

Swiss involvement in foreign armies

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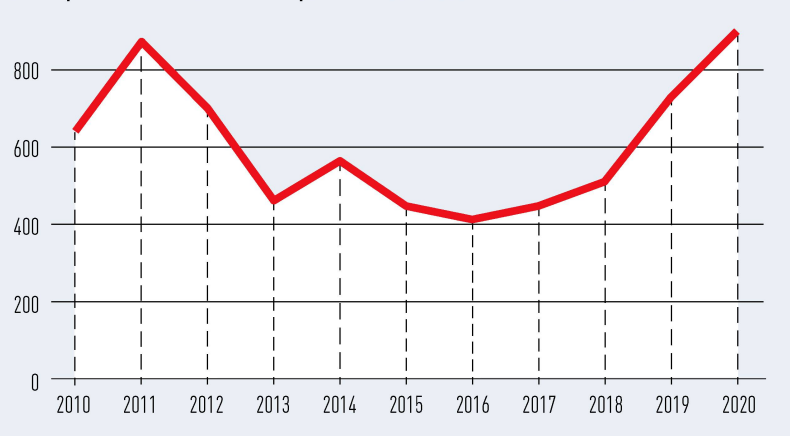
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to countries involved in armed conflict. “And if the rules are followed to the letter as expected, we may no longer be able to deliver arms to the USA, France or Denmark either.” The industry therefore wants the federal government to provide certainty and, as Zoller puts it, “offer clear assurances that we will still be able to export to and cooperate with our international friends”.

The restrictions affect around 200 companies that regularly apply for arms export permits from the federal government. According to government estimates, Switzerland’s security and defence industry employs between 10,000 and 20,000 people (subcontractors included), who also produce military goods that are not used in active combat and therefore cannot be classed as

Development of Swiss armament exports from 2010–2020 in million Swiss francs



Swiss involvement in foreign armies

Switzerland boasts a long history of military expertise. Hundreds of thousands of Swiss went to war for foreign powers until well into the 19th century. It was not until the birth of the modern federal Swiss state that curbs on mercenary activity were introduced.

The Swiss confederacy long wanted to conquer foreign lands. This mindset changed at the Battle of Marignano in 1515, when the Swiss were ousted from the Duchy of Milan and the expansion of the confederacy was stopped. Instead of fighting as soldiers for their homeland, young men were permitted to fight as mercenaries in foreign wars thereafter. Swiss mercenary activity peaked between the 15th and 18th centuries. For a long time, service in foreign armed forces represented Switzerland’s second most important economic sector after agriculture. Swiss officers would recruit farmers, grouping them into regiments to fight for countries including France, Spain, Austria, Savoy, Hungary and the Netherlands. The Swiss Guard continues to serve at the Vatican, where it has been responsible for protecting the Pope since the early 16th century.

Escape from poverty coupled with a lust for adventure

Mercenaries faced increasing curbs on their activity after the federal state was created in 1848. However, the French Foreign Legion continued to recruit tens of thousands of mercenaries. Although Switzerland banned campaigns aimed at recruiting for armed forces such as these in 1859, the hiring of Swiss mercenaries continued to be allowed until the 1920s. Other colonial powers like the Netherlands also relied on Swiss mercenaries. Some 7,600 Swiss mercenaries fought in the Dutch colonial army between 1815 and 1914 in what is now Indonesia, says historian Philipp Krauer, who has been researching the story of these men in the Swiss Tool of Empire project. “Against the prevailing backdrop of mass poverty and emigration,



arms. Take the training aircraft made by Swiss aerospace company Pilatus, for example. Pilatus is free to export these planes to countries including the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, all of whom are involved in the war in Yemen.

The issue of whether Qatar can order more air defence cannons from Switzerland in the future depends on how the Federal Council views the country's human rights situation. At present, the emirate is not involved in armed conflicts such as the one in Yemen. However, Middle East experts say that the rich desert nation in the Persian Gulf is determined to become a regional power. This increases the danger of it becoming embroiled in future conflicts that potentially result in violations of international hu-

manitarian law – the last thing that Switzerland, the depository state of the Geneva Convention, actually wants.

Swiss arms exports at a record high

Last year, Switzerland exported arms worth some 900 million Swiss francs – 24 per cent more than in the previous year and more than at any other time in recent years (see table). However, arms account for a tiny 0.3 per cent share of Switzerland's total exports. Denmark and Germany were the leading recipients of Swiss arms exports in 2020. Europe accounted for around 60 per cent of exports. The next important market was Asia. Some of the more controversial recipients included Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman and Pakistan.

Dressed to kill: the mercenary Gall von Untervalden.
Coloured wood engraving from around 1520–1530.

Photo: Keystone

many politicians were happy to see poorer Swiss choose the cheap way out via the colonial army," he writes. But besides fleeing from poverty, many mercenaries were also inspired by the notion of adventure. Romantic visions of the tropics quickly gave way to harsh reality. Almost half of the mercenaries in Indonesia died in service. In addition, Swiss soldiers in foreign forces were unable to pursue a military career beyond their mercenary rank. Many regretted their step and turned to their local Swiss consulate in the hope that it could extricate them from their contracts – mostly, however, in vain.

Since 1927, foreign service has been prohibited under the Military Criminal Code. Following the Second World War, an average of 240 mercenaries were convicted each year of joining the French Foreign Legion despite the ban. Nowadays, such cases are few and far between. Switzerland's judiciary came down hard on the 800 or so men who served on the side of the Spanish Republicans against Fran-

co's Nationalists from 1936 to 1939. These activists, who fought for freedom and democracy, received a pardon from parliament 70 years later.

Ban on mercenary firms

Mercenary firms have been explicitly banned in Switzerland since 2013. It is illegal for Swiss-based private security companies to take part in armed hostilities abroad or recruit mercenaries for this purpose. On introducing the ban, the justice minister at the time Simonetta Sommaruga (SP) stressed that Switzerland was taking responsibility: "We cannot be indifferent to what Swiss-based companies do abroad."

THEODORA PETER

Further information

Swiss soldiers in foreign service (Swiss Federal Archives): [revue.link/soldiers](https://www.sfb.ch/revue/link/soldiers)

Swiss mercenaries in Indonesia (Swiss National Museum): [revue.link/mercenaries](https://www.snm.ch/revue/link/mercenaries)

