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Commission (1895–2020)

The *Library Commission* was established in 1895 and met 23 times in its inaugural year. Its first task was to fill the positions in the newly created Swiss National Library, then known as the Landesbibliothek. The *NL Commission* ceased its activities in 2020, and its tasks are now the responsibility of the national library association *Bibliosuisse*. We look back at the Commission's 125-year history.

Stormy Beginnings (1895–1908)

In its initial years, the Commission was concerned with establishing and developing the new National Library. It was superordinate to the Library's management and had operational powers. Once staff had been recruited, attention turned to the location (new premises to replace the Library's provisional home in an apartment in Bern), budget and accounts. There was also the issue of demarcating the Library's collection from that of the Bürgerbibliothek in Lucerne. *Helvetica from 1848* were allocated to the National Library.

A conflict between the Commission and the Library's Director is documented. The argument culminated in surveillance of the "librarian" by the Commission's Chairman, who regularly checked that the Director kept good time and reported any transgressions. Exasperated, the latter resigned in 1908.

Constructive Collaboration, Consolidating the Library (1909–1945)

1909 signalled the start of a long phase of stability, marked by constructive collaboration with the Director's office of the Library. The law of 1911 transferred operational management entirely to the Director, while the institution itself was placed under the direct control of the Department of Home Affairs.

Plans for a new building played a prominent role in the Commission's meetings after 1918. Conferences on the building issue were held in 1919, the construction plans were approved in 1925, the projects submitted were reviewed in 1927, and the plans were approved in 1928. The new building at Hallwylstrasse 15 in Bern was inaugurated in 1931.

Advising the Director's Office, Lobbying the Department (1946–1965)

Once the new building was up and running, these issues initially declined in importance and urgency. The Commission devoted itself primarily to gathering information rather than taking decisions. Soon, the issue of space reared its head once again, and the Commission made repeated and successful approaches to the Department. In 1959 it was able to secure the release of further space for the Library. The Commission continued to conduct interviews with candidates for the position of Director and proposed one to the Federal Council. Other issues included the modernisation of *The Swiss Book*, international collaboration on bibliographies, and the cooperation between the National Library and the Eastern European Library.

Dealing with Space and Staff Shortages, Promoting Automation and Reorganisation (1966–1989)

The meagre budget for acquisitions, and space constraints rapidly emerged as perennial issues of concern. With recruitment on hold and efforts being made to save money, they were far from easy to resolve. A list of non-essential functions was drawn up as a damage limitation exercise, these being the first that the Library would relinquish if need be. At the same time, the Commission negotiated with the Department in an effort to avert the worst, with the result that a review of the Library's tasks was ordered. This report, and the subsequent analysis by a parliamentary working group, laid

Twelve Chairmen, three Chairwomen:

1895 1918
Johann Heinrich Graf

1918 1937
Hermann Escher

1938 1940
Eduard Fischer

1940 1950
Karl Schwarber

1950 1953
Felix Burckhardt

1954 1961
Auguste Bouvier

1962 1962
Leo Altermatt

1962 1967
François Esseiva

1967 1976
Heinz Helbling

1977 1982
Fridolin Stucki

1983 1989
Mousse Boulanger

1990 1998
Egon Wilhelm

1999 2007
Rosemarie Simmen

2008 2015
Christiane Langenberger

2016 2020
Peter Bieri

Swiss National Library Commission

As of 31 December 2020

Chair:

Peter Bieri

Former member of the Council of States, chair of the public transport information service LITRA

Diego Hättenschwiler

Wikipedian and scientific librarian

Christian Koller

Director of the Swiss Social Archives, Titular Professor of Modern History at the University of Zurich

Isabelle Kratz

Former Director of the ETHL library

Eliane Kurmann

Research assistant at infoclio.ch, doctoral student in the History Department of the University of Zurich

Jacques Scherrer

Former General Secretary of the Association Suisse des Diffuseurs, Editeurs et Libraires ASDEL

Gabi Schneider

Head of the "Academic information: access, processing and storage" programme project

Marie-Jeanne Urech

Writer

Stefano Vassere

Director of the cantonal libraries and the Sistema bibliotecario ticinese

the foundations for the reorganisation and automation of the Library beginning in the 1990s. The Commission encouraged this process and paved the way for it.

It also dealt with topics such as the modernisation of user services, the Library's role as coordinator of the Swiss library system, automation, collaboration with the Schweizerische Volksbibliothek, and national specialist bibliographies.

Reorganisation and Automation, "Memory Policy" (1990–2005)

With the appointment of a new Director, changes were also made to the composition of the Commission. It supported the Director's office in the process of reorganisation and automation, based on various expert reports⁴ and the new legislation passed in 1992. Library policy, fundamental technical problems, management principles and advising the Director's office were all on the Commission's agenda.

Beginning in 1997, the nine members met in plenary session and took part in working groups.⁵ The Commission's aims were to secure information access, push ahead with the standardisation of library systems, and coordinate training. It consciously positioned itself as a player in the information society.

An expert report commissioned in 2000, however, offered a more sober assessment of the Commission's impact, stating that it had failed to define its mandate clearly and had not fulfilled its coordination remit.⁶

Efforts to expand the Commission's remit to include acting as a regulatory authority for the planned national memory policy also came to nothing, as the Department restricted the policy to the federal institutions.

Nationally Coordinated Library Policy, Disillusionment (2005–2020)

In 2008, the Commission embarked on a dialogue with the library community, the Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK) and committees of the federal government. The charter drawn up as part of this process reflected the libraries' desire to position themselves jointly in the information society. A group of experts appointed by the EDK in 2011 to examine the specifics of a nationally coordinated library policy existed only for a short time, so widely did opinions diverge on which direction it should pursue. This was followed in 2013 by a proposal submitted to the EDK for the Commission to implement the nationally coordinated library policy, which identified three priority action areas⁷. In 2014 it followed this up with an outline proposal for a *memory institutions portal*. Neither of these proposals was taken up.

In 2017 the Commission took part in the dialogue at the first *Digital Switzerland Conference*. Faced with the obvious inefficacy of its own actions, however, disillusionment set in. It was thought that the Commission was insufficiently known, too heterogeneous in its composition, and too closely involved with the Administration. The idea of affiliating to a library association was raised, initially in the form of a question. During the periodic impact assessment in 2018, the decision was taken to disband the NL Commission and transfer its tasks to an external body. The Commission's members made their last substantive contribution in 2018 to the workshop on the role of the NL in the digital world, in which they formulated their ideas and expectations. The final meetings were devoted to preparations for the handover (2019) or were cancelled because of the pandemic (2020).

4 Reports of the Sub-Commission of the Library Commission (1988), Working Group of National Councillor Mühlemann (1989) and Federal Commission for Scientific Information (1988).

5 "Policy and Operations of the National Library", "Swiss Literary Archives", and "National and International Coordination".

6 P. Knoepfel: expert report on the mandate of the Commission of the Swiss National Library, 2001, p. 2ff.

7 Long-term archiving + accessibility of cultural heritage, equality of opportunity in access to electronic resources and standardisation of library management systems.