

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Review ESSAY

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/>

Published on **27 April 2012**

H-Diplo Review Essays Editor: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse

H-Diplo Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

H-Diplo Review Essay on ***Diplomatische Dokumente der Schweiz Band 23 (1.1.1964–31.12.1966)***. Zürich, Locarno, Genève: Chronos, Armando Dadò, Editions Zoé, 2011. 499 Seiten, ISBN 978-3-0340-1082-5 (CHF 78.--). [These documents are available online at www.dodis.ch].

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Hauser-DODIS.pdf>

Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Benedikt Hauser**, Swiss State Secretariat for Education and Research

Would anyone have expected leading protagonists like Leonid Brezhnev or Charles de Gaulle to have personally devoted some of their precious time to Switzerland? Most probably not. As plausible as this assumption may be, Volume 23 of the edition of *Swiss Diplomatic Documents* belies it.

It was indeed General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev himself, together with three other members of the Politburo, and Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin, who unexpectedly showed up at the Swiss Industrial Exposition in Moscow in June 1966, staying for more than two hours. The impression the Soviet leaders left is in stark contrast to the image of a sclerotic clique presiding over the destiny of a moribund empire, as they are often remembered now that the Cold War is over. Unlike high-ranking Swiss officials on similar occasions, as the Swiss Ambassador remarked, Brezhnev was technically well informed, asking expert questions, listening attentively to the answers and spontaneously completing his replies with jokes. The visit tellingly reflects Brezhnev's move to détente and its perception in the West: As Bern's representative in the Soviet capital concluded, Switzerland, like other western countries, henceforth had promising prospects for expanding trade relations with the USSR.

Charles de Gaulle's reasons for giving some thought to Switzerland were of a different nature. It was a courtesy visit at the *Elysée* by the Prince of Liechtenstein, arranged at his request by the Swiss Embassy in Paris, which prompted the French President to do so. Having coffee with his guests, de Gaulle ruminated on the course of history, criticising with some disappointment former Chancellor Konrad Adenauer for having sacrificed Eastern Germany to the Europe of Six, yet stating assertively, when asked by the Prince, that German unification would trigger *one* war for certain, and at least another one with Russia. The remark should not be belittled as a personal fancy of a man in his old age: over twenty years later, the unification of West and East Germany continues to have the effect of a red flag to the bull for French foreign policy: as

late as in December 1989, President François Mitterrand did not refrain from paying an official visit to the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In 1990, he expressed to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher his fears about a re-emergence of “the ‘bad’ Germans” who seemed “determined to use their influence to dominate Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary”, leaving “only Rumania and Bulgaria for the rest of us.”¹

As to the Swiss, de Gaulle amicably spoke of them as a bourgeois people with a tendency to use the press to magnify international events as threats and dangers far beyond their real relevance. One was probably supposed to deduce from this that small contented countries like Switzerland remained politically confined to their own parochial horizons: it was clearly France’s destiny to play a leading role as a driving force in shaping the world’s future.

Insights useful to historians also come from encounters at a lower level. The U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs William R. Tyler, for example, did not refrain from harshly criticising European States, Switzerland included, for distancing themselves from development aid. He reproached them for callously pursuing national objectives benefitting their own economies instead of committing themselves to fostering peace and combating misery. Reflecting the perception of the Cold War “as a clash of social systems” and the “rightness” of the cause,² he described development aid as a prerequisite for successfully fighting communism in the Third World. Tyler clearly made it understood to his Swiss counterpart that the Johnson administration would not stand idly by and was determined to exert pressure on U.S. allies, thereby pursuing a multilateral approach: the U.S. soon raised the issue at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which would inevitably internationalise the question and force Western Europe to sustainably improve coordination and increase financial assistance to developing countries in the southern hemisphere.

As seen from a specific Swiss perspective, one of the main challenges undoubtedly was internationalisation, which was considered not only as a steadily intensifying process, but also as a necessity if Switzerland was to remain competitive in the area of science and technology. However, the topic apparently was never generally analysed from an overarching conceptual angle. If ever it was brought up in terms of strategic options, it was in relation to the Swiss policy of neutrality which, outside Switzerland, was increasingly perceived as a morally questionable position: How could the country’s non-membership in the United Nations (UN) credibly be justified? Was it not highly objectionable, morally, to be silent when blacks were being massacred in South Africa? Could Switzerland continue to be “in the world but not of it”,³ as an internationally renowned magazine would concisely state some years later?

¹ Foreign Office, *Documents on British Policy Overseas (DBPO) Section III Volume VII, German Unification, 1989-1990, Letter from Mr. Powell (No 10) to Mr. Wall, 20 January 1990* (Routledge, 2009), p. 216, 218.

² Robert Jervis, “Identity and the Cold War,” in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War* Volume II, Crises and Détente, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 33.

³ *Newsweek*, 24 June 1996, in Thomas Maissen, *Verweigerter Erinnerung. Nachrichtenlose Vermögen und Schweizer Weltkriegsdebatte 1989-2004* (Zürich: Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 2005), p. 227. The article critically examined Swiss policies in the areas of dormant accounts and looted assets dating back to WW II.

Whether these questions were asked by U.S. officials, African scholars or journalists, Swiss diplomats found it increasingly difficult to give convincing answers. Neutrality, which, as it was remarked, could not officially be discussed,⁴ nevertheless was given a “quasi-absolute quality.”⁵ Not only did this repeatedly put the country under pressure and conversely damage its reputation, it most probably also stifled critical thinking and innovation within the diplomatic corps itself: when exploring possible avenues that would enable Switzerland to avoid joining in sanctions against Rhodesia and avoid being ostracised by the international community, its observer at the U.N. suggested practical working solutions. This was the only course of action he could recommend, as the only alternative he saw was the release of a dogmatic statement on neutrality (273).

There is little of great surprise in the collected documents from a thematic point of view. Seen through contemporary lenses, many of the issues seem to be recurrent, leaving the reader with the impression of déjà vu: European integration, double taxation, immigration, exportation of watches and war material, the practice of Swiss ‘good offices,’ bilateral mediation, hosting international organisations and conferences. All of these issues continue to be on the Swiss diplomatic agenda to the present day. What may be particularly noteworthy is that the U.S. tendency to give its own legislation extraterritorial effect,⁶ as it was phrased, was observed with some concern already back in 1965. On the other hand, issues that became the world’s top challenges some years later, raising major unprecedented questions to the international community, were apparently not perceived as possible future risks. Neither Switzerland’s economic vulnerability resulting from its dependency on oil-producing countries, as it turned out in 1973, nor the irreversible environmental damage, were considered as possible looming dangers. If ever problems were contemplated from a global perspective, as was the case of the Vietnam War, the predominant view was that of the Cold War and competition between the superpowers (100, 373).

The material reproduced in the present edition comprises only a small part of approximately 900 documents covering the same period. These documents are freely accessible online (www.dodis.ch). The editors’ objective in publishing the disclosed sources is to provide students with a compass that can provide initial orientation and guidance in an archival world where plethora, not scarcity, constitutes one of the major challenges to research. Furthermore, international history can no longer be confined to the records of Foreign Ministries. Ministers themselves, Secretaries of State or Ambassadors are certainly often vividly remembered, especially if their names stand for outstanding achievements or

⁴ When asked by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs William R. Tyler about the reasons for Switzerland’s neutrality in the present world, the representative of the Swiss Embassy in Washington was ready to talk about the subject only under the premise of an officially non-binding personal statement (7).

⁵ Daniel Möckli, “The Long Road to Membership: Switzerland and the United Nations”, in *Swiss Foreign Policy 1945-2002*, ed. Jürg Martin Gabriel and Thomas Fischer (Basinstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 46-73), p 57.

⁶ The text dated 5 February 1965 speaks of new regulations and the claim of the U.S. to have unlimited access to all activities of subsidiaries of U.S. financial institutions abroad (149).

shameful failures. Still, Swiss foreign policy was never the exclusive domain of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. The development of Switzerland's international relations should rather be seen as a constant process of bargaining among a multitude of players such as other Federal Departments, the Swiss Parliament, the Cantons, as well as a continuously growing number of protagonists such as economic lobbies, political parties, NGOs or the media. Consequently, numerous "non-diplomatic" documents were also taken into account, despite the volume's title. And rightly so: an understanding of Swiss international relations greatly depends on it.

Yet, the picture is far from complete. The insightful perspective of some of Switzerland's most influential players in international affairs, such as banks and insurance companies, remains largely unknown because their archives are mostly not accessible to historians for research. As long as respective evidence-based data and sources are lacking, the risk that the view on matters of crucial importance is lopsided or regrettably biased is unavoidable. Furthermore, it is an illusion to believe that the past can be controlled in an open society.

Benedikt Hauser graduated as an historian from the University of Basel, Switzerland in 1984. He is the author of studies on financial relations between Switzerland and Italy from 1936-1945. At present, he is the *Deputy Head of Education* at the *Swiss State Secretariat for Education and Research*, Bern.

Copyright © 2012 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.