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Autor: Crivelli, Pablo / Chisholm, N.
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Controversial past

ON 19 DECEMBER 2001, exactly five years after it was called into being, the "Independent Commission of Experts, Switzerland - Second World War" handed over to the Federal Council the results of the investigations it had conducted in Switzerland and abroad into Switzerland's conduct during the Second World War. The 600-page report entitled "Switzerland, National Socialism and the Second World War" was officially presented at the end of March 2002 in the form of a 25-volume work, available from all bookstores. So what is the final judgement on this period? Firstly it must be noted that the commission found no indications whatsoever which support the accusation that Switzerland may have contributed to prolonging the war through its co-operation with the Third Reich. However, in a number of areas the conduct of the Confederation during the war gave rise to criticism. The report concentrates on three main areas in which the political and economic leaders of the time fell short. The commission pointed out that Switzerland frequently violated elementary humanitarian principles in its treatment of refugees: The decision to close the borders in 1942 meant certain death for thousands of those refugees, even though Berne was fully aware of the fate that awaited Jews who were turned back. Added to this, the human dignity of refugees who were taken in was not always respected.

The accusation that the Swiss authorities to some extent helped the Nazis to achieve their most horrible objective – the extermination of entire groups of people – was founded on reality. As far as economic co-operation is concerned, the commission believes that some companies went too far in their collaboration, often violating the principle of neutrality. However, it points out that economic co-operation should not be attributed to sympathies with National Socialism. More to the point, some companies merely saw a good business opportunity, while others, like the Confederation, saw no other way to survive. The third controversial area concerns the restitution of assets after the war. Both the government and economic decision-makers failed to act quickly and unbureaucratically: not out of



From the exhibition on the final report of the Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland – Second World War, in the Käfigturm in Berne.

avarice but due to a lack of sensitivity for a problem which was perceived as marginal, or in the endeavour to continue profiting from the advantages of banking secrecy. This passive conduct forms the basis of the

problem of dormant accounts held by Swiss banks in the names of victims of the Nazi regime.

Pablo Crivelli

Translated from the German by N. Chisholm

INTERNET

The 25 studies of the Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland – Second World War (ICE) are published in German and French by Chronos Verlag, Eisengasse 9, CH-8008 Zurich, Tel +41 01 265 43 43, Fax 0041 01 265 43 44, E-mail infos@chronos-verlag.ch. The final report of the Commission, entitled "Switzerland, National Socialism and the Second World War", is published by Pendo Verlag, Forchstrasse 40, 8032 Zurich, Tel +41 01 389 70 30, Fax 0041 01 389 70 35, E-mail pendo-verlag@swiss-online.ch. The final report is also available in electronic format from the ICE home page www.uek.ch

Short bibliography

A great many books, articles and essays have been written about Switzerland in the Second World War. Here is a short list of works which deal with the subject, some of which were consulted by the Historical Commission but not extensively quoted.

- It is worth mentioning the book published in 2001 by Walter Hofer / Herbert Reginbogin entitled "Hitler, der Westen und die Schweiz 1936–1945", NZZ Publishing House (ISBN 3858238821). Bernese historian Walter Hofer, an international expert in National Socialism and totalitarianism, justifies Switzerland's conduct during the war by citing the pressure which the country was under from an increasingly aggressive Germany, and the policy of appeasement practised by France and Britain, which strengthened Switzerland's attitude. Reginbogin examines the economic and financial relations which Switzerland maintained with the Allies – an aspect which was not discussed in detail by the Bergier Commission.
- Another book published recently is entitled "Zwischen Bundeshaus und Paradeplatz. Die Banken der Credit Suisse Group im Zweiten Weltkrieg", NZZ Publishing House, 2001 (ISBN 3-85823-907-0). This 800-page work completes, and to some extent justifies, the work of the Bergier Commission on the Swiss banking system during the National Socialist era.
- On the subject of refugees, the work of the Historical Commission itself deserves mention: "Die Schweiz und die Flüchtlinge zur Zeit des Nationalsozialismus", Kronos Publishing House, 2001 (ISBN 3-0340-0617-9). Anyone wishing to find more details on specific aspects will find a rich trove of material in the detailed bibliography attached to the final Bergier report.

Pablo Crivelli

Translated from the German by N. Chisholm