

Zeitschrift:	Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber:	Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band:	24 (1997)
Heft:	4
 Artikel:	Switzerland in the Second World War - an interview with Paul R. Jolles : "We did not enrich ourselves"
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DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906489

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Switzerland in the Second World War – an interview with Paul R. Jolles

“We did not enrich ourselves”

International criticism of Switzerland's conduct during the Second World War has not abated. Former State Secretary Paul R. Jolles, who as a young diplomat took part in the negotiations leading to the Washington Agreement, discusses the accusations against our country – which featured most recently in the Eizenstat Report*.

Mr. State Secretary, the Eizenstat Report says that during those negotiations Switzerland must have been rather obdurate.

We were certainly tough negotiators. But we were in a very difficult position. As a neutral state, Switzerland was not very popular at that time – neutrals never are in times of war. But our inner convictions were never on the side of the Nazis, but on the side of the Allies.

The word ‘obdurate’ contains the implication that at the time Switzerland refused to accept that it had made mistakes during the war.

The Allies were not the only ones who found the Swiss obdurate. I would like to quote to you from a memorandum written by a German negotiator after a bargaining session with Switzerland on July 18, 1941. The Swiss negotiators are described as showing “an incredible toughness in sticking to their guns”; the author said that in spite of themselves the Germans had to respect them, since “the damn fellows simply cannot be made to let go”.

Do you consider that as evidence that Switzerland was obdurate all round? Quite right. It had no choice other than to bargain with maximum toughness and persuasiveness for its vital interests. It did not have any means of pressure.

Was not Switzerland in 1946 concerned to keep as much as possible of the stolen gold for itself?

That is today's interpretation. But you are forgetting that at the time of the Washington Agreement it was not a question of holding on to money or gold which had been obtained by dishonest means. For Switzerland it was a matter of defending the principle that the rights and obligations of neutral states had been recognised in the Hague Conven-

tions of 1907. It was not one of enrichment. The gold transactions in exchange for Swiss francs were part of normal currency trading and apart from the commission brought us no gain at all.

Do you mean that Switzerland did not enrich itself? The Eizenstat Report says that Switzerland became one of the richest countries as a result of its trade with Nazi Germany.

That is a superficial generalisation about the situation. It should be interpreted quite differently. Switzerland never enriched itself, it simply traded according to market criteria. During the war Switzerland's national income increased only marginally – by less than one per cent a year.



Paul R. Jolles: “Switzerland had no choice other than to bargain with maximum toughness and persuasiveness for its vital interests.”
(Photo: Max Füri)

yes'

What do you say to the statement in the Eizenstat Report that Switzerland could have adapted its neutrality policy in the course of the war?

It is remarkable that a responsible spokesman of the United States government should come to such a conclusion. Our policy of permanent neutrality – whether good or bad – is a constant principle of our foreign policy. Another type of conduct would not have shortened the war or been of use to the Allies, but it would have led to the destruction of our country. So our conduct during the war was the only possible one.

For New York Senator D'Amato, the figures contained in the Eizenstat report are sufficient justification to

demand that the Washington Agreement should be renegotiated.

Senator D'Amato can demand what he likes. The Washington Agreement was signed in full knowledge of the facts, with the exception of the gold from concentration camp victims. This aspect is certainly morally repugnant and should not be forgotten. But new negotiations would not change anything.

Is the demand for new negotiations justified by the statement that Switzerland, together with other neutral countries, was responsible for prolonging the war?

I consider that passage to be an outrageous statement and a misrepresentation – particularly in view of the fact that Swiss arms deliveries to Germany came to only 0.6% of that country's total armaments. What the Eizenstat Report says about this cannot be proved by anything or anybody.

Respect for the work of the historians, but criticism of part of the interpretation given to the events in the foreword – does that sum

up your attitude to the Eizenstat Report?

I do find it a little remarkable that global judgements were drawn from the facts described by the historians – and then not proven. It may be that in the United States – where political controversy is harder – words are not weighed up to the same extent. But as a small country we are more sensitive on that point.

What conclusions should Switzerland draw from the Eizenstat Report?

I hope there will now be cooperation between Swiss and American historians based on trust in order to reach joint results. The Eizenstat Report in itself shows that there are some things – for example, the whole question of the Swiss war economy – that the Americans still know too little about. ■

* This interview was conducted by Rudolf Burger and appeared at greater length in the Berne daily 'Der Bund' on May 10, 1997.

New Ombudsman for Swiss Radio International

At its constitutive meeting on June 12, 1997, the SRI (Swiss Radio International) General Public Commission elected Pier-Luigi Roncoroni as its new ombudsman. He is also vice-chairman of the General Public Commission and President of the Pro Ticino Association. His deputy will be Heidi Rieder. The new strategy of the General Public Commission will be to involve the audience to a greater extent and to promote more extensive dialogue with those creating the programmes.

Although an ombudsman has not been called upon to date, his existence is nonetheless important. His task is to handle complaints regarding SRI broadcasts and act as co-ordinator between those making complaints and SRI. The ombudsman ensures that those listening to Swiss radio programmes abroad have someone to contact in case of criticism.

The General Public Commission established its new strategy under the leadership of its new president, Rudolf Wyder, director of the Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad. Its aim is to move closer to the public and enter into more dialogue with its listeners. In order to do so, it is to seek out so-called general public correspondents within the

audience who will evaluate the programmes. This will make the work of the commission more in line with reality. To date, evaluations have mainly been carried out on the basis of specified programmes.

In addition to monitoring programmes, the General Public Commission wishes to maintain more dialogue with

those creating the programmes with the aim of creating a more lively response to its recommendations. The topic of the next meeting, to be held in autumn, is a preview of 1998 and a discussion of how to handle the debate surrounding Nazi gold and Jewish funds in SRI programmes.

The General Public Commission consists of members who have contact with the target public abroad thanks to their private and professional activities. In order to carry out its activities more effectively, as mentioned above, the commission has reduced its effective to eight members as of 1997 and has laid down strict criteria for being part of the commission. By providing information about its activities, the commission should also contribute to increased awareness of SRI in Switzerland. ■

Members of the General Public Commission:

Rudolf Wyder, president, director of the Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad, Berne

Pier-Luigi Roncoroni, vice-president, director of the Swiss Life Insurance and Pensions Institute, Zurich

Heidi Rieder, cultural consultant, Berne

Räthus Luck, scientific advisor to the Swiss National Library, Berne

Peter Pfister, vice-director / OSEC Lausanne

Chasper Pult, director of the Pro Helvetia Swiss Cultural Centre, Milan

Carlos Bauverd, François Xavier Bagnoud Association, Lutry

Claude Frei, national councillor, Auvernier

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