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# Schweizerischer Vaterländischer Verband

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**The Swiss Patriotic Federation (*Schweizerischer Vaterländischer Verband*, or SVV) was a private, right-wing association which was set up between 1919 and 1948 in response to the nationwide general strike of 1918. Originally conceived as a civil defence organisation, the SVV was later predominantly active in political intelligence services and was one of the most important anti-communist organisations in Switzerland between the wars.**

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## Introduction

The Swiss Patriotic Federation (*Schweizerischer Vaterländischer Verband*, or SVV) was set up in response to the nationwide general strike which took place from 12–14 November 1918. While the workers viewed the "National Strike" primarily as a means of achieving specific social and political demands, the Swiss Federal Council (*Bundesrat*), the military and a large part of the general population saw it as an attempt to start a Bolshevik revolution. This interpretation, which has since been disproven by historical research, had an enormous significance for the ideological consciousness of the right wing, resulting in the mobilisation of the middle classes and political alliances in the shape of civil defence organisations and other right-wing organisations.

An appeal by the Swiss Alpine Club (*Schweizerischer Alpen-Club*) on 7 November 1918, warning of an imminent revolution, marked the starting point for the formation of civil defence organisations immediately before and during the general strike. The aim of these organisations was to support the army and the police in their efforts to supress the strike. Existing civil defence organisations now became openly active and were able to recruit large numbers of new members. During the strike, two patriotic societies were set up in the cantons Aargau and Geneva: the Aargau Patriotic Society (*Aargauische Vaterländische Vereinigung*), headed by Eugen Bircher (1882-1956), and the Swiss Civil Union (*Union Civique Suisse*). These two organisations merged in April 1919 to form the SVV. The foundation of the SVV brought together civil defence and patriotic organisations, which previously had been only loosely organised, under the roof of one nationwide federation.

## Founding the SVV

The SVV had a federalist structure and although the individual sections were independently organised, they met annually for a delegates' meeting. The first president, Eugen Bircher, a leading Swiss surgeon, was president of the Swiss Officers' Association (*Schweizerische Offiziersgesellschaft*) between 1931 and 1937. He published the General Swiss Military Newspaper (*Allgemeine Schweizerische Militärzeitung*) from 1932 until 1945, and headed the Swiss Doctors' Mission on the German side of the eastern front between 1941 and 1943. From 1942 until 1955, he also represented the Farmers, Tradesmen and Citizens' Party (*Bauern-, Gewerbe- und Bürgerpartei*) as a national councillor.

When it was founded, the SVV's main focus was on getting the state to legally acknowledge the civil defence organisations and their right to bear arms. Military circles in particular supported the proliferation of civil defence organisations and their arming. In contrast, the *Bundesrat* opposed this development, as the legalisation of civil defence organisations at a federal level would require a "*Vollmachtenbeschluss*", a resolution taken with full emergency plenary powers. Ultimately, it was decided that the issue was a matter for the cantons, and in a small number of cantons civil defence organisations were given semi-official, auxiliary police functions. The civil defence organisations recognised by the cantons were given weapons and ammunition from the federal armoury by the Swiss Military Department (*Eidgenössische Militärdepartement*).

In 1919 and 1920, the SVV set up a Works Service (*Werkdienst*), an Information Service (*Nachrichtendienst*) and a Press Service (*Pressedienst*), which from that point on determined the organisation's activities. As well as the section membership fees, the SVV was primarily funded by banks and employers' federations. In return, they received information about potential strikes and political unrest from the SVV. In the final years of the SVV, it was largely financially dependent on the Society for the Promotion of the Swiss Economy (*Gesellschaft zur Förderung der schweizerischen Wirtschaft*), which was founded in 1942. Following an affair triggered by attempts by the organisation's board to bribe the police in 1948 it was dissolved nationally. Individual sections continued to exist for a period of time; the *Aargauische Vaterländische Vereinigung* still exists.

## The SVV network

As soon as it was founded, the SVV started establishing a national and international network. In 1919, it formed contacts with its German sister organisations, the citizens' defence leagues which were founded in March 1919 and the Technical Emergency Aid (*Technische Nothilfe*). The SVV maintained regular contact with European civil defence organisations through the *Werkdienst-Internationale*, a conference of European civil defence organisations which was organised by the German Technical Emergency Aid (*Technische Nothilfe*) and which took place annually between 1921/22 and 1931.

The SVV also had a very tight national network, and maintained a close cooperation in political matters with the *Schweizerische Offiziersgesellschaft*, the Swiss NCO Association (*Schweizerischer Unteroffiziersverband*), the *Entente Internationale Anticommuniste,* founded by Théodore Aubert (1878-1963), the centre-right press agency *Schweizer Mittelpresse,* the *Gesellschaft zur Förderung der schweizerischen Wirtschaft* and several frontist groups. In 1933, it was involved in the foundation of the right-wing frontist group *Bund für Volk und Heimat*.

## The Federation's Activities

In the founding period the focus of the federation's activities was on the civil defence organisations. However, these were not employed with any great frequency and from the end of 1920 on finally lost all significance. In 1920/21, the focus shifted to the *Werkdienst*, which was set up in 1919 and was modelled on the *Technische Nothilfe*. Its purpose was to supply strike-breakers for important enterprises, such as electricity and gas works, press and transport companies. In 1922, the SVV took over the existing strike-breaker organisation of the Swiss Railways (*Schweizerische Bundesbahnen*), which together with the Swiss Military Department also funded training courses for the *Werkdienst* volunteers of the SVV between 1927 and 1931. After 1931, the *Werkdienst* was deployed very seldom and maintaining the service became increasingly difficult. In 1939, the *Werkdienst* became part of the SVV *Nachrichtendienst*.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the markedly anti-communist *Nachrichtendienst* emerged as the federation's most important activity. The private intelligence service worked with so-called persons of trust, the majority of whom were recruited from the organisation's members. It also worked with spies and informers within the Communist Party. The *Nachrichtendienst* observed communists and socialists, and from the mid-1930s also increasingly focused on Jewish refugees. The reports were sent by the organisation's intelligence service secretariat to the federal authorities, mainly to the federal prosecutor's office, which in the majority of cases ordered police investigations, resulting in measures such as house searches, mail bans, bans on public appearances for political speakers or the refusal to approve Swiss citizenship applications from communist candidates. In this manner, the SVV was able to use its intelligence services for many years to massively influence the authorities' approach to state security and activities in this area.

The *Pressedienst* used the information from the *Nachrichtendienst* to write newspaper articles and publish these in centre-right newspapers or in the organisation's journal, which was first published in 1930. The *Pressedienst* played an important role throughout the entire existence of the SVV. The work of the *Pressedienst* was facilitated by the fact that several members of the SVV also performed functions or occupied positions in the *Schweizer Mittelpresse*.

In addition to its *Nachrichtendienst*, *Werkdienst* and *Pressedienst* activities, the SVV also coordinated the centre-right in political voting campaigns and attempted to prevent Social Democrats from being elected to influential positions, an objective it also tried to achieve with the support of right-wing frontist groups. The SVV fought to get the Communist Party banned, was a proponent of very restrictive policies for foreigners and anti-Semitic refugee policies, and it officially lobbied to have the borders closed during World War Two.

## Significance

The SVV was a central figure in the Swiss anti-communist movement, capable of massively influencing the federal authorities in the areas of state protection, asylum and refugee policies, and it played a decisive role in helping to shape many anti-communist laws. The anti-democratic and legally unregulated collaboration of this private organisation with the federal authorities in the field of political intelligence services was also firmly rooted in anti-communist beliefs, a basis that was not only of central importance for the SVV but which also decisively shaped the underlying principles of state protection in Switzerland.

Further research is required into the history of Swiss anti-communism and the history of the SVV from 1930 until it was dissolved in 1948. In contrast, Andreas Thürer's dissertation provides a good look at the early years of the SVV.

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## Citation

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