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A MASTERABLE PAST?
SWISS HISTORICAL MEMORY OF
WORLD WAR II

An Honors Thesis

Present to

the Department of History
of the University of New Orleans

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts, with University Honors
and Honors in History

by

Sara Ormes

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Abstract

After World War II, every country that had been touched by or involved in the war had to come to terms with its past. In the case of Switzerland, the Swiss government, the army and some of the country's leadership established a strong official historical memory of the war, portraying Switzerland as a neutral, benevolent and well-fortified country that remained innocent and untouched by the war.

From the 1960s onwards, Swiss artists and intellectuals challenged these myths by presenting alternative views of the Swiss past in their work. Beginning in the 1970s, Swiss historians published an increasing amount of scholarly research concerning Switzerland's World War II past, and challenging the official historical memory promoted by the government.

In the 1990s, after the discovery of thousands of dormant Swiss bank accounts containing Holocaust assets, Switzerland was forced to adopt a more realistic memory of its involvement in World War II. An Independent Commission of Experts, established by the Swiss government, conducted thorough research about Switzerland's wartime involvement and published its Final Report in 2002.

Keywords: Switzerland, collective memory, World War II, national myths.

1. Introduction

Over the years after World War II almost every country involved or touched by the war had its own way of dealing with the past. Some nations, like Germany, could not deny the immense guilt and responsibility that weighed heavily on the German people. Germany would spend decades dealing with the deeds committed by National Socialists and seeking reconciliation with their victims. Germany's World War II history was an "unmasterable past."¹ The effects of the dismemberment of Germany—as a consequence of Germany's war guilt—are still noticeable today, 20 years after the reunification. For many other countries, however, the lines between being guilty and being a victim were not clear cut. Austria, for example, held on for two generations to the myth constructed after the war of having been „Hitler's first victim“ Only in the early 1990s did the Austrian government officially admit to their share of responsibility for Nazi war crimes committed during WWII.²

Due to growing international pressure in the 1990s, Switzerland also, a small country in the heart of Europe, had to go through a historical paradigm shift. For years Switzerland had been depicting itself as a completely neutral country, not involved in the war, surviving the cauldron of war raging around its borders without being invaded. The Swiss had convinced themselves that it was the strength of their unity and will (*Willensnation*) and the force of their army that repelled potential invaders. The lead article by Pierre Béguin, chief editor of the *Gazette de Lausanne* on 9 January 1946, expresses this sentiment accurately:

Ce qu'il y a surtout de réconfortant en tout cela, c'est que les réflexes nationaux de notre peuple tout entier ont admirablement joué. [...] Les Suisses étaient trop sains d'esprit et trop attachés aux valeurs sur lesquelles ils ont édifié leur

¹ Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); see also Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

² Gunter Bischof, "Victims? Perpetrators? "Punching Bags" of European Historical Memory? The Austrians and Their World War II Legacies," *German Studies Review*, no. 27 (2004), 17-32.

*communauté nationale pour se laisser impressionner ou se laisser séduire. A quelques exceptions près – qui concernent des trublions et des dévoyés – ils n’ont pas chancelé. [...] Et c’est ainsi que cette page de notre histoire qui aurait pu être la plus sombre a été en vérité l’une des plus claires. Il en ira ainsi à l’avenir également, face à d’autres dangers, si nous restons fidèles à nous-mêmes, si nos réflexes nationaux jouent avec la même perfection.*³

According to Béguin, Switzerland’s sound national reflexes, her sanity and her attachment to values protected the country from invasion and helped her survive – what Hobsbawm calls the “era of catastrophes” (*Zeitalter der Katastrophe*)⁴ – surprisingly well. Switzerland appeared to have been spared from the turmoil and atrocities of World War II. The hardy Swiss people seemed to have emerged stronger than ever after a war in a European world ruined and tattered by the war. This perspective stood in the long tradition of Swiss historiography depicting Switzerland as an exceptional nation and a special case (*Sonderfall*). In this view Switzerland was different due to its political culture of direct democracy, federalism, tradition of neutrality, and its multi-ethnic composition and multilingual culture.⁵ These national traits made Switzerland different from any other country of the world. The country’s position as a peaceful and self-contained island in the middle of war-tormented Europe seemed to enforce this view even further.

In the past few years, however, the question of Switzerland’s role and involvement in World War II suddenly became a focus of national and international attention and criticism. Thousands of dormant bank accounts of holocaust victims raised the question whether Switzerland’s idealized self-image was merely a cover-up for a more shady and sordid past. It precipitated a national identity crisis in a country with a strong sense of itself; the concept of the *Sonderfall* Switzerland seemed exposed as a myth. In the course of this serious crisis, the

³ Pierre Béguin, *Gazette de Lausanne*, January 9, 1946: <http://www.letempsarchives.ch/Default/Skins/LeTempsFr/Client.asp?Skin=LeTempsFr&enter=true&AW=1318877999656&AppName=2> (accessed October 23, 2011).

⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, *Zeitalter der Extreme* in Markus Furrer, *Die Nation im Schulbuch* (Hannover: Verlag Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 2004), 234.

⁵ See Paul Widmer, *Die Schweiz als Sonderfall*

Swiss government ordered in 1996 the creation of an International Commission of Experts (ICE), headed by the noted Swiss historian Jean-Francois Bergier (“Bergier Commission”). For the first time the relationship between Switzerland and Nazi Germany before, during, and after World War II was critically and independently researched and evaluated by expert historians. The commission’s report published in 2002 painted a rather different picture of Switzerland’s involvement in World War II than had been portrayed in the decades following the war. Switzerland had compromised its neutral position during the war by secretly cooperating with the Nazis especially in the economic arena and by closing its doors to refugees from Nazi Germany. The deconstruction of national myths dear to the Swiss people was a very painful.

It is not the purpose of this thesis to establish what exactly the Swiss did or did not do during World War II. Rather I want to analyse how the war has been remembered in Switzerland. The study of memory is not about whether the country’s behaviour during the war was complicit, or pragmatic and understandable, but rather to comprehend the dialectic between remembering and forgetting, emphasizing and concealing certain historical events. I am also interested in the players, mechanisms and implications involved in the process of constructing a national memory.⁶ It is vital to understand the difference between actual historical facts and how nations remember them, acknowledging the historical truth irrevocably connecting memory and historical facts. In the eyes of later generations, past events happened the way they have been remembered and told in the national historical narrative.

The aim of this thesis is to describe and analyze how the collective Swiss national memory of World War II was constructed, maintained and modified by a handful of national leaders in the decades following World War II. I will establish an outline of Switzerland’s

⁶ David Cesarani, foreword to *Switzerland and the Second World War*, ed. Georg Kreis (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2000), ix.

involvement, position and role during World War and how they were remembered after 1945, the players who were in the forefront of shaping the Swiss collective memory of the war, and the consequences the different ways of remembering ultimately had on Switzerland. I will conclude that, for the most part, the Swiss collective memory of World War II was shaped by pragmatic leaders due to political necessity dictating these historical constructions. Contemporary politics at any given time instrumentalized these myths. I will also highlight how public officials, historians and the media fit the trajectory of World War II into a long tradition of Swiss history built on a few key myths of national identity. It was this official pragmatism that militated against a balanced Swiss historical narrative of its World War II involvement and interaction with the outside world. Swiss historical consciousness has been based on the myth of keeping a distance to the outside world:

Bremsend [gegen eine Öffnung der Schweiz] wirkt dabei oft der während Jahrzehnten gehegte Mythos des "Abseitsstehens" mit der Überzeugung, dass man besser fährt, wenn man sich aus allem heraushält. Da genügt auch nicht die Erkenntnis der Historikerinnen und Historiker, dass die historische Wahrheit anders aussieht. Zu stark sind solche Vorstellungen mit der nationalen Identität verknüpft und Teil eines Geschichtsbewusstseins.⁷

I will conclude my thesis with a brief discussion about the reasons why it is important to study the history of memory, particularly in the case of Switzerland.

2. Theories of Historical Memory

2.1. Maurice Halbwachs

The beginning of the concept of collective memory lies with the French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. In his book *On Collective Memory* he defines collective

⁷ Furrer, 11.

memory as a flexible, constantly changing and socially constructed idea. Although remembering is still an individual act, it is influenced by the collective of a group or society as a whole and individual people are drawing on society to remember:

Yet it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories. [...] It is in this sense that there exists a collective memory and social framework for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection.⁸

Collective memory, according to Halbwachs, is as impermanent and changing as society. As an example he mentions how the constructed image and memory that the medieval pilgrims had of Jerusalem was entirely different from the image other pilgrims cultivated at another time in history. Yet these differences in collective memory are not random, but directly influenced by the current situation the memory is constructed in:

For Halbwachs, the past is a social construction mainly, if not wholly, shaped by the concerns of the present. He argues that the beliefs, interests, and aspirations of the present shape the various views of the past as they are manifested respectively in every historical epoch.⁹

How the memory of the past is directly influenced by the needs of the present can also be observed in Switzerland's history: In the summer of 1940, almost a year after the invasion of Poland through the German and Soviet armies, things did not look good for Switzerland – located in the heart of Europe between neighboring Germany, Austria, Liechtenstein, France and Italy. Within two months (April and May 1940), the Axis powers invaded Denmark, Norway, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. The Swiss people became more and more convinced that they might be next and suffer a similar fate before too long. In this environment, General Henry Guisan, commander-in-chief of the Swiss army during World War II delivered a speech at the strategically chosen location of the *Rütli*. In this legendary meadow in the center of Switzerland the first three Swiss cantons purportedly

⁸ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 38.

⁹ Lewis A. Coser, introduction to *On Collective Memory*, by Maurice Halbwachs, 25.

signed a document of mutual assistance in 1291. This event is remembered as standing at the beginning of Switzerland as a nation. Guisan's speech, not only because of his eloquence, but also because of the choice of the historical location, was a strong indication of Swiss resistance to potential Nazi depredations and has been remembered as such ever since. What the Swiss needed at this point in time, was to be encouraged and assured that they would survive this menacing international situation. So General Guisan was a "true master of historical ceremony who in the most desperate situations evoked the past as a compelling metaphor for contemporary events."¹⁰ He used the founding myth of the Swiss nation as historical 'proof' that it was possible to withstand overwhelming enemies and thus retain freedom and independence.

According to Halbwachs' concept of collective memory, the same story about the foundation of Switzerland could, at a different time and under different circumstances, be used to 'remember' a completely different aspect of Swiss history. Therefore, a study on the Swiss memory of World War II during the post-war period is as much a study on the history of the post-war period itself as it is a study of the historical events of the World War II:

Hier wird klar, dass Erinnern kein Zustand ist, sondern Bewegung und mit Geschichte ebenso viel zu tun hat wie mit Gegenwart. Erinnerungen werden gemacht und zwar im Moment des Erzählens und aus ihm heraus.¹¹

2.2. Pierre Nora

Pierre Nora, a French historian whose work on memory and identity is considered fundamental in France, compares and contrasts the notion of collective memory with the concept of history:

¹⁰ Regula Ludi, "What Is So Special about Switzerland?," in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, ed. Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner and Claudia Fogu (London: Duke University Press, 2006), 211.

¹¹ Daniel de Falco, *Der kleine Bund*, 15. Februar 2003. http://www.archimob.ch/arc/livre/index_ger.php (accessed October 18, 2011).

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past.¹²

In his description of memory Nora makes reference to Halbwachs' theory that collective memory is shaped by the concerns of the present. While history tries to rationally reconstruct what happened in the past, memory is an organic process that, according to Nora, happens in the present by way of the so-called *lieux de mémoire*. These “places of remembrance” can be physical locations, such as a museums or sculptures, or events, abstract ideas, or institutions. In the case of Switzerland, important *lieux de mémoire* are what Markus Furrer calls Swiss historical “myths,” around which the Swiss construct their national identity.¹³ They are places or concepts explicitly dedicated to the memory of a certain event, and therefore the product of a lack of spontaneous memory, according to Nora:

Lieu de mémoire originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally.¹⁴

An example for this theory would be the recent oral history project “Archimob” in Switzerland, conducted under the title *L'histoire, c'est moi: 555 Versionen der Schweizer Geschichte 1939-1945*. The project collected 555 interviews with people who had experienced World War II in Switzerland and asked them about their “personal, special and ordinary experiences in the time between 1939 and 1945.”¹⁵

¹² Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire”, *Representations*, no. 26 (1989), http://www.sfu.ca/media-lab/archive/2007/487/Resources/Readings/Nora_between%20memory.pdf (accessed October 23, 2011).

¹³ See Markus Furrer, *Die Nation im Schulbuch*.

¹⁴ Nora, *Between Memory and History*.

¹⁵ Archimob. <http://www.archimob.ch/d/ausstellung.html> (accessed October 16, 2011).

Interpreted according to Nora, this brilliant project only happened because there is no room anymore for the production of spontaneous memory in Swiss society, and an official archive has to be set up to conserve these individual testimonies. The multitude of *lieux de mémoire* in Switzerland – actual places like the Rütli as well as abstract concepts like Swiss neutrality – leads us therefore to the conclusion that the formation of a completely free and spontaneous individual memory culture did not happen in Switzerland.

It seems like Switzerland's handling of World War II would be an example of what Nora calls the acceleration of history, which he describes as “an increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good,”¹⁶ which leaves neither time nor space for the remembrance of an event. However, considering Nora's definition of history as an intellectual construct and reconstruction of the past, we come to the conclusion that it is – not possible to talk about an acceleration of history in the case of Switzerland's dealing with World War II. In fact, what happened is the institutional construction of an official memory of World War II soon after the war, consciously highlighting aspects of the war that were in line with the national self-image and omitting facts that were perceived as ill-suited for the concerns of the post-war period. The Bonjour affair is an example for this (described in more detail in chapter 4). As this institutionally constructed memory does neither fall into the category of collective memory, nor of factual history, I am using the term “public memory” where needed. “Public memory” is referring to the version of memory dominating in the public, which can, but does not have to, be memory constructed institutionally in order to serve political needs.¹⁷

¹⁶ Nora, *Between Memory and History*.

¹⁷ Luc van Dongen, “Swiss Memory of the Second World War in the Immediate Postwar Period, 1945-48,” in *Switzerland and the Second World War*, ed. Georg Kreis (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2000), 261.

2.3. Jan Assmann

Jan Assmann's reflections on the different types of memory form an important addition to studies of historical memory developed by Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora. Assmann, a German historian of ancient Egypt, makes the important distinction between what he calls communicative memory and cultural memory, which differ in the first place in their distance in time to the actual event. Communicative memory only stretches as far as we can find contemporary witnesses to a certain event:

Its most important characteristic is its limited temporal horizon. As all oral history studies suggest, this horizon does not extend more than eighty to (at the very most) one hundred years into the past, which equals three or four generations...¹⁸

Following this time span of up to one hundred years we find a different type of memory, which Assmann calls cultural memory. Cultural memory is not only different in its distance to the event and the fact that it does not change with time, but also in its function. Assmann isolated six main characteristics of which I am going to choose the three most relevant to the analysis of Swiss memory of World War II.

First, there is the concretion of identity through cultural memory, which “preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity.”¹⁹ He points out that such a concretion of memory creates a sharp distinction between the “us” and the “them.” In the case of Switzerland such a concretion of identity through cultural memory can be seen in the context of Switzerland's self-image as a small yet powerful state. This essential aspect of Swiss identity is upheld and perpetuated through the cultivation of the memory of important events in Swiss history that exemplify and therefore preserve the notion of being a “mighty dwarf.” Examples for this would be the

¹⁸ Jan Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique*, no. 65 (1995), <http://www.let.uu.nl/~Elena.Carrillo/personal/LITERATURA%20Y%20GUERRA%20CIVIL/ARTICULOS/Assmann.pdf> (accessed October 23, 2011).

¹⁹ Assmann, *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*.

commemoration of the “*Rütlichschwur*”, a declaration of mutual assistance and independence of the three first Swiss cantons as “*ein einzig Volk von Brüdern*,” as Schiller expressed it, every year on August 1. Another example would be the remembrance of the “*Schlacht von Sempach*” (battle of Sempach) in 1386, which is regarded as the highlight of the separation of the Swiss from the Habsburgs. The undersized peasant army of the Swiss Confederation emerged victorious in this crucial battle and turning point in Swiss history. In the aftermath of World War II, the memory of Sempach was used again to substantiate the idea of Swiss independence and military victory achieved again against overwhelming odds.

A second characteristic of cultural memory, according to Assmann, is its capacity to reconstruct. This aspect is very closely linked to Maurice Halbwachs’ concept of the past as a construct according to the needs of the present. Assmann differentiates between two possible existences of cultural memory: first in the form of accumulated sources and pieces of memory like texts and images “act[ing] as a total horizon” and comprehending all potential interpretation of this material; and second in the form of a form of individual memory -- an “actuality, whereby each contemporary puts the objectivized meaning into its own perspective, giving it its own relevance.”²⁰

A third characteristic mentioned by Assmann – organization – lies in the realm of language. Cultural memory brings about a certain institutionalization of communication: it not only reduces the communicative situation – to a degree – to a formula, but also is specialized in the “bearers of cultural memory.”²¹ This essentially describes the influence of culture on the language, which results in a canonized and specified use of the language, shaped through a society’s cultural memory.

²⁰ Assmann, *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*.

²¹ Assmann, *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*.

2.4. Theory of Memory Regarding Switzerland

What, then, are the concepts that can be applied from these theories of historical memory to the case study of Switzerland's memory of World War II? Most useful for the Swiss case study is Maurice Halbwachs' theory that *collective memory is a flexible construct*, shaped by the concerns of the present. It implies that memory can also be understood as a political tool, if used consciously. Pierre Nora's theory on the *lieux de mémoire* is also useful, especially in the context of what Markus Furrer calls national *myths*, which can be understood as abstract *lieux de mémoire*. Also, Nora's notion of the acceleration of history will be an important part of the analysis of the collective memory constructed during the immediate post-war area. Finally, Jan Assmann's *cultural memory* with its characteristics, especially his thoughts on the function of collective memory in relation to the concretion of identity, will play an important role in the analysis of the development of Swiss collective memory of World War II.

3. The Immediate Post-war Period: Collective Memory Construction

3.1. The Geistige Landesverteidigung and its Consequences

Already before World War II was unleashed in Europe in 1939, Switzerland felt an urgent need to protect its identity, its national interests and its sovereignty against the rising tide of National Socialism in Germany. Adolf Hitler had seized dictatorial powers in the spring of 1933. He consolidated his power not only through equalizing (*Gleichschaltung*) all relevant political, social and cultural aspects of German culture, but also through the elimination of potential political opponents, Hitler justified the suppression of the opposition as necessary to

protect the country. Understandably, Switzerland felt under siege and threatened both on a political level and a cultural one. In response to the specter of Nazi invasion, Swiss elites initiated a movement that became known as “*geistige Landesverteidigung*” (spiritual national defense). Its purpose was the protection of Switzerland through the strengthening of its unique national identity:

The *Geistige Landesverteidigung* aimed to emphasize Swiss individuality and thereby strengthen the desire for political independence and military national defense. It thereby fulfilled a desire (and the necessity) to demarcate itself from the outside world, in particular from the Third Reich, and also promoted internal social stability.²²

Although not a new concept, the *geistige Landesverteidigung* was a direct reaction to the dire threat from the Third Reich, promoted by the country’s elites. The *Landesverteidigung*’s power and profound influence impacted the Swiss national character and lasted for much longer than the interwar period and World War II, as Joseph Mooser has explained:

This key phrase is associated with the experience and memory of the country’s critical situation in the period between the two world wars and, in particular, the collective experience of standing up to National Socialist German, which since 1933 had been perceived by a great majority of the population as a threat to their very existence. Thus the values, attitudes, and objectives of the Swiss self-image in the context of the ‘spiritual national defense’ [...] exerted an influence that lasted until well after the Second World War.²³

The need for internal unity and the strengthening of the Swiss self-image were driving forces of the movement of the *Geistige Landesverteidigung* and triggered additional cultural as well as political measures. From a cultural aspect, the Swiss National Exhibition of 1939 under the title “*Landigeist*” (spirit of the home country) is a telling example of the national cultural atmosphere at this time. Politically, the *Bundesversammlung* (Federal Convention) of Switzerland is made up by the *Nationalrat* (National Assembly) and the *Ständerat* (Council

²² Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland – Second World War, Switzerland, National Socialism and the Second World War (Zürich: Pendo Verlag, 2002), 74 [hereinafter cited as ICE].

²³ Joseph Mooser, “Spiritual National Defense,” in *Switzerland and the Second World War*, ed. Georg Kreis (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2000), 236-237.

of States). The *Bundesversammlung* granted the *Bundesrat* (National Council) in August 1939 – as part of the *Geistige Landesverteidigung* -- and in order to allow the Swiss government to react quickly and effectively to the developments of the war – full emergency powers and authorized it to enact laws without a statutory basis. On the grounds of protecting the country, the *Bundesrat* made use of these powers. During the war it heavily censored the press, radio, film, photography and books; it also put various restrictions on the public discourses of the nation's newspapers.

The Swiss nation experienced exhilarating relief when the war had come to an end in Europe in May 1945. The axis powers had collapsed and Switzerland had survived this “age of catastrophe” (Hobsbawm). Switzerland did not get swallowed up by the gigantic clash of world powers. Yet the challenge for a small nation to survive in the midst of a new conflict emerging between the former allies in East and West posed new threats and challenges. Before World War II Swiss neutrality was regarded as a virtue. During and after the war, however, it aroused suspicions not only from the hostile axis powers (Hitler referred to Switzerland as “a pimple on the face of Europe”²⁴), but also amongst the friendly allies. As early as in 1942, a British journalist described Switzerland as the place “where the big shot Nazis have parked their loot.”²⁵ This raised the issue of secret Swiss collaboration with Hitler's Germany. The possibility, then, of being implicated with being an accessory in the Nazi war of aggression and extermination emerged as a new threat by the end of the war. It is therefore not entirely surprising that the Swiss *Bundesrat* thought it unwise to abandon the powers granted by the *Nationalversammlung* during the war.

In the shifting international environment and with the looming threat of wartime collaboration with the Nazis being exposed, Switzerland still needed to look out for its interests after the war. It was this pragmatic mindset that heavily influenced the formation of

²⁴ Martin Bormann et al., *Hitler's Table Talk: 1941-1944* (London: Enigma Books, 2000), 800.

²⁵ ICE, 23.

the Swiss collective memory of World War II in the following years.²⁶ Since the future international standing of the country depended heavily on how its role during World War II was perceived by the victorious Allies, the politics of history in the construction of an acceptable historical memory of the war became a prime national concern. *Geistige Landesverteidigung* not only allowed a more authoritative government coming out of the war to influence the collective memory. It also resulted in what Mooser calls an “identity construct.”²⁷ Both these developments significantly shaped the way the Second World War was remembered by the Swiss.

3.2. Mythmaking à la Suisse: The Construction of the Official Post-war Collective Memory

The construction of Swiss official historical memory of World War II began immediately after the end of the war in the tradition of the *Geistige Landesverteidigung* exercised before and during World War II. It was a defensive act against external pressure and it aimed at protecting national unity, identity, and self-image. There was an immediate need to include the events of the war as a coherent part of Swiss identity in a pragmatically refurbished national historical narrative. At the center of this construction were both the reinforcement of old and the establishment of new national historical myths, above all the myth of the *Réduit Alpine* (the successful retreat into the core fortress of the Swiss defense system in case of an attack), and the myth of Switzerland as the Good Samaritan during World War II, welcoming refugees from Nazi Germany. The “concretion” (Assmann) of these myths was so powerful and profound that it took journalists, artists, historians and – eventually – the Swiss government decades to demystify and deconstruct the trajectory of World War II to make a way for a more rational and factual examination of Switzerland’s

²⁶ It took the Swiss government until the 1950s to give up their last emergency powers.

²⁷ Mooser, *Spiritual National Defense*.

role during the war. In the late 1940s the international political arena was still so acutely unstable in the eyes of the country's leadership that close Swiss cooperation with both Nazis and allies needed to be silenced in order to maintain the myth of strict Swiss neutrality during the war. The country needed its rootedness in its identity of neutrality and unity of purpose. Thus the myths of relentless military defense of Swiss independence and acting as a safe haven for refugees from Nazi Germany were a vital part of this process of stabilization. This stabilization effort is reflected by the important role the government and the army assumed as the designers and guardians of the collective memory of World War II. Swiss statesmen such as Max Petitpierre and military leaders such as General Guisan assumed the role of principal mythmakers.

3.2.1. National Myths and the Creation of Official *Lieux de Mémoire*

The construction and conservation of historical myths has been an important part in Swiss statesmanship and historiography. According to Markus Furrer, myths are an important part of Switzerland's representation of the past since Switzerland's identity is in the first place a historic construction. The national identity of the multi-ethnic country Switzerland is not based on ethnic principles like in the case of Germany, or cultural traits like in the case of France.²⁸ Therefore, historical myths have been vital in the creation of a coherent Swiss nation; they have played an important part in establishing a Swiss national identity, and have provided the Swiss national historical narrative with continuity from the Middle Ages to the 20th century.²⁹ With these historical myths playing such an important role in defining Swiss national identity, it was important to align the events of the Second World War with this carefully constructed Swiss historical narrative.

²⁸ See Thomas Ricklin, *Worin unterscheidet sich die schweizerische „Nation“ von der Französischen bzw. Deutschen „Nation“*, <http://www.federalism.ch/files/documents/Nation.pdf> (accessed November 20).

²⁹ Furrer, 241.

Among the most dominant myths in the post-World-War-II era of Switzerland role during World War II were the myths of Swiss neutrality during the war, the *Réduit Alpine*, and Switzerland as the Good Samaritan.³⁰ These myths were used as powerful guideposts around which the collective memory of the war in post-war Switzerland was organized. Events that fit the mythical self-image were emphasized, reinforced and often embellished. Historical facts such as Switzerland rejection of some 20,000 refugees denied entry at the borders (“*Das Boot ist voll*”), both Swiss cooperation with Nazi Germany (in the economic arena) and the Allies (allowing intelligence operatives and activities on its soil), which did not fit the official concept of the pursuit of strict neutrality during the war, were temporarily forgotten and silenced in the historical narrative and only came to light decades after World War II.³¹ The establishment and cultivation of these historical myths is particularly evident when examining the way Swiss history books presented the events of World War II in the post-war period.

Switzerland’s strict wartime neutrality was a powerful, yet dangerous myth in post-war Switzerland. Powerful, since it became an important and lasting *lieu de mémoire* for Switzerland and part of the Swiss self-image, but also dangerous in the sense that it formed a smokescreen for secret activities during World War II that were not intended to be made public to the Swiss people. Swiss collaboration with Axis and Allied powers needed to be suppressed or communicated carefully. After all, Switzerland was not invaded but rather dealt with those powers discreetly behind the scenes. Switzerland refused to join the collective security arrangements of the United Nations in 1945/46, again hiding behind the smokescreen of strict neutrality. Therefore, Swiss *Bundesrat* Max Petitpierre, Switzerland’s iconic foreign minister between 1945 and 1961 and former law professor at the university of

³⁰ Furrer, Nation im Schulbuch.

³¹ ICE, 118.

Neuenburg, added the concept of international solidarity to Switzerland's neutrality policy.³² "Neutrality and Solidarity" was the heading under which the Swiss role in World War II was to be remembered, a concept that was supposed to describe the past as well as serve the present and the future. By adding the concept of solidarity to Switzerland's neutrality, Switzerland positioned itself on the "good" side of the war while still adhering to its neutrality, but not just merely sitting on the fence, but actively supporting the victims of the conflict. Markus Furrer explained how Switzerland was viewed to have been saved during the war by its putative policy of strict neutrality and fierce national independence as well as its role as the Good Samaritan:

*Die mythologisierte Darstellung von Neutralität verknüpft Unabhängigkeit und Neutralität aufs Engste, sie erkennt in der Neutralität die Ursache für das Verschontbleiben der Schweiz vor den Katastrophen des kurzen 20. Jahrhunderts und verknüpft damit den Wohltätigkeitsgedanken einer helfenden Schweiz.*³³

Just how far the Swiss government was willing to go to protect this myth of strict neutrality becomes clear in the controversy about the publication of the important multi-volume collection of captured German documents in *Documents on German Foreign Policy* by the American government. The Swiss government worked tirelessly for almost a decade to stop the publication of documents that revealed evidence of a secret Franco-Swiss military cooperation during the war, which would have undermined its concept of strict neutrality. Although the documents were published in 1961, the government succeeded in averting a crisis with these historical revelations. It successfully 'distracted' the Swiss people by focussing on a document that described Corps Commander Ulrich Wille's contact with the German ambassador in Switzerland. The people's attention was focused on Wille's

³² Daniel Trachsler, „Max Petitpierre, Vater der aktiven Neutralität,“ *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 11. Mai 2011. http://www.nzz-libro.ch/pdf_book/9783038236702.pdf?PHPSESSID=cpebl18id1bfoefpt1uftkp811 (accessed October 23, 2011).

³³ Furrer, 258.

sympathetic attitude towards the Germans and the publication of the *Documents on German Foreign Policy* took a back seat.

As a last resort, therefore, and in the nick of time, Wille became the sacrifice that would prevent the feared questioning of neutrality as a result of the uproar over another scandal. But the foundations of the neutrality myth were shaken anyway, although the ‘affair of the deputy’ successfully prevented the full dimensions of this becoming apparent to the Swiss public.³⁴

Looking at how the Swiss neutrality myth was portrayed in Swiss history books in the post-war period further illustrates the mythical character of the neutrality concept. Markus Furrer’s detailed analysis is invaluable for this task. His research demonstrates how, up until the late 1980s, the concept of Swiss neutrality was mostly offered as a plausible description of and key element in Switzerland’s historical narrative in Swiss schoolbooks, and how a few textbooks even presented the myth as a seemingly unquestionable historical fact (e.g. a textbook by Eugen Halter from 1960/61).³⁵

The myth of the *Réduit Alpine/National* combines a conceptual *lieu de mémoire*, remembering the military threat and the steadfastness of the Swiss people and the army, with an actual, geographical one: the Alps. The Alps form the heart of the *Réduit national*, which can be translated as *National Retreat/Space*, and serve as a symbol for Switzerland’s military resistance against Nazi Germany throughout the war. In dozens of post-war Swiss history text books, the myth of the *Réduit national* dominates the chapter on World War II in Switzerland. The military aspects and the threat against the Swiss people are at the center of attention. It seems like it was only due to brave General Guisan and the courage and willingness of the Swiss army to resist a potential Nazi invasion that Switzerland was not overrun by the Axis powers. The containment of the Nazi threat succeeded due to the deterrent effect of the sturdy Swiss army. The following excerpt of a history book from 1975

³⁴ Sacha Zala, “Governmental Malaise with History: From the White Paper to the Bonjour Report, in *Switzerland and the Second World War*, ed. Georg Kreis (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2000), 326.

³⁵ Furrer, 244.

illustrates the fearsome nature of the Swiss Alpine fortress, where every nook and cranny became a gun emplacement, clearly:

*Im Herzen der Schweiz, wo ihre Freiheit gegründet worden war, sollte sie im Falle eine[s] Angriffs verteidigt werden. Das ganze Bergland wurde zu einer mächtigen Festung ausgebaut. Aus unzulänglichen Felsennestern richteten Geschütze ihre Mündungen nach allen Tälern.*³⁶

Especially in the light of the new nuclear threats of the Cold War, the myth of the *Réduit National* served the important purpose of strengthening Swiss national morale. It built confidence to defy any enemy through their power of will and readiness to die for their country once again. The fact that Switzerland in fact was not invaded during the war and the perception of General Guisan as the key figure in protecting and leading the defence of Switzerland, put him and the army in a powerful position to shape and define the memory of World War II. This is illustrated by the largely militarized memory of World War II as portrayed in Furrer's analysis of Swiss history books after the war. It was not until the 1990s that most textbooks presented the myth of the *Réduit Alpine* as an actual myth and not as a historical fact. However, in a long special historical edition, published in 1990 with the title "Switzerland and the Second World War," 21 of a total of 80 pages were dedicated to the military readiness of the country.³⁷

The third national myth established as a pillar of the collective memory of World War II in Switzerland was the fiction of Switzerland as the Good Samaritan. Initiated by Max Petitpierre's addition of the concept of solidarity as a constituent element of strict Swiss neutrality, it remembered Switzerland as the originator of the international Red Cross and as a humanitarian and benevolent country. During the World War II the notion of the Good Samaritan Switzerland was illustrated perfectly by its supposedly having voluntarily opened its doors to political and racial refugees, having acted through the Red Cross as the main third

³⁶ Furrer, 261.

³⁷ Furrer, 263.

party protector of prisoners of war, and having made an effort to “assuage the evils of the war.”³⁸

A demonstration of the importance of this memory is the result of the so-called “White Paper affair” in Switzerland in 1946 (see 3.2.2). Originally intended as a report on the government’s activities during the war, the project was transformed into “a collection of essays on Switzerland’s humanitarian activities during the war. [...] This transformation, then, is clearly illustrative of a policy which Peter Hug has described as compensation for ‘Switzerland’s failure to participate in the construction of post-war peace by means of nationally exaggerated humanitarian activities’.”³⁹

Once it became known, that Switzerland had marked the passport of German and Austrian Jews with a “J”-stamp, the Swiss government commissioned Dr. Carl Ludwig, a law professor from Basle and a former government councilor with the production on a report on Swiss refugee policy. Now known as the Ludwig Report, it came out in 1957 and its author did not mince words:

Ludwig was determined to expose the restrictive attitude of the authorities unsparingly; he deplored the fact that refugee policy was largely determined by the aliens section of the police ... he also referred to the restrictive requirements of the army and the ‘not very creditable attitude’ of certain cantons. He had no time for the excuse that people had too little knowledge of what was going on over there in the Reich’.⁴⁰

The Swiss government employed various strategies to justify its refugee policy and did not shy away from using an individual as a scapegoat in order to protect its image. In an important section on the introduction of the “J”-stamp, the report stated that, according to Dr. Oprecht, a national councilor, Dr. Rothmund, the Chief of Police during World War II had initiated the use of the “J”-stamp in 1938 and was therefore to be solely responsible for its

³⁸ Furrer, 265.

³⁹ Zala, 315.

⁴⁰ Georg Kreis, „Swiss Refugee Policy, 1933-45,“ in *Switzerland and the Second World War*, ed. Georg Kreis (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2000), 105.

consequences. In fact, however, the Swiss Federal Council had made all the significant decisions in relation to the introduction of the “J”-stamp itself, as it admitted many years later.⁴¹

Although the 1957 Ludwig report contained some harsh criticism of the way the refugee policy had been handled during the war, it did not trigger a memory debate or any self-criticism.⁴² The press played a considerable role in maintaining the myth of Switzerland as a Good Samaritan: The liberal *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* for example, stated that “the lessons lay not in the excessively restrictive attitude, but more in the fact, that the inherently correct principle of ‘generous acceptance’ had to be kept within limits because of food problems and security requirements.”⁴³ Equally, the socialist newspaper *Volksrecht* warned against the complacency of hindsight and pointed out that the “significantly more comfortable standpoint of 1957”⁴⁴ should not be abused to criticize decisions that were made under very difficult and complex circumstances.

When looking at Swiss history books, it becomes evident that the country’s behaviour as a merciful and generous benefactor to refugees was rarely questioned until the 1980s. Only 40 years after the war was it possible to question Switzerland’s “Good Samaritan” image during World War II and the closing of its borders to floods of refugees from Hitler’s Germany (“*das Boot ist voll*”).⁴⁵

3.2.2. The Politics of History: The Role of the Swiss Government

The Swiss government ruled the country during the World War II with a considerable amount of authoritative power that was democratically legitimated. By the end of the war the

⁴¹ ICE, 129.; Carl Ludwig, *Die Flüchtlingspolitik der Schweiz in den Jahren 1933-1955*, 148-149, <http://db.dodis.ch/dodis;jsessionid=0F4683C1F318D83DD81CE996BBD22595?XE71TUfUMvuyrondilT044GDbgOZXIXfjdnppvGCwXEELMisFPp4BOc64QVuA20Yq6Sh> (accessed November 6, 2011).

⁴² Kreis, 105.

⁴³ Kreis, 105.

⁴⁴ Kreis, 105.

⁴⁵ Furrer 266.

politicians had become used to the idea that, in order to protect the country and its population, excessive authority had to be used and tough decisions had to be made. This mindset was also applied to the way the Swiss remembered their own past:

Die Landesregierung verstand sich als Hüterin eines Geschichtsbildes, das nach wie vor der Staatsraison zu dienen hatte. Dieser Zweck schien unzimperliche Massnahmen zu rechtfertigen.⁴⁶

Already during the first post-war month the concretion of historical memory of the war was put in place. Halbwachs' theory that the past is a construction based on the concerns of the present was quickly becoming apparent when we look at the specific actions of the Swiss government in defining the framework of an acceptable historical narrative of Swiss behavior during the war. Understandably, its pragmatic principal concern was for Switzerland to survive World War II with all its aftershocks and every decision was subordinated to this national goal. In this framework, the memory of the war was a powerful tool that could be used to fortify Swiss identity and its status in the world, but it also needed to be controlled. This becomes clear when looking at an incident that happened in 1945 concerning the documentary evidence to buttress the factual history of World War II. Two members of the *Nationalrat*, Albert Maag and Urs Dietschi, requested that documentary evidence be made available to back up the government's official reports on anti-democratic activities during the Second World War.⁴⁷ From the very outset of constructing an official collective memory, official reports and white papers were a popular form for the government to communicate the official, yet seemingly objective, historical narrative of Swiss actions during World War II.

⁴⁶ Kurt Messmer, "Lügengebäuden in den Schulstuben?," in *Kriegsnarrative in Geschichtslehrmitteln: Brennpunkte nationaler Diskurse*, ed. Markus Furrer and Kurt Messmer (Schwalbach: Wochenschauverlag, 2009), 133.

⁴⁷ Van Dongen, 270 and Zala, 313 both describe reports as an attempt to give the Swiss government the opportunity to have a clear conscience.

The “controlled management of the past” was crucial to contain the “hidden dangers of explosive revelation” that might have demystified the official narrative.⁴⁸

The Swiss government commissioned the historian Werner Näf, a history professor at the university of Bern, to file a report and to provide the Swiss government with options on how to deal with Mag’s and Dietschi’s potentially explosive request. Näf presented the government with three options to control access to the World War II past: “1. Publication of the Swiss political documents, in other words a “White Paper”; 2. A documented account of Swiss foreign policy during wartime by a historian commissioned by the Federal Council; 3. A future free academic use of the material.”⁴⁹ After careful deliberation, Näf proposed to reject both the first and the third options. The publication of a White Paper, he argued, would not be in line with the way the Swiss government had pursued its policy in the past; publishing a purged record would give the impression that the Swiss had something to hide.⁵⁰ He rejected the third option for different reasons. If the material was made available completely to the public and academic study raised issues of timing and academic integrity: “‘whether they would be dealt with in a true academic sense ... would be a matter of chance and hardly likely in the immediate future’, which would not be in line with the intended purpose of an ‘early public elucidation of Swiss foreign policy’.”⁵¹ Based on this reasoning, Näf recommended to the Swiss government to go with the second option and commission a historian to write a well-documented account. The government then could control the outcome by commissioning a carefully selected reliable historian. This line of argument was classic politics of history – you control the outcome by narrowing access to the record to a select historian who understands what is at stake for his nation’s reputation in the world.

⁴⁸ Zala, 313.

⁴⁹ Zala, 313-314.

⁵⁰ Zala, 314.

⁵¹ Zala, 314.

Näf's argumentation, then, sheds light on the mindset of the Swiss leadership and political elite in the immediate post-war period regarding the construction of the memory of the war. It clearly demonstrates how eminently political the definition of wartime Swiss memory was. First, Swiss historical memory had to be presented to the public in a form that was acceptable for the government's image at home and abroad. The government kept strict control over the formation of the nation's wartime memory. Enough information had to be made available to remain credible but not too much to spill the beans on Swiss complicity. Second, the government decided what could be publicized and what not – historians such as Näf only played a subordinate role in this process. Third, memory must not be allowed to form loosely and freely since it had to “enlighten” the Swiss population as to the government's benevolent role during the war and to present the government in a favorable light.

Regarding the theory of memory we can observe several aspects of Halbwachs', Nora's and Assmann's concepts in the way the Swiss government dealt with the past. First, the past was already shaped by the immediate concerns of the present. Switzerland needed to be protected from the weight of the complicit past and reassured about its future, and the government's politics of history on how to deal with the World War II trajectory of its history reflected this urgent need. Secondly, we can observe what Nora called the “acceleration of history” (as described in more detail in chapter 2.2) through the government. This speeding up of the institutionalizing and fixation of historical memory, which then became history, was at best an (incomplete) representation of the past. Third, we can see the memory already in its actuality, as Assmann described it, and no longer in its organic bits and pieces, the usual incoherent factual chaos that is the historical past. The government took on the task of selecting the “official” and “relevant” pieces of information from the infinite pool of historical matter and shaped it into *a usable past* on behalf of the entire population, never

mind that individual memories often clashed with the official collective memory. This clash too had to be silenced. The further development of Näf's suggestion to commission a historian to write a coherent master narrative of Switzerland's role during the war further supports this point. Ultimately the government implemented none of his three suggested options (White Paper, documentation, academic analysis). Instead, the government pursued a minimal version, to highlight Switzerland's role as Good Samaritan and squeaky clean neutral power

All that was now being attempted was a collection of essays on Switzerland's humanitarian activities during the war. This transformation of the White Paper is all the more astonishing in that the original plan for a collection of documents had in no way been conceived as a critical reworking of the past but, rather, as an apologetic presentation of the way neutrality had been handled under Axis pressure.⁵²

The "critical reworking of the past" in order to master it, was not Switzerland's highest priority in the immediate post-war period. There were more critical demands of national and international politics that were more pressing and needed to be addressed pragmatically. The construction of a historical memory of the war served as a powerful tool in the government's hands to *fashion a usable and masterable past*. However, the government cannot take all the credit for the success and acceptance of its official concretion of historical memory of World War II:

Because of personal experience and the 'conditioning' of minds during the time of conflict, the Swiss population shared a very positive image of the part their country had played during the war. It was, therefore, entirely ready to accept the reassuring image offered to it by its leaders.⁵³

In other words, the Swiss people were complicit too in settling with the simplistic version of a usable past: they heard what they wanted to hear. For the most part they eagerly embraced the government's official version of the historical memory of World War II.

⁵² Zala, 315.

⁵³ Van Dongen, 264.

3.2.3. The Hedgehog: General Guisan and the Swiss Army

The Swiss government was undoubtedly the main player in the construction of an acceptable collective and cultural memory of the war, albeit not the only one. In the immediate post-war years in Switzerland, the army had a noteworthy influence on national affairs in Switzerland. The Army chief spokesman was General Guisan who emerged as one of Switzerland's most respected leaders out of World War II. As the commander-in-chief of the Swiss army, General Guisan's opinion was highly respected and influential. He emerged at the center in the creation of an idealized and heroic public version of Swiss historical memory of World War II. The subsequent powerful "sanctification" of World War II memory through his speeches and public statements created a certain sense of obligation to bring personal individual memories in line with Guisan's version of the collective memory. In his view there was only one way of remembering World War II and the accomplishments of what he called "the generation of 1939 to 1945." Switzerland's survival through difficult times deserved to be honored. The following statement in his order of the day for 8 May 1945 illustrates his version of a usable past, never mind that the Swiss army did not fire a single shot in the war:

What is important, then, is that the benefit of this experience, this trial, should not be wasted. If, in the near or more distant future, our army were to be called to arms to defend our independence once again, the generation of 1939 to 1945 will arise again, identify themselves and join the ranks. But those men will only be worthy of their task if they do not reject it in any way either in their deeds or in their thoughts, and if they pass on to those who follow their courage, their sense of duty and their loyalty.⁵⁴

This excerpt gives an impression of the mechanisms that were involved in the establishment of a collective memory immediately after the war and the role the army's leadership played in it. First, it established the army as the main player in the defense of Switzerland's independence and therefore the savior of Switzerland. Second, it reinforced the thinking that

⁵⁴ Van Dongen, 268.

there was only one “right” way to interpret and remember the war. Everybody who would “reject their task in any way, either in their deeds or in their thoughts” would not be worthy of fighting for Switzerland. Guisan almost demanded “blind” obedience to his narrative of the war from the Swiss people. Merely questioning the official narrative was unworthy of a Swiss citizen and smacked of a traitor. Guisan’s narrative created a version of official historical memory that was, irreversibly set in stone only months after the end of the war (e.g. Assmann’s “concretion” of memory).

Another core document that helped establish the trajectory of Swiss historical memory of the war as one shaped by the military, was General Guisan’s report to the *Bundesrat* about the army’s activities during the war. Ostensibly, it was a plain documentation of Swiss military preparedness during the war. In fact, the report significantly shaped Swiss historical memory of the war by initiating the public debate on the events between 1939 and 1945. As a primarily military document, it has three main consequences:

First, it is a ‘memorial’ to the spirit of resistance in the Swiss people and their army; second, it helps to ‘militarize’ the memory of the war; and third, it strengthens the image of a hedgehog Switzerland, owing its fate to its courage alone...⁵⁵

In this initial post-war period, Switzerland’s memory of World War II became firmly fixed, as Pierre Béguin has noted,⁵⁶ and the themes and myths established during this time would prove to be enduring. They dominated Swiss historical memory discourses for at least two generations after the war. It was almost impossible to question this version of the usable past set into stone by the wartime generation.

⁵⁵ Van Dongen, 270.

⁵⁶ Pierre Béguin, 277.

4. The “Helvetic Malaise” with History

The mystified Swiss perception of its own history was so deeply rooted that not even major events that triggered an international debate on memory and the war could affect it. In the early 1960s, for example, the high profile Auschwitz and Eichmann trials could not shake Switzerland’s view of its own past. Like in Austria, the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, although well covered, sparked not enough interest to realistically challenge the cultivated memory dogmas established immediately after the war.⁵⁷ However, individual memories of the war were not lost entirely. From the 1950s onwards, an increasing number of intellectuals, writers, and artists found creative ways of dealing with their own view of the past and challenging the Swiss government and its official memory policy. They were soon followed by a growing number of historians, such as Georg Kreis or Marc Perrenoud, who gradually “undermined the self-congratulatory myths about Switzerland’s conduct towards Nazi Germany.”⁵⁸ The Swiss government, however, seemed to be limping behind these developments, and held onto the attempt to regulate and contain history by commissioning official reports: In 1962 the *Bundesrat* instructed the historian Edgar Bonjour to write a report on Switzerland’s foreign policy during World War II, a request entirely in the tradition of Näf’s White Paper in 1945.

4.1. The Establishment of a Beachhead: Artists and Intellectuals Begin to Question Official Memory

In her essay “What is so special about Switzerland” Regula Ludi talks about an “engendered uneasiness” among Swiss thinkers and creative minds, starting as early as the 1950s. In its beginnings, however, these alternative views of the past were only expressed periodically and

⁵⁷ Bischof, 21.

⁵⁸ Cesarani, viii.

did not resonate with the Swiss public.⁵⁹ It was only from the 1970s onwards, however, that artists and intellectuals successfully managed to challenge the constructed memory of Switzerland's mythological World War II past. It took a new generation of historians and intellectuals, often born after the war, to question the outdated official old verities and draw up an emerging new version of Switzerland's complex history during World War II.

An example for the expression of this growing "malaise"⁶⁰ is the work of Swiss writer Max Frisch. Born in Zurich in 1911 as the son of an architect, Frisch published countless articles, essays and dozens of novels, and is widely regarded as one of the most influential Swiss writers of the 20th century. In his novels as well as in his diaries and his work as a publicist, he picked Switzerland and its past and identity as a central theme, and confronted the official memory constructs.

Particularly relevant with regard to Switzerland's historical memory of World War II is his work *Dienstbüchlein*, published in 1974.⁶¹ It was effectively a revision of his personal early wartime diary, *Blätter aus dem Brotsack*⁶² that had been published in 1940/39. Frisch not only reflected critically upon his personal perspective during World War II and the army in general, but also expressed his consternation about Switzerland's cooperation with Nazi Germany. The reactions to Frisch's *Dienstbüchlein* were controversial. Frisch was already an established and respected author, so the fundamental question was whether his book had, besides its literary value, also a historical significance. If the book proved to communicate some historical truth, it would radically challenge the myth of Switzerland as a well-fortified "hedgehog," surviving the war because of its army and its neutrality. Although some critics, such as noted historians Jean Rudolf von Salis or Hermann Burger conceded some historical value to the book, others like Zurich linguist Ernst Leisi, interestingly accused Frisch of

⁵⁹ Ludi, 225.

⁶⁰ Ludi, 225

⁶¹ The *Dienstbüchlein* was the Swiss identification card used during military service.

⁶² Translated "pages out of my lunch bag (literally bread bag).

describing a myth, not history.⁶³ Leisi tried to reinforce the well-established and comfortable official version of the past that had been established immediately after the war.

One of the most significant artistic representations of Switzerland's process of beginning to come to terms with its past is the film *Das Boot ist voll*.⁶⁴ The production by Markus Imhoof is based on a book by novelist Alfred Häsler of the same title. The film was screened in 1981 and expressed the "malaise"⁶⁵ with the current historical memory of World War II by telling the fictional story of six people who sought refuge in Switzerland in 1942. These were the Jewish siblings Judith and Olaf, Ostrowskij, an old Jewish man from Vienna with his granddaughter, a French orphan and a German deserter. They were all seeking asylum in the neutral country that had officially closed its borders to all "refugees who have fled purely on racial grounds."⁶⁶ The film does not sugar-coat anything. In the end, Judith, Olaf, Ostrowskij and his granddaughter – the refugees that had fled to Switzerland on racial grounds – were escorted to the border by the authorities, where certain death awaited them in the concentration camp of Treblinka.

In a dramatic way, the story shed light on a dark aspect of Switzerland's past that had been swept under the carpet for four decades and directly challenged the foundation myth of Switzerland's World War II role as the Good Samaritan. Predictably, the reactions to Imhoof's film project were mixed. Already before the actual production of the film, the Swiss government criticized Imhoof. He had applied for a grant to cover parts of the production costs of the project, but he was turned down by the *Bundesrat* with the argument that it was antiquated in its dramatic approach – cheap popular theater:

⁶³ Martin Sauter, *Max Frisch und die Landesverteidigung*, http://www.martinsauter.ch/frisch_5_dienstbuechlein.html (accessed on November 6, 2011).

⁶⁴ Translated "The Boat Is Full"

⁶⁵ Ludi, 225.

⁶⁶ ICE, 114.

*Dem Projekt fehlt die historische Distanz und Würdigung. Es wirkt dramaturgisch veraltet und erinnert in negativem Sinne an Volkstheater. Ein Beitrag wird einstimmig abgelehnt.*⁶⁷

However, the film made ends meet with funding made available by Swiss, Austrian, and West German television stations. The finished product was screened in 1981.⁶⁸ While the Swiss media purported to be unmoved, especially the international press was very impressed with the efforts of the Swiss filmmaker. While the Swiss newspaper *Der Tages-Anzeiger* referred to the film as “definitely one of Markus Imhoof’s weaker films,” *The New York Times* was full of praise for the production: “‘The Boat is full’ is something more than a discovery, something in the neighborhood of a revelation.”⁶⁹ *Das Boot ist voll* received five awards at the Berlin Film Festival in 1981.⁷⁰ Was the ice of Switzerland’s frozen World War II past finally broken?

4.2. Containing a Break in the Dam: The Bonjour Report

While artists and intellectuals had gradually been deconstructing postwar official Swiss memory and helped construct a more diverse and unvarnished memory of World War II, the government stubbornly still held on to its antiquarian politics of history and traditional strategy of commissioning reports to control official public memory culture. In 1962, the Swiss government commissioned the respected historian Edgar Bonjour to prepare a report on Switzerland’s foreign policy during World War II. Once again external circumstances triggered the commissioning of the Bonjour Report, like the White Paper of 1945, and the Ludwig Report on refugees of 1957. The massive collection of *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, published in 1961, and an article by the British journalist Jon Kimche

⁶⁷ Markus Imhoof, *Das Boot ist voll*, <http://www.markus-imhoof.ch/filme/boot1/boot.html> (accessed November 6, 2011).

⁶⁸ Dennis F. Mahoney, “Personalizing the Holocaust: “Das Boot ist voll”,” *Modern Language Studies* 19, no. 1 (1989), <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uno.edu/stable/3195262?seq=2> (accessed November 6, 2011).

⁶⁹ Imhoof, *Das Boot ist voll*.

⁷⁰ Schweizer Fernsehen, *Das Boot ist voll*, <http://www.tvprogramm.sf.tv/details/f437c2eb-e7a4-4845-8b5e-ce439270e528> (accessed November 13, 2011).

portrayed Switzerland and the Swiss government in a completely new light than the Swiss government had practiced for so long. These documents revealed Swiss political and economic cooperation with Nazi Germany on many fronts. Under this external pressure, the government agreed to let an established and deemed trustworthy historian access the Federal documents.⁷¹ However, the Swiss government reserved the right to censor Bonjour's publications, and "deleted at least one third of the original manuscript, in many cases highly informative documents' from his first documentary supplement, as he [Bonjour] himself bitterly stated in his foreword [of the published report]."⁷² Only when the Swiss press and Swiss historians heavily criticized the government did it agree to allow Bonjour to make many of the censored documents public. However, once again the finished and tamed work with the title *The History of Swiss Neutrality* ultimately failed to initiate an open debate on neutrality. Georg Kreis explains:

Presentation of Swiss foreign relations was directed so much towards the traditional understanding of neutrality that the new discoveries fit harmoniously into the old pattern of knowledge. Whether the Federal Council which commissioned the work strived for this consciously or unconsciously, all in all the report supplied a confirmation of the old through the new.⁷³

Swiss historian Jakob Tanner agreed with this perspective in an article for the *NZZ Folio* in 1991. Tanner argued that Bonjour painted in his *History of Swiss Neutrality* a picture of "striking continuity" of the Swiss state system. He criticized that Bonjour's fundamental faith in this continuity was neither rational nor argumentative.⁷⁴

The Bonjour Report ultimately failed to challenge the Swiss myth of neutrality during the war, and promoted the initiation of a more unbiased discussion of Switzerland's role and identity. Yet the heating up of this debate was left to a new generation of historians.

⁷¹ Kreis, page 327.

⁷² Zala, 327.

⁷³ Kreis, 3.

⁷⁴ Jakob Tanner, „Die Schweiz hatte wieder einmal Glück“: *Edgar Bonjours Geschichtsschreibung*, Neue Zürcher Zeitung Folio, <http://www.nzzfolio.ch/www/d80bd71b-b264-4db4-afd0-277884b93470/showarticle/f07c4aba-4f88-45f9-a3dd-dd1b0d423504.aspx> (accessed November 6, 2011).

4.3. Deconstructing the Historical Myths: Critical Scholarly Research and A New Generation of Historians

Unleashed by artists and intellectuals in the 1960s, a new generation of historians picked up the discussion of Switzerland's role during World War II in the 1970s and 80s. Younger historians increasingly deconstructed the official historical memory of the war, and created a widening gap between official memory myths and critical scholarly empirical research.⁷⁵ By the end of the 1980s, Swiss historians had basically dismantled the main myths that made up official Swiss historical and cultural memory of World War II.

The myth of Switzerland as the Good Samaritan was challenged by research on Switzerland's policy on refugees from Nazi Germany. Important studies on the subject were produced already before the 1970s and 80s, such as the official Ludwig report on refugees of 1957. However, up until the 1970s the revelations dealing with Switzerland's refugee politics, mostly failed in provoking a real debate on the issue.⁷⁶ Although facts like the rejection of over 20,000 Jewish refugees at the Swiss borders were available to the Swiss public, it did not significantly register with the public and alter Switzerland's self-perception as a Good Samaritan. Only projects like the 1978 TV-miniseries *Holocaust*, or the film *Das Boot ist voll* in 1981 created a more receptive climate for publications on Swiss refugee politics, such as Hans-Ulrich Jost's *Geschichte der Schweiz und der Schweizer* or Jacques Picard's *Die Schweiz und die Juden*.⁷⁷ These books no longer minced words: "Jost said of the refugee policy that it had been 'extremely restrictive' in the 1930s, had been 'tightened in an inhumane manner' after the outbreak of war and formed the darkest chapter of the country's history during the Second World War."⁷⁸ The combination of unvarnished creative

⁷⁵ Ludi, 228.

⁷⁶ Kreis, 7

⁷⁷ Kreis, 109.

⁷⁸ Kreis, 109.

representations and critical academic publications, coupled with the support of a broad echo in the national media, created a more accurate image of Switzerland's refugee politics during World War II: "These recollective efforts even resulted, in 1992, in the minting of an official commemorative coin bearing an uncompromising image of barbed wire and a portrait of the wartime refugee activist Gertrud Kurz."⁷⁹

The myth of Switzerland as a relentlessly neutral country during the war was unmasked by studies revealing the significance of the economic relationships between Switzerland and the Third Reich. Works by Klaus Urner and Edgar Bonjour established how external pressure forced Switzerland to abandon its neutral position. Towards the end of the 1980s, Werner Rings, Peter Utz and Hans Ulrich Jost discovered that Switzerland had purchased enormous amounts of gold from Nazi Germany.⁸⁰ In his work *Bedrohung und Enge*,

Jost placed the centre of gravity in his discussion on the Swiss financial center's cooperation with Germany and gave a comprehensive analysis of the role of 'Switzerland as a central entrepôt for movements of gold and foreign exchange', singling out the 'morally disquieting' acceptance of looted gold and the granting of a clearing loan to Germany.⁸¹

Revelations like these, based on careful archival work by scholars, shed an entirely new light on Switzerland's role during the war, and shifted the country's image from an innocent bystander to a greedy war profiteer. Switzerland made indeed some "Faustian bargains."⁸²

"This tended to play down the image of a Switzerland innocent because of its neutrality."⁸³

One of the most important documents that questioned the Swiss myth of neutrality was Markus Heiniger's work *Dreizehn Gründe: Warum die Schweiz im Zweiten Weltkrieg*

⁷⁹ Kreis, 109.

⁸⁰ Kreis, 3.

⁸¹ Jakob Tanner, "Switzerland's International Financial Relations, 1931-50," in *Switzerland and the Second World War*, ed. Georg Kreis (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2000), 51.

⁸² Johnathan Petropoulos, *The Faustian Bargain: The Art World in Nazi Germany* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

⁸³ Kreis, 4.

nicht erobert wurde,⁸⁴ published in 1989.⁸⁵ By analyzing non-military, but economic aspects of the question why Switzerland had been spared during the war, he undermined not only the myth of Swiss neutrality, but also of the power of the Swiss army. He even went as far as to say, that only a “systematic financial blockade and massive pressure by the Allies compelled the Swiss authorities at the war’s end, to curb the hitherto almost boundless freedom enjoyed by the banks.”⁸⁶

As the brutally pragmatic economic pressures on and concessions made by Switzerland to make it through the war became gradually known, the myth of the Swiss *réduit national*, the alpine fortress in which the army defended Switzerland against the Third Reich, also came under intense scrutiny. Already in 1970, the journalist Christoph Geiser had mentioned that “Hitler didn’t have to occupy Switzerland, because Swiss industry worked for him anyway.”⁸⁷ Over the course of the 1980s this view became more and more confirmed by scholars. Had Hitler decided to invade Switzerland, the Axis would have crushed the Swiss army in its alpine fortress. Hans-Ulrich Jost mentioned in 1983 that the occupation of Switzerland would have been costly, but by all means feasible without great difficulties.⁸⁸ The dismantlement of the power of the Swiss army was accompanied and further reinforced by an initiative of the radical left to abolish the army, namely to “slaughter the holy cow.”⁸⁹ Although the initiative did not succeed in the end, it still significantly weakened the position of the army as the unassailable “hedgehog” in the Alps as a principal *lieux de mémoire* of Swiss national historical memory.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Translation: Thirteen reasons: Why Switzerland was not invaded during the Second World War

⁸⁵ Kreis, 4.

⁸⁶ Tanner, 52.

⁸⁷ Kreis, 5.

⁸⁸ Kreis, 6.

⁸⁹ Ludi, 229.

⁹⁰ Ludi, 230.

4.4. End of the Cold War: The Memory Crisis of 1989

Although the referendum on the abolishment of the army failed in the end, only 35% of the voters had agreed to get rid of the army, a national symbol of the defense and protection of the country. The government took this vote as a reflection on the population's confidence in its leadership. Yet all was not well: "For the government, the result was disastrous. It exposed both the failure of official memory politics and a loss of confidence in the ruling four-party coalition. The referendum's coincidence with the fall of the Berlin Wall further deepened the crisis."⁹¹ The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War made the crisis in Switzerland even worse. In a time of crisis, Switzerland normally would have drawn strength from its national historical myths to remind itself of its qualities and its identity as a strong, well-fortified, benevolent, and neutral country. But by the end of the 1980s, a considerable amount of critical research on Switzerland's role during World War II had been done, and most myths established in the post-war period had been dismantled by the intellectuals and historians. Although these findings had been widely ignored by politicians and the general public,⁹² they came to light when the government and the population needed them most. In a time of sea changes in the world order, the country fundamentally lacked orientation and a secure identity to fall back on – Switzerland no longer could rely on its dearly held World War II myths to hold on to in times of adversity.

This widening discrepancy between academic research and official historical memory, combined with both the domestic and international political situation, triggered a major memory crisis in Switzerland in 1989. This initial confrontation with "unfinished business" from World War II should have been a wake-up call for Switzerland, and an opportunity to confront old memory dogmas and produce new collective memories by finally including the

⁹¹ Ludi, 230.

⁹² Cesarani, xi.

research of a younger generation of historians and thus tempering and modifying the old historical myths.⁹³ However, the crisis did not immediately initiate a paradigm shift. Once more, enormous pressure emanating from the outside was needed to make the Swiss government and the public at large adjust and alter their memory of World War II. Historian Elazar Barkan has analyzed this new “guilt of nations” in the 1990s as “new international moral frame” with an unprecedented “willingness of nations to embrace their own guilt.”⁹⁴

5. The Collapse of the Official World War II Mythology: The 1990s, the Commission of Independent Experts, and Mastering Switzerland’s World War II Past

In the 1990s, almost 50 years after the end of World War II, history caught up with the Swiss people. The memory crisis of 1989 had failed to produce a new and honest collective accounting of the recent scholarly revisions clashing with the official historical memory. The Swiss public and the national and international media were greatly surprised, when a disgruntled Swiss bank clerk revealed to the world the existence of a large number of dormant secret bank accounts, many of them belonging to the victims of the Holocaust. American Jewish organizations filed a class-action lawsuit against Swiss banks, claiming back countless unclaimed assets dating back to World War II and pressuring Swiss banks to make public the identity of the holders of the the dormant bank accounts. Steps towards the return of these unclaimed assets had been made as far back as 1946 through the Washington

⁹³ Ludi, 231.

⁹⁴ Elazar Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000), xvi.

Accords and in 1962 through federal legislation, but they did not lead to satisfactory results.⁹⁵ “Although attempts to revisit this issue have been made ever since, we must acknowledge the frustration of Holocaust survivors and their heirs that this issue is still with us 50 years after the end of the War ... Many have legitimately questioned why it has taken nearly 50 years to obtain a comprehensive and transparent accounting of this issue”,⁹⁶ stated U.S. Under Secretary of Commerce Stuart Eizenstat before the House Banking and Financial Services Committee in Washington DC in 1996.⁹⁷ The law suit ultimately resulted in a settlement between the Swiss banks and the Jewish organizations in 1998.⁹⁸ Swiss banks now paid the prize for their lack of transparency when it came to Holocaust era assets parked in Switzerland during World War II.

The question what had happened to these unclaimed Jewish assets after the war was only the trigger for a much larger debate on Switzerland’s past. The claim for restitution by the Jewish organizations brought about a large amount of research, conducted in American and British archives.⁹⁹ The question arose what Switzerland’s role during World War II actually looked like. If Switzerland had profited from the war, and managed to evade exposure on this matter, what else was hidden by the official collective memory established by the Swiss government? The research uncovered a lot of Switzerland’s unfinished business from World War II that had been deliberately silenced and suppressed by government and the business leadership in the immediate post-war era.

In the 1990s, Switzerland was confronted with aspects of World War II the Swiss government had tried to brush under the carpet since the end of the war: Switzerland’s

⁹⁵ Ludi, 229-230.

⁹⁶ The United States Department of State, *Holocaust Assets*, <http://www.state.gov/www/regions/eur/961219eizen.html> (accessed November 12, 2011).

⁹⁷ See also his memoirs Stuart Eizenstadt, *Imperfect Justice: Looted Assets, Slave Labor, and the Unfinished Business of World War II* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003).

⁹⁸ Ludi, 323.

⁹⁹ Ludi, 323.

collaboration with the Nazis, the purchase of Nazi gold by Swiss banks, Switzerland's role as a hub for stolen art,¹⁰⁰ and its cooperation with secret intelligence services were made public, as well as the refusal to admit Jewish refugees into the country: The monumental clash between the official memory production and scholarly research findings finally came to the fore:

The discrepancy could not have been bigger in the mid-1990s between its officially endorsed image as the paragon of virtue—the cradle of the Red Cross and humanitarian law—and charges that painted the country as a Holocaust bystander ruthlessly profiteering from other people's misery. In the eyes of observers from abroad, the Swiss appeared totally oblivious of their wartime past.¹⁰¹

The process was extensively covered by the international media, and carried out in the spotlight of international attention. Switzerland had always cultivated its image as a benevolent and humanitarian nation, and the international press had a field day writing about this radical change of image:

For a few years at the end of the twentieth century Switzerland was the focal point of a frenzy of activities, as diplomats, politicians, and lobbyists battled over one of the last pieces of 'unfinished business from the Second World War ... The inquest turned into a spectacle mediated by the global news media to a fascinated public around the world.¹⁰²

These international media attacks had serious repercussions for Switzerland. They damaged the country's moral identity and challenged the population's understanding of its government's role in memory production and its own past. Scholarly research had been painting a different picture of Switzerland's past – a view of the complex past that had been available since the 1980s – the large public and the government had failed to take note of the new scholarly findings and refused to include them in their individual memories -- their personal understanding of the past shaped by the comfortable Swiss collective memory.

¹⁰⁰ Jonathan Petropoulos, "Business as Usual: Switzerland, the Commerce in Artworks during and After World War II, and National Identity," in *Contemporary Austrian Studies*, vol. 7 (1998), 229-42.

¹⁰¹ Ludi, 214.

¹⁰² Cesarani, vii.

Therefore, the new image of the World War II past 1990 was a brutal wake-up call for the Swiss nation and produced a deep identity crisis. The Good Samaritan myth, the myth of the “hedgehog” Switzerland, and the myth of Switzerland’s neutrality all were unceremoniously shattered. Jean-François Bergier described the climate in Switzerland as follows:

The shadow has become so dense, that the Swiss can no longer find their own history within it, and have become disoriented. On this occasion the phenomenon really is exceptional, and it is being reflected in an unprecedented crisis of the Swiss conscience.¹⁰³

In 1996, this “crisis of conscience” became so serious that the Swiss government issued an urgent federal decree, calling for the creation of an independent commission of experts (ICE) to “study, from a historical and legal standpoint, the fate of assets which found their way to Switzerland after the national socialist regime came to power.”¹⁰⁴ The Swiss government once again fell back on a well-established device in its politics of history – to establish a historian’s commission to produce a report that might clear the air. Given the international attention given to Switzerland’s unseemly role in World War II, this time it had to be an *international* historians’ commission.

In a sense, the establishment of the ICE was as surprising as it was expected. From Näf’s White Paper in 1945, to Ludwig’s Report in 1957, to the Bonjour Report 1962, the commissioning of reports had been the governments preferred method of dealing and controlling historical memory for decades. Considering the fact, however, that government’s repeated attempts to control and shape historical memory had caused the crisis of the 1990s in the first place, it is surprising that the Swiss government chose the same strategy in its politics of history to resolve the current crisis.

¹⁰³ Jean-François Bergier, “On the Role of the ‘Swiss Independent Expert Commission on the Second World War,’” in *Switzerland and the Second World War*, ed. Georg Kreis (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2000), 353.

¹⁰⁴ Bergier, 354.

Yet this commission was different. For one it was an international commission of historians. The membership of the international commission read like a “Who’s Who” of Holocaust era assets specialists and top experts on Nazi economic and financial policies: Jean-François Bergier, Georg Kreis, Jacques Piccard, Jakob Tanner, Joseph Voyame, Wladiyslaw Bartoszeski, Saul Friedländer, Harold James, Sybil Milton (later replaced by Helen B. Junz), and Joseph Voyame (later replaced by Daniel Thürer). Although the commission was called the *Independent Commission of Experts*, they were by no means given unrestricted free reigns in their research. First, commission members were placed under a duty of confidentiality and were not allowed to disclose any information gathered to any third party or person – in particular not to other historians. Second, they were financially dependent in their research endeavors on the Swiss government; they were also obligated to submit regular reports on their progress. Bergier, a prominent Swiss economic historian and the head of the ICE posed the question whether it was proper to allow only a limited amount of researchers access to the sources: “Is this not an infringement of freedom of research? I think not, provided that reasonable use is made of this unusual privilege, and that use includes taking account of the general interest; exceptional situations call for exceptional means.”¹⁰⁵ The commission however, was unrestricted in establishing its own methods of inquiry and its choice of members.

In 2002, the ICE at last issued its final report. The group of international Holocaust era experts addressed in the massive 597-page report Switzerland’s role during World War II. Individual chapters discussed Swiss refugee policy, foreign trade relations, asset transactions, as well as law and legal practices in dealing with issues of property rights and restitution in the post-war period.

¹⁰⁵ Bergier, 354.

The results of the painful 2002 ICE report undoubtedly marked a paradigm shift in Switzerland's historical memory of World War II. In its final report, it came to the following basic conclusions:

1. By sending thousands of Jewish refugees back to its borders, Switzerland willy nilly contributed its share to the Nazi's extermination campaign: "... by progressively closing the borders, delivering captured refugees over to their persecutors, and adhering to restrictive principles for far too long, the country stood by as many people were undoubtedly driven into certain death. In this way Switzerland contributed to the Nazi's success in achieving their goals."¹⁰⁶
2. The Swiss government was not substantially involved in the gold transactions with Nazi Germany: "The Federal Council did nothing to obtain any information about this [the gold transaction with the *Reichsbank*], and left the fundamental political decisions to the Swiss National Bank (SNB)."¹⁰⁷ The Swiss government looked away when it came to gold transactions with Nazi Germany.
3. It cannot be proven that Switzerland's economic relations with Nazi Germany prolonged the war: "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. This has less to do with a general 'insignificance' of Swiss exports and financial centre services than with the enormous economic dimensions of this war and the multifarious factors which determined the war economy and the unfolding of events on the front."¹⁰⁸
4. Switzerland and certain Swiss individuals did benefit financially from the war: "Although the ICE was able to document specific cases, it was impossible to come to

¹⁰⁶ ICE, 501.

¹⁰⁷ ICE, 516.

¹⁰⁸ ICE, 518.

any quantitative conclusions. But it is beyond doubt that these transactions substantially benefited the “middlemen”... As a neutral country which had been spared the ravages of war, it certainly had a competitive advantage.”

5. Switzerland violated its neutrality by working together with the Axis powers during World War II and admitted to have been ‘sitting on the fence’: “Switzerland did not always strictly fulfil its duties under the neutrality law. Violations occurred 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. Switzerland often hid behind its neutrality and this same neutrality was improperly invoked to justify not only decisions made in all kinds of spheres, but also inaction on the part of the State.”¹⁰⁹

The crisis of the 1990s resulted in Switzerland paying billions of Swiss francs in compensations to the victims of the Holocaust who had been affected by the Swiss unwillingness of making public thousands of unclaimed assets parked in Switzerland’s vaunted financial institutions during the war. This resulted in a dramatic paradigm shift regarding the memory of the war. A whitewashed memory that had been cultivated and safeguarded for almost five decades was replaced by a more complex and honest perspective on the events of the war.

Although the government had accepted this new and more complex memory of the war, the reactions of the Swiss population were, and still are, ambiguous: “The destruction of dear beliefs, furthermore, alienated many citizens from the political establishment who has largely endorsed the new interpretations. Widespread frustration eventually benefited the national-conservative right, with the *Schweizerische Volkspartei* (People’s Party) becoming

¹⁰⁹ ICE, 508.

the strongest force on the federal level.”¹¹⁰ In response to the ICE, organizations like the *Arbeitskreis Gelebte Geschichte* (research group living history) or the umbrella association *Interessengemeinschaft Schweiz – Zweiter Weltkrieg* (joint venture Switzerland – Second World War) emerged, which made it their mission to “support people and publications, which provide a certain balance to the trend of discrediting Switzerland and the wartime generation. The joint venture resists the further demolition of Switzerland’s reputation.”¹¹¹ It is an ongoing challenge for the Swiss people to integrate such a rich and manifold memory into their public memory culture and create an edifying but still truthful identity that people embrace and can live with. Switzerland, at last, is mastering its World War II past.

6. Conclusion

“Every nation and every country feeds on its myths. The function of the historian is not to destroy the myths. The only effect of that is to reproduce the myth in negative form, to create an anti-myth. In any case, the operation generally proves futile. The fact is that myths have their own existence, and though the assaults of historical logic may disturb that existence they cannot destroy it.”¹¹²

Over the second half of the 20th century, the Swiss government and a small group of key government figures, such as Petitpierre, General Guisan, and Bonjour worked hard to integrate Switzerland’s experience of World War II into a constructed and well-protected national self-image. The historical memory of the war became a keystone in maintaining Switzerland’s image as well-fortified, humanitarian, and neutral country in the heart of Europe. Over the years, first artists and intellectuals and then also a younger generation of historians attempted to paint a more realistic and truthful picture of Switzerland’s role during the war. But it was not until the 1990s that the Swiss myths were seemingly shattered through

¹¹⁰ Ludi, 238.

¹¹¹ Luzi Stamm, <http://www.luzi-stamm.ch/hintergrund/portrait/mitgliedschaft.htm> (accessed November 21, 2011).

¹¹² Bergier, 353.

external pressure after the revelation of the dormant accounts in Swiss banks of Holocaust era victims. I agree with Jean-François Bergier when he says that the existence of historical myths cannot be destroyed, although it seems like this happened during the 1990s. What first and foremost suffered during the 1990s was Swiss national pride. Not unlike the Americans, Swiss people are exceedingly proud of their country, its prosperity, natural beauty, and relative isolation from the world. For decades, Swiss people were used to sit on their “balcony over Europe,” cultivating their high living standards and being pleased with their proud civic culture. With the recent deconstruction of their treasured national World War II myths, and the revelation of parts of their history clashing with their self-image, Switzerland seemed to lose some of its identity. What happened in 1996 split a whole nation into two camps: the self-styled “patriots” adhered to the old myths, and the “progressives” (or in some people’s view, the “traitors”) accepted the darker aspects of the Swiss past. Switzerland will have to find a way how to live with the memory of their past and how to include it into their national identity. The International Commission of Experts, called into existence by the Swiss government in 1996, accused the country of having breached its neutrality and neglected its humanitarian duty during the war. This rung in a necessary paradigm shift in the way the collective national memory of the war was handled. The ICE’s critical findings of Switzerland’s role during World War II will hopefully encourage more open discourses on the country’s past in the future. The ICE report was a major step towards Switzerland at last beginning to master its complex and ambiguous World War II past.

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APPROVAL SHEET

This is to certify that Sara Maria Ormes-Ganarin has successfully completed
her Senior Honors Thesis, entitled:

A Masterable Past: Swiss Historical Memory of World War II


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