

Gun politics in Switzerland

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Gun politics in Switzerland are unique in Europe. The personal weapon of militia is kept at home as part of the military obligations. Switzerland has one of the highest militia gun ownership rates in the world.^[1] In recent times political opposition has expressed a desire for tighter gun regulations.^[2] A referendum in February 2011 rejected stricter gun control.^[3]



A citizen practicing the yearly mandatory training.

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Army-issued arms

The Swiss army has long been a militia trained and structured to rapidly respond against foreign aggression. Swiss males grow up expecting to undergo basic military training, usually at age 20 in the *Rekrutenschule* (German for "recruit school"), the initial boot camp, after which Swiss men remain part of the "militia" in reserve capacity until age 30 (age 34 for officers). Each such individual is required to keep his army-issued personal weapon (the 5.56x45mm Sig 550 rifle for enlisted personnel and/or the 9mm SIG-Sauer P220 semi-automatic pistol for officers, medical and postal personnel) at home with a specified personal retention quantity of government-issued personal ammunition (50 rounds 5.56 mm / 48 rounds 9mm), which is sealed and inspected regularly to ensure that no unauthorized use takes place.^[4] The ammunition is intended for use while traveling to the army barracks in case of invasion.

When their period of service has ended, militiamen have the choice of keeping their personal weapon and other selected items of their equipment. In this case of retention, the rifle is sent to the weapons factory where the fully automatic function is removed; the rifle is then returned to the discharged owner. The rifle is then a semi-automatic or self-loading rifle.

The government sponsors training with rifles and shooting in competitions for interested adolescents, both male and female.

The sale of ammunition – including Gw Pat.90 rounds for army-issue assault rifles – is subsidized by the Swiss government and made available at the many shooting ranges patronized by both private citizens and members of the militia. There is a regulatory requirement that ammunition sold at ranges must be used there.

The Swiss Army maintains tight adherence to high standards of lawful military conduct. In 2005, for example, when the Swiss prosecuted recruits who had reenacted the torture scenes of Abu Ghraib, one of the charges was improper use of service weapons.^[5]

In 2001 Swiss citizen Friedrich Leibacher entered a regional Swiss parliament building and used a rifle to kill 14 people before killing himself.^[6] Strangely enough, this wasn't his personal army issue weapon, but a private version of the army issue rifle. He committed suicide with a pistol and used an improvised explosive device.^[7]

Number of guns in circulation

In some 2001 statistics, it is noted that there are about 420,000 semi-automatic rifles stored at private homes, not assault rifles because assault rifles are select-fire (fully or semi automatic) firearms. mostly SIG SG 550 types. Additionally, there are some 320,000 semi-auto rifles and military pistols exempted from military service in private possession, all selective-fire weapons having been converted to semi-automatic operation only. In addition, there are several hundred thousand other semi-automatic small arms classified as carbines. The total number of firearms in private homes is estimated minimally at 1.2 million to 3 million.^[8]



A "shooting society" somewhere in Switzerland; people come to such ranges to complete mandatory training with service arms, or to shoot for sport and competition.



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Carrying guns

To carry firearms in public or outdoors (and for an individual who is a member of the militia carrying a firearm other than his Army-issue personal weapons off-duty), a person must have a *Waffentragschein* (gun carrying permit), which in most cases is issued only to private citizens working in occupations such as security.

It is, however, quite common to see a person serving military service to be en route with his rifle.

Conditions for getting a Carrying Permit

There are three conditions:

- fulfilling the conditions for a buying permit (see section below)
- stating plausibly the need to carry firearms to protect oneself, other people, or real property from a specified danger
- passing an examination proving both weapon handling skills and knowledge regarding lawful use of the weapon

The carrying permit remains valid for a term of five years (unless otherwise surrendered or revoked), and applies only to the type of firearm for which the permit was issued. Additional constraints may be invoked to modify any specific permit.

Neither hunters nor game wardens require a carrying permit.^[citation needed]



A militiaman with his service weapon slung over his shoulder.

Transporting guns

Guns may be transported in public as long as an appropriate justification is present. This means to transport a gun in public, the following requirements apply:

- The ammunition must be separated from the gun, no ammunition in a magazine.
- The transport has to be direct, i.e.:
 - For courses or exercises hosted by marksmanship, hunting or military organisations,
 - To an army warehouse and back,
 - To and from a holder of a valid arms trade permit,
 - To and from a specific event, e.g. gun shows.^[9]

Buying guns

Conditions under the 1999 Gun Act

- To purchase a firearm in a commercial shop, one needs to have a *Waffenerwerbsschein* (weapon acquisition permit). A permit allows the purchase of three firearms. Everyone over the age of 18 who is not psychiatrically disabled (such as having had a history of endangering his own life or the lives of others) or identified as posing security problems, and who has a clean criminal record (requires a Criminal Records Bureau check) can request such a permit.
- To buy a gun from an individual, no permit is needed, but the seller is expected to establish a reasonable certainty that the purchaser will fulfill the above-mentioned conditions (usually done through a Criminal Records Bureau check). The participants in such a transaction are required to prepare a written contract detailing the identities of both vendor and purchaser, the weapon's type, manufacturer, and serial number. The law requires the written contract to be kept for ten years by the buyer and seller. The seller is also required to see some official ID from the purchaser, for such sales are only allowed to Swiss nationals and foreigners with a valid residence permit, with the exception of those foreigners that come from certain countries (Croatia, Bosnia, Macedonia, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Albania, Algeria), to whom such sales are not allowed even if they do have a residence permit. Foreigners without a residence permit or from countries on the ban list must ask for a special permit.
- After turning 18, any individual can buy singleshot or semiautomatic long arms (breech-loading or muzzle-loading) without a permit (so-called "free arms"). Likewise, members of a recognized rifle association do not need a buying permit for purchasing antique repeaters, and hunters do not need one for buying typical hunting rifles.
- Basically, the sale of automatic firearms, selective fire weapons and certain accessoires such as sound suppressors ("silencers") is forbidden (as is the sale of certain disabled automatic firearms which have been identified as easily restored to fully automatic capability). The purchase of such items is however legal with a special permit issued by cantonal police. The issuance of such a permit requires additional requirements to be met, e.g. the possession of a specific gun locker.
- Most types of ammunition are available for commercial sale, including full metal jacket bullet calibres for military-issue weapons; hollow point rounds are only permitted for hunters. Ammunition sales are registered only at the point of sale by recording the buyer's name in a bound book.

Changes due to the Schengen treaty

The rules laid out above were changed on 1 December 2008 as Switzerland joined the Schengen treaty; and all member countries must adapt some of their laws to a common standard. Following the draft of the Swiss government for the new *Waffengesetz* (weapons law), these points will change:

- Unlawful possession of guns will be punished.
- Gun trade among individuals will require a valid weapon acquisition permit: this is, from a Swiss point of view, a radical restriction that is assumed will undercut private gun trade dramatically.
- Every gun must be marked with a registered serial number.

- Airsoft guns and imitations of real guns will also be governed by the new law.
- Only one weapon may be purchased per weapon acquisition permit: Presumably, this will dry out the market for relatively cheap used guns, including popular collector's items such as Swiss army revolvers from the late 19th/early 20th century.
- Weapons acquired from an individual in the last ten years (which did not require a weapon acquisition permit) have to be registered. As a central weapons register was politically unfeasible, the authorities hope to get an overview of the market through this registration requirement.
- While the above mentioned "free arms" remain exempt from the weapon acquisition permit, the vendor is required to notify the local arms bureau of the sale.

Buying ammunition

The government subsidizes the production of military ammunition and then sells the ammunition at cost. Swiss military ammo must be registered if bought at a private store, but need not be registered if bought at a range. Registration consists of entering your name in a log at the time of sale. No serial numbers are present on the individual cartridges of ammunition. Ammunition bought at the range must be used at the range. Ammunition for long gun hunting is not subsidized by the government and is not subject to any sales control. Non-military non-hunting ammunition more powerful than .22 LR (such as custom handgun ammunition) is registered at the time of sale.^[10]

Recreational shooting

Recreational shooting is widespread in Switzerland. Practice with guns is a popular recreation, and is encouraged by the government, particularly for the members of the militia.^[11] Swiss firearms-related rights are supported by the organization ProTell.

200,000 people attend the annual Feldschiessen weekend, which is the largest rifle shooting competition in the world.^{[4][12]} Hunting rifles have special exemptions under Swiss law. Purchases from dealers of hunting long guns and of small bore rifles are not even recorded by the dealer. In other words, the dealer would not record the sale of a .30-06 hunting rifle, but would record the sale of a .30-06 M1 Garand rifle.^[4] According to chapter 2 article 10 of Swiss law, people over the age of 18 do not need a permit to purchase a rifle for use in hunting, off-duty shooting and sport-shooting events.^[10]

In addition, there are several private shooting ranges that rent guns. It is possible to go shooting with minimal supervision and without an id-check.

Black powder

In Swiss gun shops, people can freely purchase black powder and modern black powder substitutes for use in firing historical rifles. The buyer must inform the vendor as to name and address.

Gun crime

Further information: Gun violence and Crime in Switzerland

Police statistics for the year 2006^[13] records 34 killings or attempted killings involving firearms, compared to 69 cases involving bladed weapons and 16 cases of unarmed assault. Cases of assault resulting in bodily harm numbered 89 (firearms) and 526 (bladed weapons). As of 2007, Switzerland had a population of about 7,600,000. This



Ready ammunition of the Swiss Army. Every soldier equipped with the Sig 550 assault rifle used to be issued 50 rounds of ammunition in a sealed box, to be opened only upon alert. The ammunition was to be loaded into the rifle magazine for use by the militiaman should any need arise while he was en route to join his unit. Any use other than this, or even unsealing, was strictly forbidden. This practice was stopped in 2007 due to safety concerns.^[10]

would put the rate of killings or attempted killings with firearms at about one for every quarter million residents yearly. This represents a decline of aggravated assaults involving firearms since the early 1990s. The majority of gun crimes involving domestic violence are perpetrated with army ordnance weapons, while the majority of gun crime outside the domestic sphere involves illegally held firearms.^[14]

See also

- Gun politics
- Schweizerischer Schützenverein
- Lists of countries by gun ownership
- Gun crime



A Swiss 100 gram black powder container.

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- [^] Killias M., Haymoz S., Lamon P. (2007), *La criminalité cachée en Suisse et ses répercussions sur l'opinion publique: situation actuelle et évolution des 20 dernières années*, Berne: Stämpfli (2007); Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 22 March 2007, 29 November 2007.

External links

- *Ordonnance fédérale sur les armes, les accessoires d'armes et les munitions* (http://www.admin.ch/ch/f/rs/514_541/index.html) Swiss federal application law on weapons, weapon accessories and ammunition.
- Swiss Portal for hunting and fishing (<http://www.ch.ch/private/00029/00043/00340/00365/index.html?lang=en>),
- Protell website (http://www.protell.ch/Aktivbereich/01Homepage/fr/default_f.htm)
- Firearms Training Company with Swiss Protell membership (<http://www.edelweisstactical.com>)

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