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In aftermath of Swiss shooting, echoes of U.S. gun-control debate

By [Edward Cody](#), Thursday, February 7, 12:42 PM

DAILLON, Switzerland — On Jan. 3, the day Sandy Hook Elementary students returned to school in Newtown, Conn., Florian Berthouzoz leaned out his window and opened fire on this tranquil Swiss village with an old military carbine and a 12-gauge shotgun.

By the time he finished shooting, three women were killed, apparently at random, two men were wounded and Berthouzoz was brought down by a police officer's bullet in the chest.

The shooting at Daillon, on a steep slope in [snow-covered Alpine foothills](#) about 50 miles southeast of Lausanne, shocked the Swiss people because it seemed so senseless. It immediately revived their perennial debate over the danger posed by large numbers of unregistered weapons in private hands and the tradition of off-duty soldiers storing their guns at home in a closet.

The Swiss debate has closely resembled the arms-control controversy [that boiled up in the United States](#) after the Newtown killings. Liberal Swiss politicians, following a script shared by American colleagues, have vowed to push for new restrictions. Their conservative opponents have maintained that more laws would do nothing to prevent such shooting sprees.

Although separated by thousands of miles and the Atlantic Ocean, the United States and Switzerland have in common long traditions of unusually high levels of weapons possession among their citizens. Behind Switzerland's image of whispering bankers and scrubbed chalets, it also has, like the United States, a strong and vocal segment of the population that considers attempts to tighten arms controls an attack on individual liberties and national character.

[The Small Arms Survey](#), in a study conducted in 2007 by researchers attached to the University of Geneva, estimated Switzerland has 3.4 million firearms of all kinds among a population of 8 million, or 46 for every hundred.

That makes it exceptional in Europe. France, which lies next door, was found to have 19 million in a population of 65 million, or 31 for every hundred, and it surrounds ownership of all weapons with strict registration requirements.

The United States, the survey's estimates showed, leads the world, rivaled only by Yemen. Americans were found to have 270 million firearms in a population of 314 million, or 89 for every 100.

Although Switzerland ranks third in gun possession, its history has not been stained with as many random killings as the United States. Sixteen have been recorded since 1990, most with only a few deaths. The



most notorious occurred in September 2001, when a man opened fire on the Zug cantonal Grand Council, killing 14 people before taking his own life.

Eric Voruz, a member of the Swiss parliament's Security Policies Committee, said he and his Socialist Party colleagues decided after the Daillon shooting to introduce legislation for a referendum on creation of a national gun registry. The bill, he said, will include a requirement that Switzerland's citizen soldiers leave their army-issued weapons in a military arsenal after annual training rather than storing them at home.

The army weapons are fully automatic SIG assault rifles but must be adjusted to semi-automatic before being taken home, he explained. This is in line with a Swiss law, similar to that in the United States, allowing assault rifles such as AK-47s or M-16s, but only in semi-automatic mode, in which the trigger must be pulled for each shot, instead of the fully automatic military mode, in which the weapon can fire bursts that last as long as the trigger is held down.

Buyers of handguns or semi-automatic rifles in Swiss gun stores must undergo a background check that can take more than a month. But used weapons often change hands a number of times in informal purchases that are not tracked. Switzerland's 26 cantons have individual registries, but they do not share information, making tracking even more difficult. In any case, cantonal authorities often do not enforce registration requirements vigorously.

"That's why the weapons circulate so freely," Voruz said.

Voruz acknowledged that gun-control advocates do not have a parliamentary majority and will have difficulty gaining support for their referendum. In 2011, Swiss voters defeated a similar proposition, 53 to 47 percent. The question, he said, is how many minds will be changed by the Daillon tragedy.

Hermann Suter, vice president of ProTell, a powerful lobby similar to the National Rifle Association, said his organization would fight the proposal for a new referendum. "We are against any attempt to change the law from what it is now," he said. "The current law is altogether sufficient."

Suter said Switzerland's attitude toward gun possession stems from its long tradition of citizen soldiers, ordinary Swiss who are required to suit up and report for military training every year and who get their own weapon to keep at home in case of emergency. The tradition is part of Switzerland's national character, he explained.

As a measure of Switzerland's attachment to weapons, Suter pointed to an annual shooting contest and weapons fair that draws well over 100,000 enthusiasts, most of them veterans of annual military training.

"The citizen and the soldier, it's a personal union," Suter said. "The soldiers have always had their weapons at home. It has been that way for years and years."

Small and self-reliant

Philip D. Jaffe, a forensic psychologist, said Switzerland's military draft and annual weapons training have historically fostered national unity among the confederation's cultural groups, which include French, German and Italian speakers. Even though the citizen militia may be outdated in modern military terms, he said in an interview in Lausanne, it has long fit in with the national image of small, self-reliant Switzerland maintaining its independence while being surrounded by much larger countries.

"They drill this into you; there's something idealistic about it," Jaffe said. "They hand you a big, bulky machine gun, and it's yours. You get to keep it."

Berthouzoz, in fact, did not get to keep his army-issued weapon. After service in which he rose to the rank of captain, he was expelled from the military in 2006 because of psychological problems. His assault rifle was confiscated along with other weapons in his home, according to police accounts.

Neighbors recalled that Berthouzo, 33, was a military and weapons enthusiast who was jolted by his separation from the army. For the past several years, he lived alone in a decrepit hillside house inherited from his deceased parents and received a monthly disability pension. Although Daillon has only 450 inhabitants and two cafes, Berthouzo was alone most of the time and often quarreled with his relatives, neighbors told reporters.

About 8:30 p.m. Jan. 3, he began shooting out the window at the nearby home of an uncle, who was wounded by one of the rounds.

Then, police and neighbors said, Berthouzo came down into a steep alley called Morey Street and directed his fire against anyone passing by.

“Help, please, I don’t want to die,” a woman who was one of his first victims cried out, according to the recollections of a witness who was wounded as he ran to help.

‘He must have lost it’

Police were summoned from Sion, about seven miles down in the valley, but the first arrivals found it difficult to take Berthouzo into custody because they could not easily find him in the darkness. The police arrived after about 45 minutes, residents said, and shot Berthouzo in the chest, seriously wounding him.

By then, the three women, including a 32-year-old mother of two, lay dead in the street, and the two men were seriously wounded. Along with Berthouzo, they were rushed to a hospital in Sion. Since then, the shooter has been transferred to a hospital in Geneva, where a psychological examination has been ordered pending his recovery.

Police said they found that, in addition to the carbine and the double-barreled shotgun he used in the shooting spree, Berthouzo possessed two pistols, an ammunition belt for a machine gun, several knives and a stock of ammunition.

Marie-Paule Udry, who runs La Channe d’Or cafe, said Berthouzo had several drinks in her establishment that evening but did not appear outrageously drunk. Neither she nor any of the villagers were able to explain what set off the shooting.

“He must have lost it,” suggested Stella Ginier, who runs the Cafe des Alpes, Daillon’s other gathering place.

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