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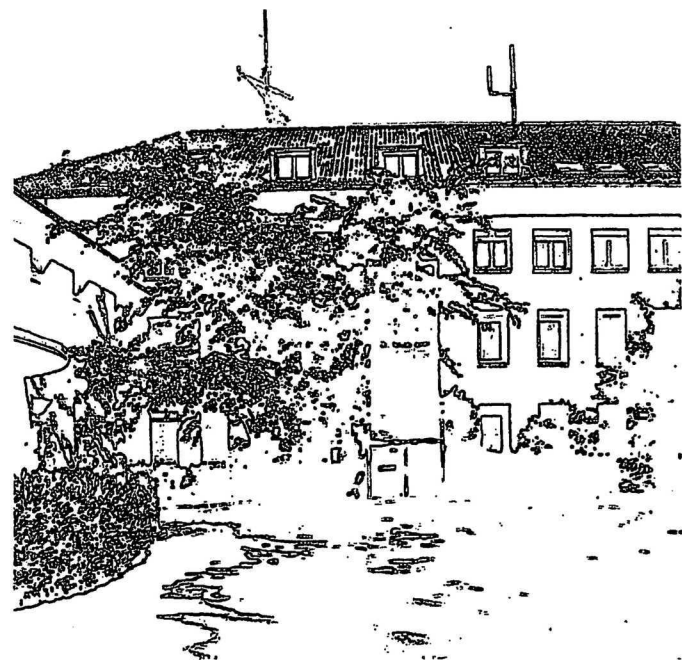
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Sacha Zala

## Constructing an official past Swiss policy on the memory of World War II\*

The questions concerning the mechanisms of construction or, depending on the point of view, the emergence of the collective memory can possibly be tackled only by a broad interdisciplinary approach. From the perspective of the historical discipline, a lot of questions remain difficult to answer, for instance how historical images are constructed or transferred in the minds of individuals who have been socialised differently.<sup>1</sup> In the end, the concept of „collective memory“ remains somewhat difficult to put empirically to the use of the historical discipline. On the other hand, history manages to clarify not all but the essential questions concerning the construction of tradition.

Since the mid 1990s, Switzerland's role during the Second World War has become the object of an international controversy.<sup>2</sup> This paper focuses on the official side of the construction of historical images in post-war Switzerland. By doing so, an official policy suppressing any critical revision of Swiss history emerges. Its goal was to prevent any questioning of neutrality. This restrictive policy had a decisive influence on the historical representation of Switzerland during the War up to the 1970s. In this first period, the Swiss historical policy developed reactively in response to foreign revelations, criticism or pressure, and, in my view, was crucially determined by the following five measures:

1. In the early post-war period, files from the German diplomatic representations in Switzerland were confiscated, thoroughly analysed and selectively destroyed, depending on how compromising they were in regard to the collaboration between the Swiss industry and the „Third Reich“.

2. The access to the Swiss Federal Archive was handled very restrictively, and only politically „acceptable“ researchers were allowed to enter in the first place.

\* This essay is based on thoughts first presented in Sacha Zala, „Geltung und Grenzen schweizerischen Geschichtsmanagements“, in: *Zeitgeschichte als Streitgeschichte. Große Kontroversen seit 1945*, hrsg. von Martin Sabrow, Klaus Große Kracht und Ralph Jessen, Verlag C. H. Beck, München 2003, S. 302-321.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Harald Welzer (ed.), *Das soziale Gedächtnis. Geschichte, Erinnerung, Tradierung*, Hamburger Edition, Hamburg 2001.

<sup>2</sup> For the report of the so-called „Bergier Commission“ cf. *Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland–Second World War: Switzerland, National Socialism, and the Second World War. Final Report*. Pendo Editions, Zurich 2002.

3. The Swiss Foreign Ministry and the Federal Archive conducted actual intrigues against historians in order to prevent research projects in Switzerland and abroad threatening to put Swiss neutrality into question.

4. To „make up“ for this obstruction of historical research, the Swiss authorities resorted to presenting official reports to Parliament and the Swiss general public. At first, this strategy was applied only by decision makers and experts within the administration, but had gradually to be extended to external experts. These, however, were bound to respect the secrecy since they were commissioned by the Swiss authorities and enjoyed privileged access to the archives.

5. Finally, document editions were censored and allied countries put under political pressure in order to prevent the uncensored publication of documents likely to question Swiss neutrality.

### The selective destruction of German files in Switzerland

After the German capitulation, Switzerland took over the archives of the German embassy in Berne and of the German consulates. Despite their refusal to hand over the documents to the Allies, the Swiss authorities soon realised that they would eventually have to comply with the allied desire to consult them. Accordingly, a high Swiss official ordered in July 1945, that „all files had to be analysed for all circumstances, for instance in case one had to allow the Allies access to the documents, and all documents which would endanger Swiss interests if consulted by the Allies had to be taken out.“<sup>3</sup> These files were thus thoroughly analysed by Swiss officials. After the German Federal Republic was diplomatically recognised, the German files were handed over without any detailed list of contents. It is impossible to reconstruct totally what was actually given back, as was confirmed by the German Foreign Ministry. However, there is no doubt that some of the counterparts of the files which are now in the Political Archive of the German Foreign Ministry disappeared in Switzerland. This restrictive policy contrasted markedly with the liberal access to the *German* files granted by the Allies.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Memo of H. Zurlinden, Berne, 25. 7. 1945, Swiss Federal Archives (SFA), E 2001-03 (-), -/7, vol. 1.

<sup>4</sup> For a complete account cf. Sacha Zala, „Dreierlei Büchsen der Pandora. Die Schweiz und das Problem der deutschen Archive“, in: *Die Schweiz und Deutschland 1945-1961*, hrsg. vom Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Oldenbourg, München 2003, pp. 119-134.

### Restrictive access to archives as preventive censorship

In 1944, it was formally decided that access to the files of the Federal Archive should be blocked for 50 years. This meant that the official files about the Second World War would be inaccessible to research up to the year 1995. Exceptions were granted, however, and some researchers got privileged access to these files. A historian who requested access had to have a „patriotic conviction“ if he wanted to have any chances of success. This policy was sealed in the early 1960s when the *Swiss association for political science* made a request. The Foreign Ministry stated that a request could only be granted „after examination of the researchers' opportunity and personal qualities. The guarantees of honesty and discretion of those who request access to certain sources will be decisive in this respect.“<sup>5</sup> Access to the archives was liberalised only in 1973 when the closing of the archives was reduced to 35 years. This decision allowed a broad public access to the sources necessary for a thorough research on the war years and an independent historiography.

### State intrigues against historians

It is possible to document state intrigues against historians at least up to the late 1950s.<sup>6</sup> This policy culminated in several interventions which aimed at denying Swiss and foreign researchers access to the public German archives captured by the Allies. I will illustrate this policy with two short examples of research projects which were successfully aborted.

In 1953, a high official of the Swiss Foreign Ministry approached the Swiss Ambassador in the United States in order to make sure that documents from the German archives would, „not be handed over under a pretext whatsoever“ to a doctoral researcher from the University of Berne. He even tried to establish a general regulation independent from the case in question. He demanded that the Americans issue a directive denying any Swiss private person access to the documents about Switzerland taken from the former German Foreign Ministry and deposited in London and Washington.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Letter of L. Haas to the Federal Department of the Interior, Berne, 24. 1. 1962, SFA, E 2001 (E), 1980/83, vol. 115.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Sacha Zala, „Governmental Malaise with History: From the White Paper to the Bonjour Report“, in: Georg Kreis (ed.), *Switzerland and the Second World War*, Frank Cass, London 2000, pp. 312-332; Sacha Zala, *Gebändigte Geschichte. Amtliche Historiographie und ihr Malaise mit der Geschichte der Neutralität. 1945-1961*, Bern 1998, pp. 60-63, 69-71, 99-101; Sacha Zala, *Geschichte unter der Schere politischer Zensur. Amtliche Aktensammlungen im internationalen Vergleich*, Oldenbourg, München 2001, pp. 268-283, 350-351.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. SFA, E 2001 (E), 1979/28, vol. 4.

In a second incident in 1957, a German student was refused access to the Swiss Federal Archive. Subsequently, the director of the Federal Archives pressured professor Werner Hahlweg from the University of Münster i. W., who supervised the student, into promising him access to the manuscript, and „to get the doctoral student to proceed to all the ‘plausible changes’ before granting the printing of the paper.“ However, even this assurance did not seem sufficient to the director of the Federal Archives who feared that, if the worst came to the worst, „the Faculty of Münster i.W might appeal to their academic freedom.“<sup>8</sup>

### Official report policy

To „make up“ for the obstruction of historical research illustrated above, the Swiss authorities resorted to presenting official reports to parliament and the Swiss general public. At first these reports were established only by decision makers and experts *within* the administration, but from the 1950s onwards, external experts had to be commissioned in order to secure the necessary legitimacy. These experts enjoyed privileged access to the archives; however, they were bound to respect the secrecy since they acted on behalf of the Swiss authorities.

Right after the end of the Second World War, the political elite practiced the art of rendering an account of the Swiss position during the conflict. They produced a whole range of reports, which were supposed to contain the officially approved history of Switzerland during the war. However, revelations from the publication of files that had been confiscated by the Allies shook Switzerland and forced the authorities in the 1950s and 1960s to commission experts *external* to the administration. This policy led to the *Ludwig-report*<sup>9</sup> on the refugee policy in 1954, which revealed the Swiss responsibility for the introduction of the „J“-stamp in German passports to stigmatise Jews, and in 1962 to the *Bonjour-report*<sup>10</sup> as an exhaustive representation of Swiss history during the Second World War. The *Bonjour-report* was also triggered by foreign revelations. In 1961, some documents on the secret military cooperation with the French military were published in the collection of sources *Documents on German Foreign Policy*. The Swiss authorities tried to suppress the knowledge about this affair since it compromised neutrality.

<sup>8</sup> Letter of L. Haas to R. Kohli, Berne, 24. 9. 1959, SFA, E 2001(E) 1978/84, vol. 146.

<sup>9</sup> Carl Ludwig, *Die Flüchtlingspolitik der Schweiz in den Jahren 1933 bis 1955. Bericht an den Bundesrat zuhanden der eidgenössischen Räte*, [Bern 1957].

<sup>10</sup> Edgar Bonjour, *Geschichte der Schweizerischen Neutralität*, vol. 4-6, Basel 1970.

From the mid 1950s onwards, the Swiss Government had succeeded in preventing the publication of these documents.<sup>11</sup> When the Kennedy administration came into power, however, the allied editors finally managed to publish the volume containing the compromising documents. As a response to this event the Swiss Government decided to commission a confidential report. They found a suitable independent personality in Edgar Bonjour. As officially privileged historian, Bonjour thus monopolised the research on political history until 1970 when his report was finally published. Its publication, however, was the result of pressure by the general public and Parliament, since the Government had had only an internal investigation in mind.

### Censorship of document editions

The unequivocal language of the sources still troubled the Swiss authorities in 1970 when Bonjour wanted to publish a documentary supplement to his official report. The Government refused its publication. Only after Bonjour had submitted a new manuscript, which was heavily censored by the Foreign Ministry, could the first documentary supplement be published in 1974. Bonjour complained publicly about this censorship and was allowed to reintegrate a great quantity of previously censured documents in subsequent volumes, but even those volumes were still submitted to censorship.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the censorship the *Bonjour-report* represents an important breakthrough. It was obvious that the files on the Second World War could not be kept secret anymore for a very long time. In 1973 the war files of the Swiss Federal Archive were opened. Based on this access, a critical and free historiography could finally develop in the 1980s. For the state, the opening of the war archives meant that it had definitively lost one of the most efficient instruments for the official management of history. From that moment on, the official historical images had to face free historical research which was already undermining the neutrality paradigm. Consequently, the Swiss historical policy lost its restrictive character and acquired a more active and propagandist dimension strengthened by jubilees and remembrance ceremonies.

In my view, three essential moments of this second phase have to be mentioned:

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Paul R. Sweet, „Der Versuch amtlicher Einflussnahme auf die Edition der ‘Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1933-1941’. Ein Fall aus den fünfziger Jahren“, in: *VfZ* 39 (1991), pp. 265-303; Zala, *Geschichte unter der Schere politischer Zensur*, pp. 261-317.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. SFA, E 2001 (E), 1980/83, vol. 115 and E 2001 (E), 1982/58, vol. 86.

1. Jubilees and official remembrance ceremonies 1989–1991–1998
2. The rediscovery of the „nonconformist heroes“
3. The „Independent commission of experts Switzerland–Second World War“ between the law and the monetisation of history

### Jubilees and official remembrance ceremonies 1989–1991–1998

Since Switzerland hadn't been involved in the actual war, there was no heroic military confrontation that would have made a suitable element for the collective memory. Lacking any real alternatives, Switzerland officially „celebrated“ in 1989 at least its theoretical resistance, that is the general mobilisation of 1939, the moment which *might* have led to real resistance. This construction meant that Switzerland, as only country in the world, peculiarly remembered the *beginning* of the Second World War. Intellectuals boycotted this commemoration already in its preparatory stage, which didn't hinder the authorities to glorify once more the role of the military in the Second World War. This was of even greater importance since the Swiss people had to pronounce on an initiative demanding nothing less than the abolition of the Swiss army in November of the same year (36% of the electorate were in favour of the abolition). Generally, though, this controversy reinforced new interpretations of the traditional image of the military threat from abroad.<sup>13</sup>

In 1991 Switzerland celebrated the 700th anniversary of its founding on the *Rütli*. This strengthened the traditional image of history since it established connections between the place of remembrance *par excellence*, the Rütli, as mythical founding place of the Confederation, and the Rütli-report by the Swiss Commander in Chief in the year 1940 which symbolises Swiss resistance against Germany in the Second World War. The double jubilee in 1998 – 200 years of Helvetic Republic and 150 years of Federal State – was already overshadowed by the international controversy over the dormant accounts, yet it succeeded at least for a short time in giving back some positive connotations to Swiss history among the general public.

<sup>13</sup> Georg Kreis, „Zurück in den Zweiten Weltkrieg, Zur schweizerischen Zeitgeschichte der 80er Jahre“, in: Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte (SZG) 52 (2002), pp. 60–68; Georg Kreis, „Zur Bedeutung der 1990er Jahre für den Ausbau der schweizerischen Zeitgeschichte (Teil II)“, in: SZG (2002), pp. 494–517.

### The rediscovery of „nonconformist heroes“

Even before the start of the controversy over the dormant accounts, the revision of the traditional image of history had led the general public to rediscover the „nonconformist heroes“ previously sanctioned by the state for their deeds. In the course of this controversy, these heroes were partly officially rehabilitated or at least rediscovered. This revision was mainly due to critical media. Ironically, the research by left-wing media rejected in the 1970s and 1980s was now selectively being presented by right-wing circles, together with traditional images, as proof that there had been, amongst the „shadow of the Second World War“, a lot of „creatures of light.“ – In this context, it is important to show that this rehabilitation of people who helped refugees gradually awakened the consciousness of the importance of the Holocaust for Switzerland in the public mind.

The case of the police commander Paul Grüninger is paradigmatic. He ignored, in the years 1938 and 1939, the state directives concerning the blockade of the border and thus saved several hundred Jewish and other refugees from the Nazi regime. He was sentenced in 1940 by the tribunal of the County St. Gallen. In 1993, the Government of St. Gallen politically rehabilitated Grüninger, and one year later the Swiss Government published a declaration of honour. The reopening of his process and his acquittal by the tribunal of the County St. Gallen legally rehabilitated Grüninger in 1995, and finally, in 1998, the Parliament of the Canton decided on a financial repair for Grüninger.<sup>14</sup>

The Vice Consul Carl Lutz – a sort of Swiss Raoul Wallenberg – who saved about 62.000 Jews in Hungary through diplomatic „protective letters“, was the first Swiss citizen to be elevated in the rank of a „Righteous Among the Nations“. <sup>15</sup> But it was only in 1999 that he was honoured in his native country with a special stamp issued by the Swiss postal service. In 2001, a symposium was organised on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Maurice Bavaud who tried to assassinate Hitler and was executed in Germany.<sup>16</sup> There are a lot of other examples of this kind, and we can indeed speak of an actual „remembrance boom“ for the last 5 years. In the context of the international debate on Switzerland, the goal of these remembrance ceremonies was to develop a counterpart for the representation of the country's „good“ side.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Vgl. Stefan Keller, Grüningers Fall. Geschichte von Flucht und Hilfe, Zürich, 41998

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Theo Tschuy, Carl Lutz und die Juden von Budapest, Zürich 1995.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Niklaus Meienberg, Es ist kalt in Brandenburg. Ein Hitler Attentat, Zürich 1980; Maurice Bavaud. Neuchâtel 1916–Berlin-Plötzensee 1941. Ein 22-jähriger Schweizer versucht 1938 Hitler aufzuhalten. Dokumentation zum 60. Todestag, Bern 2001.

## The „Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland-Second World War“ between law and monetisation of history

After the arrangement of 1,25 billion dollars in August 1998 between the Swiss banks, the American collective suit and Jewish organisations, the aims of the Swiss financial crisis management were reached and the media soon lost interest.<sup>17</sup> However, during fall 2002 the question found its way back into the news in the form of a failure of the *legal* management of history: The so-called *Claims Resolution Tribunal* in Zurich had problems finding enough rightful owners and heirs of the dormant accounts to distribute the 800 million dollars available after the arrangement.

In any case, public interest has been concentrating since summer 1998 primarily on the historical „coming to terms with the past“, that is on the reports of the „Independent Commission of Experts“. By doing so, there has been a growing resentment among parts of Swiss society against the „Independent Commission of Experts“ and historians in general. This extremely undifferentiated criticism led to a controversy in Switzerland, yet not among historians but between historians and the war generation.<sup>18</sup>

In our context, we have to raise the question of the continuity of the Swiss historical policy if we want to analyse the „Independent Commission of Experts“ after five years of research and its subsequent dissolution. Obviously we cannot directly compare the situation of the early post-war period with the one in the late 1990s, after the end of the cold war. However, I think that some elements point to a certain continuity.

Although a revision of the traditional historical image has been conducted in Switzerland since the 1980s, it is clear that the debate over the role of Switzerland in the Second World War has only come about in its current dimensions due to pressure from abroad. To deal with the crisis, the Swiss authorities resorted once more to the tried policy of commissioning reports: Experts employed by the state were given special competences and privileges, but they had to respect the secrecy. Very importantly, parliament decided in 1996 to entitle the „Independent Commission of Experts“ to the unique competence of „access to all files“ of private companies.<sup>19</sup>

Now banks and the industry took over the role the state had played in the

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Jakob Tanner and Sigrid Weigel (ed.), *Gedächtnis, Geld und Gesetz. Vom Umgang mit der Vergangenheit des Zweiten Weltkrieges*, vdf Hochschulverlag, Zürich 2002.

<sup>18</sup> For evidence for the unfriendly dealings with the „non-word“ „Junghistoriker“ in Switzerland cf. Sacha Zala, „Wir kennen nur eine einzige Wissenschaft, die Wissenschaft der Geschichte“. Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen eines ‚Junghistorikers‘“, in: *Traverse* 8 (1/2001), pp. 19-28.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Philippe Sarasin and Regina Wecker (ed.), *Raubgold, Reduit, Flüchtlinge. Zur Geschichte der Schweiz im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Zürich 1998, pp. 163-168

1950s and 1960s and started to put obstacles in the commission's way. At least one major bank went so far as to destroy files, as demonstrated publicly by the scandal surrounding the security officer Meili. Additionally, the bank UBS for a long time put only old inventories at the commission's disposition, and the collaboration with the UBS was also in other areas „not free of problems“, which showed in „a lot of obstructions“ to the commission's research.<sup>20</sup> The decision of the Swiss Government in 2001 to split up the commission's broad research archive consisting of copies of files from public archives in Switzerland and abroad as well as from inaccessible private archives of Swiss companies, rather than to deposit them as a whole in the Federal Archive, was a big blow for the historical research. Ignoring the commission's opinion, the Government decided to hand the copies from the company archives back to their private owners, despite costs estimated at more than one million Swiss francs for the sorting out.

In spite of the continuity of the Swiss history policy, the establishment of the „Independent Commission of Experts“ turned out to be a unique enterprise in Swiss historiography, and supposedly also internationally. Up to that point, only very few historians, if any, had been given such potent legal instruments to dig so deeply into such sensitive issues. The abundance of results contained in the 25 volumes of research and in the final report produced by the commission will keep Swiss historiography busy for some more decades to come.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Unabhängige Expertenkommission, *Die Schweiz, der Nationalsozialismus*, p. 43; Mario König, *Interhandel. Die schweizerische Holding der IG-Farben und ihre Metamorphosen – eine Affäre um Eigentum und Interessen (1910–1999)*, Zürich 2001, p. 27.