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SWISS NEWS

THE BUEHRLE TRIAL

The armaments firm Buehrle was accused of having illegally exported between 1963 and 1968 £8.5m worth of arms to countries falling under the official ban on arms exports. These countries included South Africa, Israel, Egypt, Lebanon, Arabia, Malaysia and Nigeria. In all these cases the methods of consigning the arms were similar and consisted in obtaining forged or otherwise irregular certificates of delivery from countries not falling under the arms embargo. Thus the arms which found their way to South Africa (£5m of them) were nominally addressed to the French Forces. The arms which were eventually delivered to Lebanon were officially sent to the Belgian General Staff, but the documents attesting their receipt were drawn without authorisation on paper exclusively reserved for the use of the Belgian General Staff. The way Egypt received 220 20mm anti-aircraft guns of second world war design (and as such already amortised in the company's books) is not without its "spy story" element.

One of the three principal accused, Alexandre Gelbert, former Assistant Sales Manager of Buehrle, went to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to draw certificates of delivery from an inexistent official living at a fictitious address, while another of the accused, Gabriel Lebedinsky, former sales manager, went to clinch the deal in Cairo. He took the money from the Egyptian embassy in Berne in the form of bundles and the receipts thereof were destroyed in a shredding machine. The shredding machine operator was among the accused. The agent who organised these transactions was a Swiss Egyptian double-national who took a 15 per cent commission.

Dr. Buehrle said at the court hearing that he had only become aware that Buehrle arms had been shipped to South Africa in fulfilment of a contract made prior to the arms export ban. He said that he had not issued a blanket order to his employees but that he had "expected them to be conscientious". The President could not find him directly responsible for the dealings of his firm but charged him with not having exercised his authority. Buehrle's lawyer countered by saying that it was impossible for the boss of 14,000 employees to be informed of every detail in the running of his firm. Besides, he stressed, neutrality was not a sufficient reason to impose an arms embargo—an embargo which would have no effect anyway.

The sentences passed on the three principal accused were much milder than what the prosecutor had demanded. Lebedinski received 12 months suspended sentence and a fine of £5,000, Gelbert received 11 months suspended sentence and a £500 fine,

the third, Max Meili received 9 months suspended sentence and a £200 fine. As for Dr. Buehrle, he received the 8 months suspended sentence demanded by the prosecutor, but his fine of £2,000 was a tenth of what had been originally demanded.

However, a £20,000 fine would have been twopence for Dr. Buehrle, whose salary last year was £325,000 and whose assets are estimated at anything up to £70m. His company, which is ranked 12th in Switzerland with an annual turnover of about £100m, is entirely owned by himself and his sister.

While there are about 6,000 firms with military contracts, some supplying no more than Army-type "eating utensils" and "bread bags", the arms industry proper is almost completely in the hands of Oerlikon-Buehrle, Hispano-Suiza (now taken over by Buehrle) and the Schweizerische Industrie Gesellschaft, makers of the "Sturmgewehr" automatic rifle. But the group has interests in other fields including aircraft, textiles, plastics, watches, hotels and property. During the Second World War 35,000 Oerlikon anti-aircraft guns were made under licence in Britain and nearly 300,000 in the U.S. The firm has also developed its own rockets and ballistic equipment and owns a firing range at Ochsenboden.



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