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The total defence snap link for national resistance: territorial defence forces – the Swiss example

Introduction

For nations facing expansionist and revisionist neighbours such as Russia or China, a total defence approach provides a mechanism to protect both territorial integrity and political sovereignty. A key component for any effective total defence concept is volunteer, citizen-soldier territorial defence forces (TDF), also known as national guards, defence leagues, or home guards, depending on the country.

This paper will first define total defence, and then emphasise the role these territorial formations play as the critical snap link between the military and civilian population in such a national defence strategy. While a total defence strategy can address any number of threats – natural disasters, epidemics, grey zone operations, and armed conflict, this essay will focus on the conduct of national resistance in the event of foreign invasion, an extreme scenario for the total defence system. In mountaineering, a snap link is used to join equipment and people into a functioning system for successful climbing. Similarly, like the snap link, the territorial defence forces connect the military to the civilian population in a way to ensure popular support for the national resistance effort. The article will then examine the historical example of Switzerland as an exemplar of total defence from 1939 to 1991 and demonstrate the role its citizen-soldier forces played in linking the population to overall resistance efforts. This

Swiss historical experience provides three main concepts for consideration and tailored implementation by citizen-soldier territorial defence forces in national defence resistance missions today: (1) the creation of a government-directed and functional *levée en masse* that mobilises the entire population to support total defence and provide invasion deterrence; (2) the establishment of a national redoubt or refuge, either in-country or abroad, to provide sanctuary for the resistance movement during occupation; (3) and the organization of specialised, multi-crisis capable territorial units for the full range of total defence missions.

Total/Comprehensive defence

Sovereignty is the indispensable attribute of the state for both internal power and external international relations purposes.¹ Its preservation rests upon a competent national defence posture and plan. Total or comprehensive defence is a national security strategy based upon whole-of-government and whole-of-society involvement in protecting a nation's sovereignty. In the article "From 'total' to 'comprehensive' national defence: the development of the concept in Europe" Dr. Ieva Bērziņa provides a comprehensive historical perspective to this framework, explains its derivation from the idea of Total War, and offers a differentiation between total defence, with an emphasis on military components, used primarily by non-aligned states during the Cold War, and today's comprehensive national defence which counters both conventional and hybrid threats with both military and non-military means.² Simply defined, total or "comprehensive defence is an official Government strategy, which encompasses a whole-of-society approach to protecting the nation against potential threats."³ This paper will use the term total defence to connote this meaning.

One of the key challenges in total defence is how to direct and harness the power of a wide range of involved, non-military stakeholders, especially the civilian population, to achieve the defined national security goals. The total defence effort requires cooperation, negotiation, and building consensus among stakeholders to achieve alignment of activities. In fact, for success, total defence requires the elusive, but essential unity of effort. Unity of effort – the coordination and cooperation toward common objectives, even if the participants are not necessarily part of the same command or organisation – is the product of successful unified action.⁴

¹ B.D. Porter, *War and the Rise of the State: The Military Foundation of Modern Politics*, New York, NY: The Free Press, 1994, p. 6.

² I. Bērziņa, "From 'total' to 'comprehensive' national defence: the development of the concept in Europe", *Journal on Baltic Security*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2020, pp. 7–15.

³ *Comprehensive Defence Handbook*, Edition A, Version 1, Mons: NATO Special Operations Headquarters, December 2020, p. 15.

⁴ See: *Joint Publication (JP) 3-0: Joint Operations*, Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 17 January 2017, Incorporating Change 1, 22 October 2018, pp. A2–A3.

While this unity can be facilitated among interagency stakeholders by the special operations community in its integrator role for resistance operations,⁵ citizen-soldier territorial forces serve as the essential snap link for incorporating the civilian population into the broader national resistance effort.⁶

National territorial forces and resistance

The 21st-century establishment of territorial defence forces or national guards as a complement to active-duty forces in Eastern and Central European countries follows the same natural evolution of military organisations observed in Western Europe in earlier years. The French Revolution's *levée en masse* idea of an entire nation in arms evolved to the universal military conscription plus extensive reserve system that produced the mass armies of the World Wars. This structure then changed to a more limited conscription as many armies slowly shifted to an all-volunteer professional force. Unfortunately, all-volunteer professional military forces are expensive and often lack the mass and numbers necessary for adequate national defence. This situation requires a citizen-soldier component, generally voluntary, that can be called upon in times of crisis or war. The countries of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Georgia illustrate the contribution that citizen-soldier or territorial units offer for national defence. The table below shows the number of personnel in each selected country in the active-duty Army compared to the part-time territorial forces. Based upon these *Military Balance 2021* figures, the citizen-soldier, territorial organisations provide substantial human resources to an overall national security establishment.

Table 1. Army and Territorial Force comparisons for selected countries

Country	Army (active force)	Territorial Defence Forces (TDF)	TDF as a percentage of the Army
Estonia	4,000	28,000 (Defence League)	700%
Latvia	1,700	9,100 (National Guard)	535%
Lithuania	8,450	5,550 (National Defence Volunteer Forces)	66%
Poland	58,500	32,000 (Territorial Defence Force)	55%
Georgia	19,050	1,600 (National Guard)	8%

Source: based on data from The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2021*, London: Routledge, 2021.

⁵ K.D. Stringer, "Special Operations Forces (SOF): The Integrators for Total Defense and Resistance", *Journal on Baltic Security*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2022, <https://journalonbalticsecurity.com/journal/JOBS/article/3/text> [accessed: 17 May 2022].

⁶ Idem, *Territorial Defense and SOF Roles in National Resistance*, lecture and presentation, Ministry of Defense Resistance and Resilience Conference, Tbilisi, Georgia, 28 October 2021.

Barring an often-unrealistic *levée en masse* or universal military conscription system, territorial citizen-soldier military forces offer a realistic option for any threatened government to augment its active force, provide mass for a spectrum of military operations, and connect its civilian populace to an overall total defence plan. This utilisation is not new. Historically, even the United States during its American Revolution relied heavily on its citizen-soldier militia to provide a vast reservoir of personnel for a multiplicity of military needs in the majority of both conventional and irregular engagements against the British.⁷

As noted in this author's 2020 *Military Review* article, "resistance capabilities provide a sovereign nation an additional element of national defence that contributes to deterrence against an adversary, imposes real costs on an occupier, and sets conditions for the liberation of occupied national territory."⁸ For resistance, national TDF possess three indispensable attributes that make them an ideal force. First, the territorial forces link the military to the civilian population and its respective civil institutions such as religious organisations, cultural associations, trade unions, and the like. This connection offers the TDF great potential for catalysing directed social mobilisation in the population to develop "non-violent struggle capacity."⁹ According to Gene Sharp, non-violent struggle, also known as political defiance, is the most powerful form of resistance employed by the civil society institutions across psychological, social, economic, and political domains.¹⁰ Additionally, territorial defence force "national service reminds citizens that they have obligations toward the state as well as rights."¹¹ Second, TDF geographical dispersion ensures persistent presence throughout the nation and in all county or municipality jurisdictions, which provides excellent knowledge of the population as well as close relationships with local leaders and communities. Third, TDF are voluntary organisations of patriots who are motivated to serve and defend the nation and local community, and they bring a broad base of civilian experience and skills which may be relevant in resistance situations.

⁷ See: *The Toll of Independence: Engagements and Battle Casualties of the Revolution*, ed. H.H. Peckham, Clements Library Bicentennial Studies Series, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974.

⁸ K.D. Stringer, "Survival in the Russian Occupied Zone: Command and Organization in Resistance Underground Operations," *Military Review*, vol. 101, no. 4, 2021, pp. 125–132.

⁹ G. Sharp, *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation*, New York: New Press, 2012, p. 77.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 22, 45.

¹¹ B.D. Porter, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

The Swiss total defence example

As a small European state, Switzerland from 1939 to 1991 offers a paragon exemplar of the application of total defence. Switzerland's defence is still based upon constitutionally enshrined universal military conscription. Switzerland maintains no standing army, but relies entirely upon a citizen-soldier force, where every capable male citizen is obliged to serve.¹² This approach is a modified *levée en masse*, where a citizen-soldier army, drawn from, but at the same time totally embedded in the population, connects the civilian population to national defence in a way that a professional force cannot hope to accomplish. Historically, Switzerland's approach to defence with universal male military service has given it all the advantages of a standing army without the associated centralised and bloated bureaucracy and financial costs.¹³

During World War II, the Swiss Army deterred an Axis war machine thirty times its strength. As most small countries, Switzerland had to decide the level of military deterrence needed to raise the cost of invasion to an unacceptable level.¹⁴ Starting in 1940, after the Fall of France and the resulting encirclement of Switzerland, the Swiss Commanding General Henri Guisan revised the defence plan to conduct a cost-exacting conventional fight on the borders against Axis invaders, and as the balance shifted, to continue this battle from a pre-prepared national redoubt in the mountains, while forces in the occupied regions shifted to guerrilla warfare.¹⁵ From the science of military fortification, a redoubt is an enclosed defensive emplacement that serves as a refuge.¹⁶ A national redoubt is simply an area to which the remnants of the national armed forces can withdraw if the campaign has been lost. A good national redoubt should possess defensible geography.

This total defence decision was not without its risks. Essentially the bulk of the population, the prime economic regions, and all major cities would be left to adversarial occupation. A major concern with this scenario was the resilience of the population outside the national redoubt to conduct a sustained guerrilla war.¹⁷ Although this apprehension was not tested by an Axis invasion, there were indicators that the populace exhibited readiness for this effort. For example, on 12 May 1940, with already almost 800,000 obliged citizen-soldiers mobilised for war and

¹² Bundesverfassung der Schweizerischen Eidgenossenschaft vom 18. April 1999, SR 101, Art. 59 Militär und Ersatzdienst.

¹³ B.D. Porter, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

¹⁴ A. Codevilla, *Between the Alps and a Hard Place: Switzerland in World War II and the Rewriting of History*, Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2000, p. 29.

¹⁵ H. Guisan, *Bericht an die Bundesversammlung über den Aktivdienst 1939–1945*, Bern: Eidgenössische Drucksachen und Materialienzentrale, 1946, pp. 39–42.

¹⁶ M. Brice, *Forts and Fortresses*, London: Quarto Publishing, 1990, p. 185.

¹⁷ W. Rings, *Schweiz im Krieg 1933–1945: Ein Bericht*, Zürich: Verlag Ex Libris, 1974, pp. 231–235.

approximately 300,000 of these relocating into the emerging national redoubt, the Swiss General Staff issued guidelines for the establishment and recruitment of additional volunteer local guards (*Ortswehr*) units. These officially recognised and armed territorial formations were composed of volunteers, both males and females of all ages, who were not qualified for regular military service but wanted to defend their country.¹⁸ These elements would also contribute to the armed guerrilla force together with the remnants of the military outside of the national redoubt should the Axis attack. By 1 January 1941, seven months after the official establishment of the local guards, there existed 2,835 local units, with a total of 127,563 persons, which corresponded to almost a fifth of the already activated Army.¹⁹ This 7-month force generation accomplishment came from a small state with a total population of approximately 4 million persons in 1940.²⁰ Such an excellent force generation example provides a historical benchmark for a number of Central and Eastern European countries who currently evaluate the mobilisation potential of their populations in a modern total defence context.

Additionally, from a political perspective, the Swiss population supported the necessary, but unpopular national redoubt decision since they understood it raised Swiss deterrence effects and increased the cost calculation for the Axis powers, particularly Germany, who would have to contend with a protracted struggle and blockage of the strategic Alpine transversals between northern and southern Europe.²¹ The Swiss operational approach was elegant, but simple. The overriding objective was to protract any conflict with irregulars in the pre-Alpine regions and regular forces in Alpine stronghold positions to raise the temporal and resource costs for any invader, thereby contributing to deterrence.

The very same total defence philosophy carried over into the Cold War period, where the main threat was the Soviet Union. During this era, Swiss defence went far beyond the armed forces and included the economic and psychological mobilisation of the population. “The entire populace was subject to call-up for both military and non-military functions, and the national infrastructure and industrial production base were co-opted and tooled for possible defence usage.”²² While the Swiss

¹⁸ Der Oberbefehlshaber der Armee, *Weisungen für die Organisation von Massnahmen gegen Saboteure, Lufthandtruppen und durchgebrochene Panzertruppen*, AHQ, 12. Mai 1949, [in:] H.R. Kurz, *Dokumente des Aktivdienstes*, Frauenfeld: Verlag Huber, 1965, pp. 60–62.

¹⁹ H.R. Kurz, “Vor vierzig Jahren: Aufstellung der Ortswehren,” *Der Fourier*, vol. 53, no. 6, 1980, pp. 211–215.

²⁰ A.-L. Head-König, “Bevölkerung,” *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz*, 30 March 2012, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/007946/2012-03-30> [accessed: 27 December 2021].

²¹ A. Peer, *Der Aktivdienst. Die Zeit nationaler Bewährung 1939–45*, Zofingen: Ringier & Co., 1975, pp. 28–29.

²² K.D. Stringer, “Building a Stay-Behind Resistance Organization: The Case of Cold War Switzerland Against the Soviet Union,” *JFQ: Joint Force Quarterly*, Issue 86, 2017, pp. 109–114, specifically p. 110.

government did establish a cadre-based, clandestine cellular underground for this period in case of occupation,²³ equal efforts were made with the citizen-soldier territorial forces.

During the Cold War period and at its peak, Swiss Army 61, with its recruitment based upon a militia concept of universal conscription, encompassed 625,000 personnel.²⁴ Additionally, the Swiss military created territorial divisions and brigades in the force structure that were designed for domestic emergency missions and assistance to civil and local authorities in crises – natural or man-made disasters, hybrid threats, subversion, or actual conventional conflict. A Swiss territorial brigade was a compact, focused, reservist-based unit possessing security, medical, logistical, and rescue/engineering assets for critical infrastructure protection, internal and external security tasks, rescue missions, and limited combat functions. This unit was locality based and could build long-term habitual relationships with local civil authorities, fire, police, and medical services. Such relationships strengthened overall Swiss total defence exertions. These historical formations offer potential capability models for the development of territorial defence units today.²⁵ Overall, this Swiss approach to total defence during both World War II and the Cold War, modified for 21st-century conditions, could apply to those countries subject to potential Chinese and Russian aggression in current affairs.

Conclusion/Recommendations

The Swiss use of citizen-soldier forces during World War II and the Cold War offers three potential insights for territorial defence forces in a number of Central and Eastern European countries today.

First, while an actual 21st-century Swiss-like *levée en masse* or universal conscription is unrealistic for many countries for numerous social, political, and economic reasons, the concept of involving the entire population in total defence in a government-directed and functional *levée en masse* for national resistance is feasible, with the snap link function conducted by the territorial defence forces leading, managing, and shaping the effort. The national TDF have to connect with a population in such a fashion so as to enable and catalyse activities ranging from the development of non-violent resistance activities to the promotion of a spirit of political defiance. Stakeholder organisations for TDF engagement run the gamut from youth

²³ Idem, “Survival in the Russian Occupied Zone...”, *op. cit.*, specifically pp. 129–130; idem, “Building a Stay-Behind Resistance Organization...”, *op. cit.*, specifically p. 112.

²⁴ H. Häsler, “Grundsätzliche Überlegungen eines ehemaligen Generalstabschefs”, [in:] *Erinnerungen an die Armee 61*, ed. F. Betschon, L. Geiger, Frauenfeld: Verlag Huber, 2009, p. 96.

²⁵ K.D. Stringer, *Military Organizations for Homeland Defense and Smaller-Scale Contingencies*, Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006, pp. 44–48.

and church groups to senior citizen clubs. Every citizen can have a role, military or non-military, in total defence. The Swiss local guard (*Ortswehren*) units from World War II exemplify this phenomenon. For in the end, the local community is the veritable lifeline for the national resistance movement – once this connection is severed, the resistance movement withers and dies.²⁶

Second, the Swiss experience illustrates the importance of creating a national redoubt or sanctuary to succour surviving forces until liberation. Such a redoubt could be within the country or as a sanctuary outside the country. Although differing from state to state based upon geopolitical and geographical factors, this concept can provide heightened deterrence towards an adversary and reinforce national morale by providing assurance to resistance members that there is a safe haven for rest, recuperation, and medical aid pending liberation operations.

Third, the Swiss Cold War territorial units offer force structure design considerations for states confronted with a full range of total defence threats. While these are just three extracts from the Swiss total defence experience, they are applicable in adapted form for 21st-century small states confronted by Russian or Chinese aggression. For in the end, “The Swiss Confederation demonstrated that any small state could survive if its territory was defensible and its population highly cohesive.”²⁷ A crucial stakeholder for achieving these conditions was the volunteer, citizen-soldier territorial defence forces, connecting the broader civilian population to the military as well as mobilising all citizens for total defence contributions.

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²⁶ M. Caraccia, *Guerrilla Logistics*, Student thesis, US Army War College, Carlisle, PA, 8 April 1966.

²⁷ B.D. Porter, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

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Abstract

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The article offers the historical example of Switzerland as an exemplar of total defence from 1939 to 1991 and demonstrates the role its citizen-soldier forces played in linking the population to overall resistance efforts. This Swiss historical experience provides three main concepts for consideration today: (1) the creation of a government directed

and functional *levée en masse* that mobilizes the entire population to support total defence; (2) the establishment of a national redoubt or refuge, either in-country or abroad, to provide sanctuary for the resistance movement; (3) and the organisation of specialised, multi-crisis capable territorial units for the full range of total defence missions.

Key words: total defence, resistance, territorial defence forces, small states, *levée en masse*, national redoubt