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To build the future one must remember

ROLF RIBI

Switzerland's self-image has been dented in several areas. The Bergier Report throws light on the role of our country during the Second World War. The focus is on responsibility rather than blame.

presented the government with the most important 25-part report in Switzerland's recent history.

Once more the modest ICE President enunciated the principles which had guided the commission since parliament unanimously voted in its favour in December 1996: The commission had investigated "in complete freedom" and the result was therefore no "state truth". The historians were not "judges, nor even examining magistrates." The aim was not to assign blame but to ascertain responsibility for what happened. "Switzerland showed too little solidarity and must accept this responsibility."

Germany, and the unclaimed assets held by Swiss banks: the property of persons persecuted and robbed by their Nazi masters.

However, the conventional self-image of Switzerland during the Second World War also needed correction from inside. According to Professor Bergier, many accepted images and myths cannot stand up to the historical facts. "False myths are dangerous, they distort our perception." It was the commission's task to "find the reality behind the legend."

So it was an "emotional climate" (Bergier) which prompted the Federal Council, parliament and private business to take some extraordinary, courageous steps: the federal decision in December 1996 to set up the Bergier Commission; the Swiss fund for Holocaust victims set up by banks, industry and the Swiss National Bank; and the Federal Council's announcement in March 1997 concerning a Swiss Solidarity Fund.

Then, in his speech about the "results and experiences" of the Historical Commission, Professor Bergier went on to mention three concrete themes: the remarkable role of the Federal Council during the war, the refugee policy, and the attitude to neutrality adopted by authorities and businesses.

Who governed Switzerland during the Second World War? "This is a paradox," said Bergier. His commission found the "absence of the Federal Council's participation in certain decisive issues" particularly striking. Instead of regarding itself as especially responsible for performing important state duties in the difficult war years and exercising the special powers it had been granted, the Federal Council "neglected its governance mandate". The government delegated its responsibility to the federal administration and to business leaders and associations. Bergier cites as examples the gold transactions with the Reichsbank, which were managed by the Swiss National Bank, and railway transit through Switzerland, which was left to the management of the Swiss Federal Railways. Additionally it cites private industry associations as having a formative influence on the functioning of the war economy.

In one specific area the Federal Council did not hesitate to introduce Draconian



Swiss soldier at the Kreuzlingen border post in April 1945.

WHEN JEAN-FRANÇOIS BERGIER approached the speaker's podium in the main hall of the University of Zurich, the audience of hundreds burst into spontaneous applause. The grey-clad professor accepted this well-meaning tribute with an embarrassed shrug. After five years of research, the Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland – Second World War (ICE) had just

During the Cold War, virtually no critical questions were asked about our country's past, says Jean-François Bergier. He talked of a "repression of wartime events lasting into the 1990s". The "return of the repressed" came at the end of 1996 – mainly due to pressure from abroad. It was then that talk turned to the gold transactions between the Swiss National Bank and National Socialist



The Swiss authorities ordered the passports of German Jews to be stamped with a "J".

measures: the aliens and refugee policy during the Second World War was "a stark contrast with the image of Switzerland as a humanitarian and open country." Here Professor Bergier did not mince words: "Where its refugee policy was concerned, neutral Switzerland (...) violated fundamental humanitarian principles." The final report of the commission of historians cites the authorities' marking of Jewish passports with a "J" and the closing of our borders in 1942, when our country was for many people the only hope of flight and rescue. At the same time Bergier points to the courageous rescue attempts made by Police Chief Paul Grüninger in St. Gallen and the diplomat Carl Lutz in Budapest, and mentions the major humanitarian aid provided by private relief agencies.

Exactly how many refugees were turned back at the border or extradited during the war was impossible for the Bergier Commission to determine. The final report estimates that 20,000 refugees were turned back, mainly Jews, and 60,000 civilian refugees were taken in. "By progressively closing the borders and delivering captured refugees to their persecutors, many people were undoubtedly driven to their death." In Jean-François Bergier's words, "Official Swiss policy contributed to the implementation of the Nazis' most horrible objective, the Holocaust."

Historian Bergier declared himself "surprised and disappointed" at the national government's attitude to neutrality during wartime. According to the Bergier Commis-

sion, Switzerland "blatantly ignored" and violated its neutrality obligations in the export and inadequate monitoring of the transit of war materials and also in the granting of loans to Germany and Italy for use in the war economy. According to Bergier, "The Federal Council continually preached neutrality but carelessly tossed it aside if it served the state purpose." Moreover, "The neutrality argument was used as an excuse not to enter into any major humanitarian commitment, especially in terms of refugee policy."

In his fascinating talk to an audience which included a great many politicians and industry leaders, Jean-François Bergier also discussed the attitude of Swiss business groups to National Socialism. As a highly developed country, Switzerland had no choice but to continue commercial exchanges with the Axis powers. Swiss companies saw the growing importance of the German Mark and anticipated a favourable position at the end of the war. "Thanks to their good contacts, businessmen were well informed. But they ignored the moral imperative and thought only of their business."

Guests and students assembled in the hall of Zurich University listened particularly raptly as Jean-François Bergier posed the explosive question: Did Switzerland prolong the war? British Minister for Foreign Affairs Anthony Eden raised the same accusation during the war: "Every franc's worth of war material sent by Switzerland to Germany prolongs the war." This accusation →

The challenge of the "Swiss Solidarity Fund"

Set up a foundation to help those who have drawn the short straw in life and atone for your national past by using the National Bank's gold reserves – not the dubious gold which was the subject of US under-secretary Stuart Eizenstat's vehement claim in 1995, but "clean" gold to compensate for your hard-hearted history.

This was the idea with which Arnold Koller startled Swiss citizens in 1997. Their reaction was one of concern at revelations which some courageous activists (soon to become pariahs) had so far been vainly attempting to expose.

The aim of this community-minded idea was to wash the white-crossed flag clean, and many relieved Swiss supported a government which was finally worthy of the name.

Five years on, this generous gesture has become the object of a tactical political manoeuvre. Barely clearing the parliamentary hurdle this spring, the Swiss Solidarity Foundation is to be put to national vote on 22 September this year.

Until then the Swiss People's Party (SVP) will do everything within its power to defend its initiative. It wants to use the surplus gold exclusively for the Old Age and Survivors' Pension (AHV) and not, in the words of the counterproposal, distribute it between the AHV, cantons and the Foundation.

In these difficult times the SVP's proposal even sounds attractive to Leftist ears. Moreover the SVP, after its defeat on UN membership, has resolved to take control of domestic politics. For other parties, especially the Liberal Democrats, this is out of the question.

Voters will have the last word.

Isabelle Eichenberger

Translated from the German by N. Chisholm

was levelled again in a report published in 1997 by the US under-secretary of state Stuart Eizenstat. Jean-Francois Bergier's answer: "The theory which maintains that the services, exports, and loans provided by Switzerland influenced the course of the war to a significant degree could not be substantiated."

Historian Sigmund Widmer, author of an earlier "Swiss History", is a harsh critic of the Bergier Commission. "The Federal Council led by Ms Dreifuss created a commission whose majority is made up of critical experts. So the result was a foregone conclusion." According to Widmer, the commission of historians has "consistently cited cases which are damaging to Switzerland and ignored arguments which exonerate our country." The Bergier report, he claims, fails to mention that the USA, a much larger country, took in fewer Jewish refugees than Switzerland.

Sigmund Widmer quotes his own "Swiss History" published in 1965: "The many years of 'living in the fortress' eroded any feeling of sympathy for other nations. Refugees were turned back at the border." The Bergier Commission, according to Widmer, has "exploited latent collective feelings of guilt in order to denigrate the conduct of civilian Switzerland during the Second World War." Now Widmer wants to draw up documentation on the "weaknesses of the ICE Report".

For Hugo Bütler, Editor-in-Chief of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ), the final report of the Bergier Commission fails in its assigned task and does not provide a complete picture of Switzerland during the Second World War. "Besides the shadowy side of the World War, historical perspective should also incorporate the more positive aspects." By this the NZZ editor-in-chief means the mental resistance, military state of preparedness, inherent economic necessities, and the numbers of refugees taken in.

How have the Swiss public and Swiss nationals resident abroad reacted to the Bergier report?


Communication expert Klaus J. Stöhlker takes the following view: There is very little interest among young people, because they care little about the past. Older people don't want to discuss the topic any more, mainly because they have suppressed it for so long. At present the public interest is relatively low, depending on how the main media approach the subject. According to Stöhlker, "The Swiss population is looking to the future. It does not really want to devote much time to the history of its grandfathers."

For Raymonde Berthoud, the winner of the Swiss Abroad prize and a resident of Hungary, the facts in the Bergier report are "Certainly true, but the statistics less so". This applies particularly to the number of refugees turned back at the Swiss border,

which Berthoud feels the Bergier report overemphasised. She points to the assistance provided by Swiss to Jewish people in Hungary and cites diplomat Carl Lutz and the Head of the Red Cross, Friedrich Born. Members of the Swiss community in Hungary accept the facts of the Bergier report but are surprised at the "excessively negative" portrayal of Switzerland's role during the Second World War. Raymonde Berthoud emphasises the Swiss population's "strong solidarity with the refugees." She herself was taken in as a refugee in Villars-sur-Sollon between 1945 and 1946.

For National Councillor Jacques-Simon Eggly, President of the Swiss Liberal Party and Vice President of the Council for the Swiss Abroad, the Bergier report is "an indispensable work". Nevertheless the wartime generation has been "hurt" by the commission's highly critical judgements. The fact that Switzerland helped the Nazis to achieve their objective (the Holocaust) "shocked" some members of the public. The politician from western Switzerland goes on to ask: "Did not the fact that large numbers of refugees were taken in save many human lives? Did not the preservation of our country's independence serve those who would otherwise have experienced the consequences of a German invasion?"

"The reactions of Swiss Abroad to the Bergier report are not much different from those in Switzerland itself," says Jean-Paul Aeschlimann, President of the Swiss Abroad community in France: Young people feel it has nothing much to do with them, older people (particularly those who served actively during the war) are not interested in yet another discussion of "solidarity in catastrophe", while the middle aged generation recognises that "the historical investigation was necessary and well executed." Now the results of the Bergier report need to be communicated at all school levels and in all cantons, "not to criticise the older generation, but to instil a critical approach and strengthen the civic responsibility of future generations."

Jean-François Bergier's concluding words were followed by lengthy applause in Zurich University's main auditorium: "To build the future one must remember." 

Translated from the German by N. Chisholm



Keystone

Swiss border guard in Porrentruy, photographed on 15 November 1939.