

Press release

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Wars and us

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Wars often seem like distant events, but they also shape Switzerland's past and present. Through impressive objects and stories, the exhibition "Wars and us" at the National Museum Zurich shows how conflicts have influenced Switzerland's self-image, politics and daily life for centuries.

Wars shape the present. Every day, the news and social media confront us with pictures from Ukraine, the Middle East and other parts of the world. They clearly show that armed conflicts are not merely distant events, but that they influence political debates, social values and personal perceptions across the globe. Even in neutral Switzerland, wars are part of both history and the current reality.

In five sections, the exhibition sheds light on the way in which wars have shaped politics, the economy and society in Switzerland since the late Middle Ages. It shows how conflicts spark identity-building processes, shift economic dependencies and exacerbate social tensions. Beyond their military aspect, it is their far-reaching impact on everyday life, culture and political decisions that is highlighted.

The exhibition focuses on the question of how war has shaped Switzerland's self-image. Over the centuries, myths around the Rütli oath, William Tell and Arnold von Winkelried have become symbolic narratives about freedom and unity. At the same time, economic entanglements emerged through mercenary services and later the arms industry. Conflicts have also led to social change: they have sparked economic crises and protest movements, influenced migration and shifted gender roles. Meanwhile, Switzerland has developed political scope for action, for example through neutrality, humanitarian activities and peace policy.

Many historical objects highlight these connections. A tapestry depicting the Battle of Pavia (1525) – an extremely valuable loan from Naples, which is being exhibited for the first time in Switzerland – depicts the rout of Swiss troops and challenges the myth of their military invincibility. Three different representations of the Battle of Murten (1476) – a historical painting, a school poster and a contemporary photograph – show how memory and a nation's self-image can change over time.

Exhibits also highlight economic and social aspects: troop registers, coins and discharge certificates evoke the business of mercenary service, while photographs and manuals from the Werkzeugmaschinenfabrik Oerlikon and the Waffenfabrik Solothurn document the role of the Swiss arms industry in the 20th century. Other objects – such as a machine gun and a trade union flag dating from the national strike of 1918, uniforms from active duty and the Women’s Auxiliary Service, and maps and photographs of military facilities in the Alps – illustrate how closely war, society and politics are interlinked.

The exhibition closes with a contemporary perspective: in a video installation entitled “Repeat after Me”, Ukrainian refugees emulate the sounds of gunshots, artillery and sirens. Visitors are invited to repeat these sounds – a haunting reminder that war is not only history, but continues to shape experiences and touch people.

The interactive “Neutrality Compass” accompanies the exhibition and invites visitors to reflect on their own views about the significance of neutrality. In each section, they answer questions and at the end they receive an analysis of their answers and further information on Swiss neutrality.

The supporting programme will add additional perspectives to the exhibition. An event is being organized in partnership with the Kunsthaus Zürich shedding light on the shift in Switzerland’s remembrance culture. And the topic of violence will be examined in detail in collaboration with the research project on the aestheticization of war violence at Bern University of the Arts. Contemporary witnesses also share their experiences of forced migration, peacekeeping and war photography.

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