

Wars and us

National Museum Zurich | 17.04.26 – 17.01.27

Tour of the exhibition

The exhibition, which is divided into five sections, looks at war and its far-reaching effects on Swiss society. It shows how conflicts spark identity-building processes, shift economic dependencies, exacerbate social tensions and shape political scope for action. Drawing on objects, images and personal accounts from contemporary witnesses, the exhibition traces how wars have influenced Switzerland's history, culture and social structures since the late Middle Ages.

Prologue: War in real time

The exhibition starts with a video installation showing a montage of current coverage from Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan and Myanmar. We are bombarded with almost real-time updates on the wars raging across the world. The images and news convey how the ubiquitous media presence influences public debate around conflicts.

Neutrality Compass

The interactive “Neutrality Compass” accompanies the exhibition and invites visitors to reflect on their own views. Each section features a station with questions on the relevance and significance of neutrality. At the end of the exhibition, visitors are given an analysis of their answers and further information on Swiss neutrality.

1. Threatened identity

Warfare has had a lasting impact on the way Switzerland sees itself. Since the late Middle Ages, the image of the Confederate armed with a halberd has symbolized resilience, fighting spirit and cohesion. The Battle of Pavia tapestry (1525), which is being exhibited for the first time in Switzerland, sets an interesting counterpoint: it depicts the rout of the Swiss troops and debunks the myth of military invincibility.

Three images of the Battle of Murten (1476) show how memory forms, materializes and transforms: a history painting from the 19th century depicting heroic returnees, a school poster from 1939 establishing the victorious narrative in the classroom, and a photograph from 1991 showing the former battle site as an inconspicuous field. Murten therefore becomes a canvas for national self-interpretation.

Paintings and ceremonial objects highlight how, since the 15th century, narratives of the Rütli oath, William Tell and Arnold von Winkelried have condensed political ideals such as unity and freedom into potent founding myths. Since the 18th century, Helvetia has embodied these ideas as a national allegory. In Edouard Castres' painting, she appears as an unyielding figure, while on postcards from the 20th century she represents peace and humanity. Her visual forms respond to changing political contexts and translate threat into a symbol of self-assurance.

Wars have shaped the development of political instruments since the late Middle Ages. In the 20th century, for example, the Spiritual National Defence used new media, with radio, film and even the National Exhibition of 1939 invoking the values of unity and neutrality. In the face of threats, national identity is continually renegotiated and redesigned.

2. Business of violence

Between the 16th and 18th centuries, mercenary service became a lucrative business. Troop registers, certificates of discharge and coins testify to the administrative and financial practices in military businesses. Women such as Maria Jakobea Zurlauben assumed responsibility for recruitment and paying mercenaries. The embroidered tapestry from Bischofszell shows how unremarkable it was to see armed men in everyday life: it depicts soldiers armed with halberds in an ordinary scene with the town in the background. The drawing by Urs Graf encapsulates the ambiguity of life as a mercenary, stuck between glory and poverty.

In the 20th century, the business of war moved to the arms industry. Photographs document how companies switched to producing ammunition and fuses in World War I. Images and manuals from the Werkzeugmaschinenfabrik Oerlikon and the Waffenfabrik Solothurn highlight the expansion of arms export and its international entanglements in World War II. An anti-aircraft gun made by the Waffenfabrik Bern also illustrates the consequences for Switzerland's own national defence; Since the arms industry barely supplied the domestic market, the federal government developed its own anti-aircraft gun.

The prosperity that grew from military entrepreneurship was reflected in luxury objects, such as a gold-plated footed bowl or a distinguished sedan chair. A portrait gifted by Louis XIV indicates the close ties between foreign policy and personal careers. The mercenary business had its critics, however. An allegorical painting depicting a recruiting officer in chains denounces greed and political dependencies.

3. Changing society

Since the 16th century, conflicts outside Switzerland have repeatedly led to inflation, supply crises and revolts at home, such as the Peasant War of 1653. The Huttwil Charter shows how the revolting peasants drew on the founding myths of the Swiss Confederacy. Two centuries later, Martin Disteli's illustrations recall the rebels of Entlebuch and their brutal suppression.

World War I also aggravated social conflicts. A machine gun in front of the trade union flag symbolizes the general strike of 1918. A leaflet with demands for a 48-hour week, social insurance and women's suffrage stands in contrast to bourgeois calls to end the strike. Despite its collapse, the national strike bolstered the working class as a social force.

At the same time, wars trigger waves of refugees. Religious persecution in the 16th and 17th centuries brought Huguenots to Switzerland to seek refuge, while Swiss asylum policy was increasingly tightened in the 20th century. A poster opposing “asylum abuse” from the 1990s points to the polarized migration debate following the Yugoslav Wars. Jars of ajvar and a rap music video made by the diaspora reflect how migration has left a lasting mark on daily life and raise questions around belonging.

Wars also have an impact on gender roles. A photo gallery shows how roles shift and are consolidated at the same time. The military kit of men and women since World War II to the present day also illustrates the increasing equality in the Swiss army. An audio station complements these perspectives with personal accounts by contemporary witnesses on military service and on experiences of forced migration in Switzerland.

Wars and you

For the exhibition, high school students reflected on how images of war on social media affect them and what kinds of emotions they stir up. The interactive media station “Wars and you” invites visitors to answer questions on the impact of war in the media and to compare their results with the young people’s.

4. Well-fortified Switzerland?

The 1831 painting by Johann Baptist Kirner depicting a returning Swiss Guard calls to mind the last phase of Swiss mercenaries performing foreign service, and marks the transition to exclusively defending one’s own territory. A photo album of a border garrison shows the everyday life of soldiers defending Switzerland in World War I.

Historical photographs indicate how gymnastics clubs and festivals served to showcase the defensively capable citizen well into the 20th century. Emil Erb’s rifleman’s logbook and certificates illustrate the connection between civilian clubs and societies and military duty. The standard issue weapons from 1931 to the present day illustrate Switzerland’s militia system. The 1905 standard issue bicycle also highlights the close link between the military and sport. After its withdrawal from service, it is still used in military cycling sport.

Maps from around 1900 show the military investigations, preparations and use of the Alps. In World War II, defence at the Alpine National Redoubt was stepped up. A drawing for military installations and the fresco *Muni mag 5* show the activity of artist Hans Erni as a camouflage painter and soldier. The photo series *Fake Chalets* by Christian Schwager demonstrates how military architecture still shapes the landscape. The Haflinger off-road vehicle has become a mobile icon of this defence landscape.

After 1945, Switzerland began to place greater emphasis on technological autonomy. The NEMA cipher machine and the SE-213 directional beam station represent the expansion of military communication. Finally, the ADS 95 Ranger reconnaissance drone marked

Switzerland's first venture into unmanned systems, but at the same time indicated its continued reliance on foreign technology.

5. Scope for action

The protocols of the Congress of Vienna, which recognized Switzerland's "perpetual neutrality", opened up initial political scope for action in the 19th century. After World War I, this position was put to the test by the new collective order: historical documents, postcards and photographs clearly show how the League of Nations and later the United Nations challenged Swiss neutrality. The debates around arms exports illustrate how fiercely contested its interpretation is. In 2022 35 mm ammunition, a sample of which is on display, sparked a fresh debate when the Federal Council refused to allow it to be shipped to Ukraine.

Meanwhile, civil society initiatives against war emerged. Clara Ragaz played a key role in the Swiss peace movement in the early 20th century. Photographs, letters and documents show how she combined education, equality and pacifism. Since the 1980s, the Group for a Switzerland Without an Army has called for disarmament and a realignment of security policy. Referendum posters document its political activities and show how even failed initiatives can trigger political reform.

Humanitarian activities provide further scope for action. The Geneva Convention of 1864 was the first binding regulatory framework for the protection of wounded combatants. Registers of prisoners of war from World War I and mobile field equipment illustrate how these principles were implemented in real-life settings. Since 1990, the Swiss army has also been involved in UN peacekeeping missions. Equipment and pictures of Swiss soldiers represent military-backed peacebuilding that combines neutrality with international cooperation.

Epilogue: Remembering war

The exhibition closes with the art installation "Repeat after Me" by artist collective Open Group. In it, Ukrainian refugees recall war by imitating the sounds of gunshots, artillery fire and alarm sirens with their own voices. The echoed sounds really bring home how experiences of war leave their mark on the body and memory. The epilogue therefore broadens the perspective beyond the past and reminds us that war still very much belongs to the present.