

# In Switzerland, a Cherished Tradition Comes Under Fire

By DEBORAH BALL

ZURICH—Switzerland is in the midst of an emotional debate over a proposal to limit weapons in a country that cherishes its right to bear arms, echoing the U.S. reflection on the issue in the aftermath of a mass shooting in Arizona last month.

Gun ownership has long enjoyed strong support in Switzerland, both for national defense and cultural reasons, and the country has one of the highest arms rates in the world.

That is because of a long-standing tradition for the militia army to keep military firearms at home, so as to be promptly ready for any call to arms—a key to Switzerland's decades-old policy of armed neutrality.

But a referendum set for Sunday seeks to change all that by banning militiamen from keeping their weapons at home. The heated debate over the vote has exposed a sharp divide on attitudes toward both guns and the Swiss army. After all, no one in the Swiss army has even discharged a firearm in combat since World War II—much less grabbed a gun from their home to ward off enemy invaders.

Polls put the outcome too close to call.

Because guns weren't registered until 1999, the exact number of firearms in circulation is hotly disputed, with estimates ranging from 1.2 million to 4.5 million. A survey by the Gradu-



Ahead of a Sunday referendum over gun control, an ad in Zurich reads, 'Weapons Monopoly for Criminals? No.'

ate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva estimates Switzerland is No. 3 in the world for guns per capita. About one in four Swiss households owns a gun.

Swiss men between 18 and 30 are conscripted for three months and issued with either an assault rifle or 9mm pistol, which they typically keep at home. These reserves complement a small number of full-time military staff to constitute Switzerland's army.

Historically, members of the militia could also keep their guns at the end of their service, without the need for a permit. But a permit was required as of

January 2010, as well as some justification for keeping the gun, such as target shooting. Many Swiss homes proudly display a grandfather's military-issue gun.

"This is a country where you are both a citizen and a soldier," said Daniel Mockli, a security expert at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology. "We have a militia here and the gun reflects a sense of responsibility and trust given you by the state. Here, the debate on guns is about national security, whereas in the U.S., it is about protecting yourself."

Support for guns, however, has eroded over the past decade

## Lock and Load

Number of firearms per 100 people for selected countries

U.S.	96.0
Yemen	54.8
Switzerland	45.7
Finland	45.3
Cyprus	36.4
Saudi Arabia	35.0
Lebanon	34.9
Iraq	34.2
Spain	10.4
China	4.9

Source: Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva

due to several high-profile incidents, in particular a shooter's 2001 killing of 14 people in a local government council, an incident reminiscent of the Arizona shooting of 19 people on Jan. 8 in which six were killed and Rep. Gabrielle Giffords was wounded.

Violent crime in Switzerland is otherwise low. Switzerland in 2008 had a rate of 0.7 murder per 100,000 people, compared with 1.4 in France, 1.2 in England and Wales, and 5.2 in the U.S., according to the United Nations.

The referendum proposes a constitutional amendment that would ban army-issue weapons at home, forcing militiamen to

pull them from basements and closets and store them on base. It would also tighten gun ownership rules, ban the sale of automatic weapons, and establish a national registry for firearms.

Women's groups, doctors and police groups are among the referendum's supporters, arguing that the easy availability of guns raises the risk of suicide and domestic violence. Given the low chance of Switzerland's coming under attack, it is no longer necessary to keep military arms at home, they contend.

"There are simply too many guns in Swiss homes," said Josef Lang, a member of the Green Party and a leader of the initiative. Mr. Lang contends that the Arizona shooting bolstered support for the Swiss initiative.

The debate has turned highly emotional in a country where many Swiss learn to shoot as teenagers and an estimated 600,000 people engage in target shooting as a sport.

Opponents of the referendum contend that a yes vote is tantamount to a vote of no confidence in the army, a pillar of Swiss society, and could open the door to abolishing the militia. The government also opposes the measure, fearing that soldiers won't complete mandatory target practice if their guns aren't handy.

"They are leftists and other pacifists who are trying to change Swiss culture," said Hermann Suter, vice president of ProTell, Switzerland's gun lobby.