in 1815.

The [Swiss Constitution](#) addresses the establishment of a military force:

Switzerland shall have armed forces. In principle, the armed forces shall be organized as a militia.

The armed forces shall serve to prevent war and to maintain peace; they shall defend the country and its population. They shall support civilian authorities in safeguarding the country against serious threats to internal security and in dealing with exceptional situations....

Every Swiss man is required to do military service. Alternative civilian service shall be provided by law.

It is noteworthy that the Swiss constitution mandates that the armed forces “shall defend the country and its population” — not *other* countries and their populations.

Though completely surrounded by Axis forces during World War II, Switzerland even managed to avoid participation in that war, although Swiss Air Force pilots did shoot down 11 German aircraft that crossed Swiss borders during May and June of 1940.

Under the Swiss militia system, soldiers keep their Army issued equipment, including all personal weapons, at home. This allows for rapid deployment, in the unlikely event that the country is ever invaded. In fact, widespread knowledge of this practice undoubtedly has served to deter invasion, helping Switzerland avoid foreign wars.

Considering that so many military weapons are kept in private homes, the nation has a low crime rate, compared with other Western nations. In 2010, the police registered a total of 527,897 criminal offenses, including 53 murders. This is among a population of approximately eight million people. In comparison, the state of [New Jersey](#), which has among the strictest gun-control laws in the United States, and with a population of about 8,800,000, recorded 372 murders in 2010.

If Sunday’s constitutional initiative goes as expected, Switzerland will continue to maintain a system of defense that has served it well over the years, coupled with the nation’s non-interventionist foreign policy. Americans might take a closer look at Switzerland, and learn from its enviable record of success.

*Photo: flag of Switzerland*



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