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Stephen P. Halbrook

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The Eidgenössisches Schützenfest: A Traditional Shooting Festival

by Stephen P. Halbrook¹

The *Eidgenössisches Schützenfest* (Swiss federal shooting competition), the largest rifle shooting match in the world, is held every five years in a different region of Switzerland. I have participated in five of the matches at Thun in 1995, Bière in 2000, Frauenfeld in 2005, Aarau in 2010, and Raron (Visp) in 2015.² The Luzern 2020 matches have been rescheduled to 2021 due to the coronavirus.³

The *Schützenfest* is as old as the Swiss Confederation. Luzern's shooting club dates to 1354. But Napoleon's invasion of 1798 created a satellite state under the French heel. That ended with the Treaty of Paris in 1815. The post-Helvetic republic witnessed a regeneration of Swiss independence protected by armed neutrality. That required the self-arming and participation of every male in the militia army. Since military regulations provided for *Scharfschützen* (sharpshooters), shooting matches became a federal sport.

¹ Stephen P. Halbrook holds a J.D. from Georgetown University Law Center and a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Florida State University. He is author of *Target Switzerland: Swiss Armed Neutrality in World War II* and *The Swiss and the Nazis: How the Alpine Republic Survived in the Shadow of the Third Reich*. These books were also published in German, French, and Polish editions. See <http://stephenhalbrook.com/>.

² I wrote about the Thun matches in "The World's Largest Rifle Shooting Match: Switzerland 1995," *The 1996 Precision Shooting Annual* 91 (Manchester, Conn.: Precision Shooting, Inc., 1996). Portions of this article on the Aarau matches appeared in "A Swiss Schuetzenfest: The World's Largest Rifle Match," *Shooting Sports USA*, Oct. 9, 2019. <https://www.ssusa.org/articles/2019/10/9/a-swiss-schuetzenfest-the-world-s-largest-rifle-match/>.

³ For information, see <https://www.lu2020.ch/>.

In 1824, the *Schweizerischen Schützenvereins* (SSV, or Swiss Rifle Association) was founded, and it organized the first *Eidgenössisches Freischiessen* (Federal Free Shooting) matches in Aarau that year. The Sonderbund War of 1848 further united the emerging federal state. Gottfried Keller in *Das Fähnlein der sieben Aufrechten* depicted the *Schützenfest* of 1849 in Aarau as embodying the virtues of direct democracy and federalism.⁴

From thence the shooting sports thrived. Under the Federal Constitution of 1874, Article 18, every Swiss male was required to perform military service, and he was given his arms free of charge. Before the Great War, the U.S. Army was so impressed with the Swiss marksmanship culture that it sent Captain T.B. Mott to Switzerland to investigate. He reported that “Shooting clubs in Switzerland take the place of our baseball teams,” and that the shooting festivals made it possible that “nearly the whole population interests itself in shooting and can shoot.”⁵

It has been said that when the visiting German Kaiser asked in 1912 what the quarter of a million Swiss militiamen would do if invaded by a half million German soldiers, a Swiss replied: “Shoot twice and go home.” As I have articulated in my books on the Swiss in World War II, the universal arming of the population with marksmanship skills was a factor, along with the Redit strategy, the Alpine terrain, and *Geistige Landesverteidigung* (the philosophy of national defense), that helped to dissuade a German invasion.

The end of the war allowed the shooting matches to return to normal. In 1946, over 460,000 shooters—more than 10% of the population—competed in the federal shooting programs. From then through 1996, the shooting federation had over 500,000 members. The end of the Cold War began a decline.

⁴I gratefully acknowledge being granted access to portions of the forthcoming book on the history of the SSV by Jürg Stüssi-Lauterburg, *Einer für alle, alle für einen: 200 Jahre Schweizer Schiesssportverband* (Lenzburg: Merker).

⁵Quoted in Halbrook, “Citizens in Arms: The Swiss Experience,” *Texas Review of Law & Politics*, vol. 8, Issue 1, 142, 161 (Fall 2003). http://www.stephenhalbrook.com/law_review_articles/citizens-in-arms.pdf.

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Initiatives to abolish the army and to ban firearms have been defeated, but in 2019 the Schengen Accord forced Switzerland into line with European Union restrictions on firearms that discourage firearm ownership and the shooting sports. While the SSV has been renamed the *Schweizer Schiesssportverband*, former SSV president David Glatz, who I had the pleasure of knowing, stated: “*Le tir est plus un avantage qu’un sport*” (shooting is more than a sport).

That brings us back to Aarau where the *Eidgenössisches Schützenfest* returned in 2010. Aarau is the capital of the Canton of Aargau in the Swiss Mittelland, located on the River Aare. In four weeks during the summer, 43,000 competitors—37,000 in rifle and 6,000 in pistol—participated at several shooting ranges near Aarau. Some 3.5 million cartridges were shot. Our club—the Swiss Rifles of Washington, D.C.—participated during July 1-4, 2010. The following records some of my experiences.

Two boys bike uphill on the town’s main street with .22 caliber bolt action rifles strapped across their shoulders wearing blue shirts and old-fashioned gray hats. Starving after an all-night flight from the



Officers and founders of the Swiss Rifles of Washington, D.C., with SSV President Dora Andres. Raron 2015.

U.S., I am sitting outside a deli in Lenzburg. Kids on bikes with rifles? This is so typical Switzerland!

Youth Shooting Day, which took place before we arrived, featured 1,800 youngsters competing—mostly with the current Swiss military service rifle, the *Strumgewehr* 90 (Stgw 90, or assault rifle model 1990). It shoots the low-recoil 5.6 mm Swiss cartridge, which is almost identical to the 5.56 mm NATO round used by the American military, and is perfect for the two youth age categories: under 16 and under 20. This sport trains them for citizenship.

July 1: Competition day for the Swiss Militia Army, and our first day to shoot. Switzerland has no standing army, but instead has a militia force consisting of all able-bodied males from the time they turn 20 (and females who volunteer). Traditionally they have been issued a service rifle to keep at home, which allows for instant mobilization.

Headed for the range in a van, we see camo clad militiamen (and women) with Stgw 90 rifles on the train—the guy sitting in front of us read a book with his left hand and held his rifle upright with his right hand. It's quite normal to see Swiss on the way to matches with rifles carried openly on their shoulders or in a backpack, stock folded and barrel peeking out, rather than in gun cases. You see them on motorcycles, buses, at train stations, and sidewalks.

Henri Guisan, Switzerland's highest general in World War II, explained the country's unique marksmanship culture as follows:

While traversing Switzerland on Sundays, everywhere one hears gunfire, but a peaceful gunfire: this is the Swiss practicing their favorite sport, their national sport. They are doing their obligatory shooting, or practicing for the regional, Cantonal or federal shooting festivals, as their ancestors did it with the musket, the arquebus or the crossbow. Everywhere, one meets urbanites and country people, rifle to the shoulder, causing foreigners to exclaim: "You are having a revolution!"⁶

⁶Henri Guisan, *Notre Peuple et son Armée* 26 (Zürich: Ed. polyg., 1939).

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That is as true today as when he wrote it in 1938. Imagine what today's many tourists from Asia, where guns are largely banned, think when gunfire echoes down Alpine valleys.

We arrive at the Rupperswil Shooting Center, an enormous range with countless 300 meter rifle targets and Polytronic electronic target systems under covered shooting positions. There are two types of targets: an 18" wide human torso image and a 22" diameter bulls-eye. They look like tiny dots at that 300 meters.

While this is Militia Day, there is room for plenty of others: a young couple armed with a Stgw 90 rifle and a baby in a stroller, a middle aged woman with designer-painted Stgw 90, and a white-haired couple, the man with a K31 bolt action rifle and the woman with a Stgw 90. The K31 refers to the 7.5 mm Karabiner (carbine) model of 1931, the service rifle issued beginning in that year. Reflecting when he did service, a middle-aged guy walks by with a Strumgewehr 57 (7.5 mm assault rifle model 1957).

Almost all Swiss rifle matches use the above three military rifle models. When a militiaman ends service, he or she has the option of keeping the rifle. Active duty persons keep their rifles at home. They all bring their rifles to the matches. There are also some events in which precision sport rifles are used.

Each member of our Swiss Rifles team is issued a Stgw 90 service rifle and, for those of us shooting pistol, a SIG 210 9mm pistol, the most accurate service pistol in the world. Each firearm is inspected and approved. We are also issued 5.6 mm RUAG rifle ammunition and 9 mm pistol ammunition.

Huge tents house all manner of booths, most prominent of which is the display of prizes for top shooters, from precision bolt action rifles and designer-painted PE90 rifles (the civilian version of the Stgw 90) to Smart Cars and bicycles to art and carved furniture. Leading gunsmith Waffen Pauli is selling not only shooting supplies, but also my new book *Schweizer Widerstand gegen Nazi-Deutschland* (German translation of *The Swiss and the Nazis*).

ProTell, the association that protects the rights of gun owners, has a booth giving out information against the Anti-Gun Initiative, to

be voted on by the Swiss people. It would have virtually closed down the shooting sports by banning most firearms and imposing stringent licensing requirements. It would also have collected the service rifles kept at home by those on active duty and stored them in arsenals, thus ending the ability to order rapid mobilization. In 2011, the initiative would be defeated by a vote of 56% to 44%.

Switzerland is one of the safest countries in the world. Most crimes involving armed violence are committed by foreigners with illegal weapons.

Today our team members shoot at a small range at the village of Buchs. Firing stops when a *hirsch*, a small deer, meanders across the 300 meter rifle range without harm—they say it appears every day at about the same time!

I shot pistol that morning, beginning with two events at 25 meters. In the Duell, a light flashes on, you raise the pistol and shoot once within 3 seconds; pause and repeat for five shots; then shoot the same string again. In the Series, you shoot five rounds in 30 seconds, then repeat.



A Stgw 90 service rifle points downrange at 300 meters. Firing stopped when a hirsch wandered across the range. Aarau 2010.



Rifle shooting in prone position at the firing line. Note the youngsters behind them keeping score for tips. Aarau 2010.

Another two pistol events at 50 meters: the Military, 4 slow fire, then 4 shots in 60 seconds; and the Veteran (born in or before 1950)—5 slow fire.

Traveling to a foreign country, being issued a firearm the sights of which are not set for my eyes, and shooting for score after a half dozen practice shots is, to say the least, challenging. With my pistol, I had to aim about a foot low (!) at 5:00 and it still shot high almost every time. Despite all I won a medal in 50 meter Veteran.

A hearty lunch in a tent with shooting club banners donning tables and rifles strewn promiscuously around. Afterwards, time to shoot the Stgw 90 rifle.

The Swiss standard is to shoot just a few rounds precisely, maybe 6 or 10, not to spray and pray many rounds. That reflects the military tradition expressed by what the above militiaman told the German Kaiser: “Shoot twice and go home.”

Consistent with such accuracy, almost all events are in prone position, and all are at 300 meters. This does not offer the versatility

of our American National Matches in which Hi Power rifle are shot off-hand (standing), sitting, and prone positions at 200, 300, and 600 yards, but few shooters are trained to do so. Focus on the prone position allows far larger segments of the population to participate in rifle shooting.

The electronic targets have a screen to your right showing exactly where you hit the target with each shot, except in Series events which shows the hits only when finished with all shots. In an hour, I shot four events—the Verein: 6 single fire, 4 series, every shot low (even the ten!); the Kunst: 5 single fire, every shot low; the Militaer: 4 slow fire, every shot low; and the Veteran: 5 slow fire, 2 shots to left (at least they weren't low!), 3 shots to lower left.

All this time, I am shooting for score, but my sights are set way too low and are being adjusted upwards ever so conservatively. Had to aim so high and cover the bullseye with the front sight that it is hard to see the center! It's taking forever to adjust the sights to go higher.



Rifles and pistols issued to the Swiss Rifles of Washington, D.C. Aarau 2010.

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I finally got the sights adjusted correctly to shoot the *Meisterschaft* (Championship), the only event with lots of shots— 60 to be precise. Half are in prone, and half in kneeling position. I shoot prone in three strings in twenty minutes: 10 shots good (averaged 8 or 9 of 10 possible); 10 shots great (four 10s—the ultimate excitement!, five 9s, and—what the hey!—a 6; and 10 shots just OK (7s through 10s). I took no breaks between strings. Lesson: take a break after second string.

As you can see, we shooting nerds keep copious records.

July 2. Each day has been hot, hotter, and now hottest! This part of Switzerland is definitely not in the Alps, where one can wander around glaciers and stay cool.

This morning is kneeling position in the *Meisterschaft* event, consisting of three strings of ten shots each. I shot two strings in ten minutes, took a 20 minute break, then the third string. Scores drop dramatically from prone, but kneeling isn't the most stable position. Sink into relaxation and don't let that muzzle dance the jitterbug! Total score: 474, winning the Distinction Medal!

That afternoon, I shot as an honorary member of the shooting club of Laufenburg, a medieval town on the Rhine bordering Germany. Six single shots, 4 series shots. Score 81: missed a medal by one point!

July 3. This is *Auslandertag*, Swiss Living Abroad Day, numbering 250 competitors representing 23 clubs, including our own Swiss Rifles of Washington, D.C. (the largest group with 24 competitors), together with clubs from Vancouver, Cape Town (which came in first), Amsterdam, Los Angeles, and others. This competition was at a small range at Suhr, one of the countless ranges typically found in every village. I long ago lost count of how many shooting ranges I have seen in Switzerland just from a train or automobile since my first visit in 1991, but I've only seen one golf course—and it was next to a shooting range!

Trees shield us from the sweltering sun as we shoot through triangular tunnels designed to suppress noise—alleviating complaints from some neighbors who prefer just to hear cow bells (I prefer the melody of bells and rifle fire together). The program: 5 practice, 6 slow, and 4 series shots.

At lunch, we hear from SSV President Dora Andres, who focused on the need to defeat the “Initiative Against Weapon Misuse”—code words for banning ordinary firearms possessed by law-abiding citizens and the militia. As noted, the initiative would be voted on and defeated—Swiss democracy often includes voting directly on laws, not just candidates.

July 4. What a great day to celebrate freedom with America’s “Sister Republic”—a term used by a Swiss political leader in a 1778 letter to Benjamin Franklin, noting that the Swiss had 13 Cantons and the Americans had 13 States.⁷ Thousands converge on the town of

⁶ See James H. Hutson, *The Sister Republics: Switzerland and the United States from 1776 to the Present*, 9 (1991).



Swiss Federal President Doris Leuthard wishes: “Gut Schuss” (good shooting)! Aarau 2010.



Young shooters parade with rifles. Note the young lady with two medals pinned on her jeans that she won in the competition. Frauenfeld 2005.

Aarau where shots from 19th century artillery announce the opening of the festivities. The highlight of the speeches by SSV leaders and various politicians was the closing words uttered by Swiss Federal President Doris Leuthard: “*Gut Schuss*” (good shooting)!

Speeches ended, and we walk toward the starting point of the parade. We pass Aarau’s impressive monument to marksmen, a memorial showing one man with a percussion Schützen rifle shaking hands with another with a Schmidt-Ruben model 1911 military bolt-action rifle. The monument was erected in 1924 to commemorate the first Federal *Schützenfest* in 1824. The logo for our *Schützenfest* in 2010 reflects societal progress: a woman with a precision sport rifle shaking hands with a man with a Stgw 90.

The grand parade that afternoon featured seven centuries of Swiss history with thousands of marchers, all in period dress, including William Tell with crossbow and his son and military units of all ages—



The girls and boys of the Lenzburg Cadets march with their .22 rifles. Aarau 2010.

from Roman and medieval to Sonderbund War and World War II—and farmers, vintners, politicians, and every manner of shooting teams of today. Our Swiss Rifles club marched behind an American WWII jeep with a 5-year old boy in a general’s hat!

My favorite: the girls and boys of the Lenzburg Cadets—the same ones I saw riding bikes with their rifles a few days before!

The parade was shown on Swiss TV. The major Swiss newspapers covered the events. Even the ubiquitous McDonald’s advertising signs pictured three targets with the bullseyes being the silhouettes of a burger, a drink, and an ice cream, along with the words: “Now just a shot at the yummy target.”

Illustrative of the wide public acceptance of the shooting sports, the *Schiessbuch* (shooting book) issued to every competitor consists of 195 pages of events, shooting programs, and advertisements—

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supermarkets, beer, wireless, banks, lottery, automobiles, and numerous other businesses. It begins with a welcome from Ueli Mauer, head of the Swiss Department of Defense who also shot in the matches, paying homage to the role of the shooting tradition in maintaining a free society.

The month-long *Schützenfest* ended with the competition for top shooters. It is said that there has never been a king in Switzerland with one exception: the *Schützenkoenig* (shooting king), the grand champion.

Numerous other shooting festivals take place in Switzerland every year. I have shot in a number of them and have written about some, such as the shoot from the medieval Mesocco castle ruins in Ticino⁸ and the annual *Feldschiessen* (which takes place all over the country).⁹ I covered (but was too old to shoot in!) the *Zürcher Knabenschiessen*, the centuries-old teen matches in which, when I attended, a girl beat all of the boys.¹⁰ I also attended a rainy *Rütli Schiessen*. The *Morgarten Schiessen* (site of 1315 defeat of the Hapsburgs) is on my bucket list.

Hopefully, Switzerland will continue to be a democratic beacon, to America, Europe, and the world, where from the Alpine republic echoes: “*Gut Schuss*”!

⁸“Swiss Schuetzenfest,” *American Rifleman*, 46 (May 1993). <https://www.nraila.org/articles/20010611/an-armed-society>.

⁹“Switzerland’s Feldschiessen,” *Gun Digest* 20 (1996).

¹⁰“Girl Beats Guys: A Swiss Teen Rifle Festival,” *Schiessen Schweiz*, Nov. 25, 2004, 18. http://www.stephenhalbrook.com/articles/swiss_teen_rifle_festival.html.