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**THE SWISS GUARD: PAST AND
PRESENT OF THE SMALLEST ARMY IN
THE WORLD**

**DOSSIER:
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The Pontifical Swiss Guard is one of the touristic attractions of Vatican. Their peculiar clothing looks showy for many people who get close to the soldiers to take a picture with them. Nevertheless, behind this “game image”, there’s an army with centuries-old tradition and considerable firepower.

The Pontifical Swiss Guard, also called *Custodes Helvetici* by its Latin name, is a military body in charge of the Pope protection at the Vatican. It is considered the smallest army in the world. It has over 500 years at the service of the Supreme Pontiff. The Swiss Guard member are Swiss soldiers who have received the training of their country’s military service, and a special preparation for their also special work protecting the highest authority of the Catholic Church.

In addition, they are equipped with firearms that range from pistols to assault rifles, they also carry tear gas and even some of them carry grenades. This modern equipment contrasts with his outfit, which, according to tradition, was designed by Michelangelo; and that also includes the carrying of ancient weapons such as the halberd. These facts make a wonderful combination between modernity and tradition.

Its origins go back to the Middle Ages; since 1291 when the Perpetual Alliance was agreed between the cantons of Schwyz, Uri, and Unterwalden, a pact that gave rise to the Old Swiss Confederacy. The Swiss were immersed in armed confrontations with the Holy Roman Empire, as well as in internal civil wars that occurred as new cantons were integrated into the Confederacy. These wars result in a society prepared for war.

Eventually the Confederacy managed to *de facto* liberate itself from the Holy Roman Empire, while internal conflicts were appeased, and the Diet, the governing body (made up of representatives of each of the cantons), consolidated itself as the highest authority of the Helvetic State. However, the absence of conflicts and a terrible economic situation, left many Swiss citizens without any occupation, so they began to provide services as mercenaries for foreign powers.

Over time, the Swiss began to have a reputation as mercenary people among the European kingdoms. The king of France stood out as his greatest client and even went so far as to treat Switzerland as a vassal state. However, the Helvetic’s skills in the art of war became known throughout Europe, and the hiring of Swiss mercenaries became a constant on the continent, even making Swiss compatriots fight between themselves in some battles.

Call of the Supreme Pontiff

It is in the year 1503, when Pope Julius II contacted the Helvetics. This hierarch sought by all possible ways to expel the French *barbarians* from Italy, and knowing the excellent military performance of the Swiss, he decided to use them to achieve his objectives.

Finally, on January 21, 1506, the contingent arrived at the Holy See, and the right next day the group of the Pontifical Guard was officially created by Pope Julius II himself, made up of one hundred and fifty Helvetic soldiers under the command of Captain Gaspar Von Silenen.

The baptism by fire of the Swiss Guard arrived on May 6, 1527; the day when the political conflicts between Pope Clement VII and Charles V of Germany reached their climax, when the city of Rome was invaded and looted by German and Spanish mercenaries. During the attack, the Guard held back the invading troops, while the Pope took refuge at the Castle of Sant'Angelo through the *Passetto*, a secret corridor that connects the castle with the Vatican. Of the 189 Swiss soldiers who were protecting the place, only the 42 who escorted Clement VII in his escape, survived; the remaining 147 fell in combat, resisting the onslaught of the enemy. At the end, a week later, besieged, and with the city of Rome occupied by the invaders, the Pope capitulated.

This event has marked forever the Swiss Guard. The courage and loyalty demonstrated by the Helvetic soldiers, motivated the subsequent Popes to keep the Guard at their service. In addition, the date of the Sack of Rome is commemorated each year with a very relevant event for Switzerland and for the Vatican, because every year, on May 6, the new recruits present themselves and swear allegiance to the Supreme Pontiff.

After the Sack of Rome, the Swiss Guard was again formed by Pope Paul III in 1548 with 225 men. A detachment of these new troops was sent to fight the Turks in Lepanto during the Habsburg-Ottoman wars.

The Swiss Guard didn't have any remarkable episodes again until 1798, when it was dissolved by orders of Napoleon Bonaparte, who also forced Pope Pius VI into exile, to ensure that the Vatican would not cause him problems. The Guard would be formed again in 1801 by Pope Pius VII. Also, it was reorganized as an exclusively defensive force, remaining with that *status quo* until today. Since then the army has remained relatively without any serious issues.

Nowadays

At this moment the Swiss Guard is made up of volunteers who perform military service in Switzerland. His work is far removed from his original war activities, however, caring for the Pope is still a hard task that requires constant preparation and being always alert. The attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II occurred on May 13, 1981, proves that the Vatican continues to be threatened, and that it is necessary to continue with the vigilance and care of both the Swiss Guard and the Gendarmerie Corps from the Vatican City.

Applicants who wish to join this small army must fulfill a series of requirements:

1. Be Catholic
2. Be a Swiss national
3. Pass medical (physical and psychological) tests
4. Letter of good conduct
5. Have completed the basic instruction of the army
6. Have at least a baccalaureate degree
7. Be single (although you can get married under certain conditions later)
8. Age between 19 and 30 years old

The service has a total duration of two years, plus twelve months of preparation. They have accommodation and a salary of 1800 Swiss francs per month.

Serving in the Swiss Guard is perceived as a great honor by those who participate in it. Also, for those who study or are interested about history and military topics, the Swiss Guard is not something that should go unnoticed, as it is an interesting object of study that is related to another striking topic: the Swiss Army. A subject worthy of its own articles.

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