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Civilian service is going strong, while the army takes a hit

Thousands of conscripts would rather complete 368 days of community service than join the army. The Federal Council would like to limit this option, introduced by young objectors in the 1970s.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

Today, a young person wishing to serve his country “other than guarding a bridge with a gun”, as 21-year-old Léo Tinguely puts it, can opt for a period of civilian service as he did. In this case, the potential conscript must substantiate their objection to military service with “proof through action”: the length of time owed to the nation is increased by 50 %, resulting in 368 days of service rather than the 245 asked of soldiers.

Many Swiss people consider this option to be well worth it. “I loved this experience,” says Samuel Christen, 31, who completed his civilian service in a clinic in Noirmont (JU). His mission as a service technician did not enable him to progress in his career as a polymechanic, but he was able to “help his country without paying military tax”. At 43 years old, Milan*, a senior official of the canton of Geneva, began his military training in 1995 amongst the tanks in Thun, before turning to civilian service (created in 1996). “I saw both sides of the coin and at least I wasn’t a traitor to my country,” states this ex-journalist, born in the Former Yugoslavia. He felt a strong aversion to serving in an army. During a firing exercise, a corporal who considered his performance to be lacking told him to imagine that he was firing at a man from the Balkans. “I showed him the name on my uniform,” recalls Milan. The young university student completed the remainder of his service time in a human rights NGO, then as a sports teacher for the canton of Geneva youth sports service.

Fitness for military service: a condition for civilian service

Since 2009, Swiss candidates wishing to follow this alternative path have no longer had to justify refusal of the army before a commission. However, individuals must be fit for military service and must find their civilian mission themselves. This was the case for Tinguely, a sociology student and social worker in Fribourg, whose civilian service was spent at Tremplin, a foundation providing support for drug addicts. “The recruitment process lasted for two days. They spoke to us as if we were stupid and we spent a lot of time waiting around,” says Tinguely, who regrets the absence of information regarding civilian service during his army recruitment period in December 2016. Tinguely did not feign



illness. At the end of the recruitment process, he stated his request before a high-ranking officer who communicated his military posting to him for February. He had to move quickly to complete the steps for requesting civilian service, which must be completed entirely online. Tinguely began his mission at Tremplin in October 2017 and provided 313 days of work, leaving 40 days of civilian service to complete.

The longer duration of civilian service is generally considered to be an obstacle, as are the steps which must be

A ‘Zivi’ (civilian service worker) on duty, serving lunch in a school in Kehrsatz, Bern

Photo: Keystone

New film pays tribute to the pioneers of civilian service

It's the incredible story of a group of young protesters who, in support of civilian service in Switzerland, laid down their weapons and uniforms before the Federal Parliament building and had women tear up their military passbooks. This event took place on 22 April 1971 in Berne and is the starting point for the film "La preuve de l'existence de Dieu" (Proof of the existence of God) by Genevan Fred Baillif. Screened in Geneva on 14 March 2019 as part of the Geneva International Film Festival and Forum on Human Rights, this pseudo-documentary functions as a tribute and raises questions relating to militant activities, as well as "the status of the elderly in our social context, where they are shut out from society once their work is finished", states the producer-director.

"La preuve de l'existence de Dieu" is played by the real-life protagonists of this militant action alongside experienced actors, Jean-Luc Bideau and Irène Jacob. In the film, six senior protesters campaign against weapons exportation and turn to terrorist methods, blowing up an arms factory. In reality, the actions in Berne were to lead to prison sentences of up to four and a half months, explains Alain Simonin, one of the protagonists in the film.

The Genevan militants' operation involved 22 men and 8 women and was prepared with the help of two Genevan lawyers who would go on to become State Councillors: Christian Grobet and Bernard Ziegler. The aim was to plan a crime which would lead to criminal sentences, in the case of the women for the destruction of military equipment. In the end, the objective was not met. The group, which notably included a theologian and a garage owner, wanted a collective conviction, and so a political trial, but each group member was judged separately and the women were released. Nevertheless, the group achieved a substantive response, signed by the Federal Coun-



Michel Sermet Photo fresh prod



Alain Simonin Photo fresh prod

cil, to which a 400-page manifesto on civilian service had been delivered. "Our actions influenced the creation of civilian service," reflects Michel Sermet, who served his sentence in Geneva.

Born of a Genevan militant group which had established a concept embodying civilian service for the population, the movement in favour of a community-based service was reflected in other French-speaking cantons and attracted support from intellectuals in the German part of Switzerland too. "We paid for our actions, and our sentences brought us credibility," recalls Alain Simonin with satisfaction. (SH)

undertaken to access this option. But aside from the intrinsic value they see in their missions, supporters of this path highlight a number of advantages when compared with military service. The first is the possibility of returning home in the evening. The second concerns the reimbursement of expenses for this activity, which is paid on top of the amounts given to conscripts by their insurance for loss of earnings. Tinguely also received an additional 500 francs from Tremplin, for a total of 2,300 francs per month. Better than in the army. A further advantage is the issuance of work certificates: "I was able to use my work experience in the NGO where I completed my civilian service," explains Milan. This would not have been the case

with military service, even if the latter option can also sometimes open doors.

Government moves to restrict civilian service

Civilian service meets needs in the social, healthcare and educational sectors, and is becoming an increasingly popular choice for young people. Between 2010 and 2017, the number of days completed as part of a civilian service mission more than doubled, jumping from 878,000 to 1.78 million, with 6,785 admissions and almost 48,000 people serving at the end of 2017. Alarmed by this success, the Federal Council has launched an offensive aiming to make

civilian service seem less attractive. It has been decided to focus notably on men who have already embarked on military service and wish to leave. The aim of these measures is “to ensure respect for the principle that it is not a question of free choice between military and civilian service...” according to the Federal Council statement which remains somewhat ambiguous given its “proof through action” approach. The government is particularly concerned by an exodus of its executives and specialists towards non-military services. In 2018, of 6,205 admissions, 2,264 were effectively servicemen who had finished their training, including 350 officers and non-commissioned officers. The government warns of “a loss in knowledge and competencies regarding conduct and a loss in technical skills...”.

Slipping out through the back door to avoid the army

This policy has received substantial criticism. Socialist municipal councillor of Lausanne Benoît Gaillard, having himself opted for the non-military route in 2004, denounces the escape of conscripts “through the back door”. The average rate of fitness to complete military service ranges from 83 % to 55 % depending on the canton. “Today, those wanting to avoid the army simply have themselves declared unfit for service based on a certificate which is



Provocation on the way to civilian service: protesters dump their service rifles and uniforms in front of the Federal Palace (22 April 1971)

Archive image provided

not always very credible. Instead, we should be encouraging a service benefiting the country. The fact of the matter is that the Federal Council is under pressure from the right and does not want to give the impression that it is favouring alternative solutions to military service. So, it prefers to tolerate people escaping from military service through the back door.” Gaillard also claims that this system excludes women.

“The vocation of the Swiss army is not a bad one,” states Milan, who feels that “it should develop a different discourse, in order to be more attractive to young people”. As for defending the country in the event of attack: “It’s an illusion; it would be like using a Swiss army knife against a nuclear power. We need an army focused on peace-keeping missions instead,” suggests this ex-serviceman.

*Not real name.

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