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Switzerland Vis-a-Vis the Fall of the Polish State in September 1939. Status and Prospects for Research

*Szwajcaria wobec upadku państwa polskiego we wrześniu 1939 r.
Stan i perspektywy badań*

ABSTRACT

The outbreak of World War Two posed fundamental questions before Switzerland about the political future in the context of Germany's aggressive policy. Territorial claims laid by the Third Reich's elites towards the neighboring countries in the name of the unification of all Germans in one state were also dangerous to Switzerland, whose Alemannic citizens were perceived by Berlin as a part of the great German nation. The Swiss political class as well as the public opinion of the country closely observed Germany's actions, and in this context the Third Reich's aggression against Poland was one of the more essential points of Swiss collective memory about World War Two. This memory is very strongly

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marked, however, by local determinants and the specific geopolitical situation of Switzerland. That had a very distinct impact on the subjects of interest by Swiss historiography dealing with the WW2 years. The most important elements of the Swiss collective memory were: the threat from the Axis' powers and the need to mobilize society to defend the country, the problem of maintaining neutrality and the consequent matter of interning foreign military units crossing Switzerland's borders, the issue of potential war refugees, the problem of deposits in Swiss banks left by Holocaust victims, recognition of states that de facto ceased to exist as a result Germany's invasion, and the problem of mutual relations with the Allied powers both during the war and after it ended. The perception of the Polish question by Swiss historiography becomes part of the aforementioned planes, which explains a rather selective character of the Polish-Swiss subjects in Switzerland's historiography. They are confined mainly to the history of the internment of the Polish 2nd Rifle Division, problems concerning the recognition of the Polish government in London and emphasizing the pro-Polish sympathies of Swiss society.

Key words: Switzerland, World War Two, Swiss historiography, Polish-Swiss relations

STRESZCZENIE

Wybuch II wojny światowej postawił przed Szwajcarią fundamentalne pytania o przyszłość polityczną w kontekście agresywnej polityki Niemiec. Wysuwane przez elity III Rzeszy roszczenia terytorialne wobec sąsiednich krajów w imię jednoczenia wszystkich Niemców w jednym państwie były groźne także dla Szwajcarii, której alemańscy obywatele bywali postrzegani przez Berlin jako część wielkiego narodu niemieckiego. Helwecka klasa polityczna, a także opinia publiczna tego kraju, bacznie przyglądały się poczynaniom Niemiec i w tym kontekście agresja III Rzeszy na Polskę stanowiła jeden z istotniejszych punktów zbiorowej pamięci Szwajcarów o II wojnie światowej. Pamięć ta jest jednak bardzo mocno naznaczona lokalnymi uwarunkowaniami i specyficznym położeniem geopolitycznym Szwajcarii. Odbiło się to bardzo wyraźnie na tematyce, którą zainteresowane było helweckie dziejopisarstwo odnoszące się do lat II wojny światowej. Najważniejszymi elementami zbiorowej pamięci Szwajcarów były: zagrożenie ze strony państw Osi i potrzeba mobilizacji społeczeństwa do obrony kraju, problem zachowania neutralności i związana z tym kwestia internowania obcych jednostek przekraczających granice Szwajcarii, kwestia potencjalnych uchodźców wojennych, problem pozostawionych w bankach szwajcarskich depozytów przez ofiary Holocaustu, uznawanie państw, które de facto przestały istnieć wskutek agresji Niemiec oraz problem wzajemnych relacji z państwami alianckimi zarówno w czasie wojny, jak też po jej zakończeniu. Postrzeganie kwestii polskiej przez helwecką historiografię wpisuje się w wyżej naznaczone płaszczyzny, co tłumaczy dość wybiórczy charakter tematyki polsko-szwajcarskiej w tamtejszej historiografii. Ogranicza się ona głównie do historii internowania 2. Dywizji Strzelców Pieszych, problemów z zakresu uznawania polskiego rządu w Londynie oraz podkreślaniu propolskich sympatii tamtejszego społeczeństwa.

Słowa kluczowe: Szwajcaria, II wojna światowa, historiografia helwecka, związki polsko-szwajcarskie

When presenting the reaction of Switzerland as a state but also of its society to the problem of Poland's fall in 1939 and attempting to show the interest of Swiss historiography in this subject, it is necessary to somewhat

broaden the chronological scope of discussion beyond September 1939, both in the initial and final turning points. From the Swiss perspective, the Polish-German problems became part of a somewhat broader context than Warsaw's bilateral relations with Berlin, and, without outlining them, it is difficult to understand the Swiss viewpoint of the period in question. It is, however, specific, determined by an entirely different perception of some problems that might sometimes appear obvious like the very moment of the beginning of the war, or legal issues, including the recognition of states which de facto ceased to exist. Not without significance is also the problem of settling accounts with its own history and the role that Switzerland had to play during World War Two, which sometimes determines the choice of particular subjects by the Swiss narrative of that period.

The goal of the article is to indicate the key issues connected with the Third Reich's aggression against Poland that were of interest to the Swiss or had an impact on the local political life, as well as to point out their presence in later historiography. The present study is not a detailed analysis but a kind of survey of the subjects that, in the context of the September 1939 events, were significant to the Swiss for some reason, even if the subject matter can be regarded as of minor importance from the Polish point of view. This is also the case with a reverse viewpoint: some issues of fundamental importance to the Poles were marginalized by Swiss public opinion or were not noticed at all because they did not have the Swiss context.

The material basis of the study are the most important monographs devoted to World War Two that appeared in Switzerland, those that were testimony to the historical memory of the Swiss, as well as those that referred to the role of Switzerland in this world conflict. It should be noted that in post-war historiography this subject matter is characterized by a fairly irregular presence, which is determined by somewhat different objectives than, it appears, it was intended to serve. The first wave of publications on the subject appeared directly after the end of the war. In addition to the obvious informative functions, it exercised a fairly special role consisting in the 'proper' placing of Switzerland in the post-war world, which will be examined in the further part of the discussion. It should be stressed, however, that these studies were addressed first of all to the Swiss and did not aspire to the role of essential elements of war memory on a European or world scale¹. It was only the 1970s that produced in-depth studies on the history of Switzerland during the period

¹ As an example, see: P. Beguin, *Le Balcon sur l'Europe. Petite histoire de la Suisse pendant la guerre 1939–1945*, Neuchâtel 1951.

of World War Two, which should be explained by the generation change and the molding of their own historical memory by the generation that did not remember the war². Finally, the last renaissance of this subject in Switzerland were the 1990s, which stemmed, of course, from the need to come to terms with the country's own history, in particular with the problem of storing in Switzerland the gold plundered from the Jews³.

At the beginning, attention should be drawn to the rather special Swiss viewpoint on the question itself about the moment of the start of WW2. Obviously, September 1939 is generally presented as the starting point, but this approach is sometimes challenged in Swiss historiography. From the standpoint of world politics, it is difficult to eliminate such developments that fundamentally translated into the further course of the conflict, and had the character of an armed confrontation. Examples include Japan's intervention in China or at least the civil war in Spain, closer to the Europeans. In both cases we are dealing with the game of interests of world powers, direct or indirect involvement of particular governments or individual military officers, but also of societies of the countries not taking direct part in the conflict. Similarly, this also applies to other events, which, although they did not have an armed character, evidently influenced the outbreak of the war. The Anschluss of Austria and the partition of Czechoslovakia were the most characteristic examples. Finally, one cannot fail to include political-system changes that led to the downfall of democratic systems and elevation to power of dictatorships that bandied about the slogans of revisionism and nationalism or the export of revolution abroad, with fascism and communism being the most often cited examples.

In this context, September 1939 can be classified as another stage of the world conflict, whose origin was sought in the Versailles System. Sometimes there were even opinions in historiography that the two world wars can be treated as one great confrontation interrupted only by the exhaustion of both parties, and finally finished in 1945. The watershed of September 1, 1939 as the beginning of World War Two tended to be challenged also for the reason that it was the invasion of one country by another

² R. Cartier, *Der Zweite Weltkrieg*, Zürich 1977; W. Rings, *Schweiz im Krieg 1933–1945. Ein Bericht*, Zürich 1974.

³ B. Balzli, *Treuhänder des Reichs. Die Schweiz und die Vermögen der Naziopfer. Eine Spurensuche*, Zürich 1997; L. Van Dongen, *La Suisse face à la Seconde Guerre mondiale*, Genève 1997; G. Kreis, *La Suisse pendant la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale*, [no place of publication] 2000; M. Fior, *Die Schweiz und das Gold der Reichsbank. Was wusste die Schweizerische Nationalbank?*, Zürich 1997; W. Rings, *Raubgold aus Deutschland. Die „Golddrehscheibe“ Schweiz im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Zürich 1985.

and as such it did yet not cause consequences on a worldwide scale. The interest of public opinion in the events in Poland was certainly immense, but from the standpoint of the legal order or the range of military operations this was not regarded as a world conflict, just as it was not in the case of the aforementioned war of Japan with China. It was only the declaration of war on Germany by France and Great Britain that made the conflict, at least territorially, a world one in the sense that the two countries had their colonies scattered all over the globe. From the Swiss point of view, the war started, however, only in June 1940, when Germany started hostilities on the western front, which caused far-reaching consequences for the Swiss.

It should be noted here that such a perspective was influenced by several factors, one of them having its reference also to the Poles. First, Germany, as was the case during World War One, attacked a neutral country, i.e. the Netherlands, because the attack on Belgium surprised no one. The razing of Rotterdam to the ground by the Luftwaffe on 14 May 1940 made the Swiss realize no rules were valid in the West anymore, not only legal but also humanitarian ones. There was a widespread fear of a similar 'treatment' of Switzerland. While the September campaign in Poland might have seemed like a distant war with a country situated in entirely different geopolitical conditions, the bombing of a city in the neutral country bordering Germany in order to force it into quick capitulation was an event that had a significant impact on the Swiss perspective of perceiving the war and the question of its beginning. What's more, fears of that kind were present not only on the level of public opinion but also among some part of politicians well-versed in military politics. Switzerland's defense doctrine contained plans of a joint action with France against the Third Reich, a scheme of allowing the French army to pass through the Swiss territory was prepared, and bunkers were built on the northern border⁴. Presentations of Switzerland as France's secret ally that can be found in the studies referring to the first months of the war are also justified by the resolute and armed response of the Swiss air force to the incursions into its airspace by the Luftwaffe in the first months of the war⁵. Hence June 1940 was a far more significant moment to the Swiss than September 1939. Even if from the perspective of time the narrative

⁴ E. Bucher, *Zwischen Bundesrat und General. Schweizer Politik und Armee im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Zürich 1993, pp. 403–413; R. Fonbonne, *Les projets français d'intervention en Suisse 1939–1940*, "Histoire de Guerre" 2005, 56, pp. 16–21.

⁵ G.A. Chevallaz, *Le défi de la neutralité. Diplomatie et défense de la Suisse 1939–1945*, Vevey 1995, pp. 44–46; E. Wetter, *Duell der Flieger und der Diplomaten. Die Fliegerzwischenfälle Deutschland-Schweiz im Mai/Juni 1940 und ihre diplomatische Folgen*, Frauenfeld 1987.

about the beginning of the conflict in 1940 was not accepted by Swiss historiography on a large scale, this took place to a great extent on the level of social awareness. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the case of the memory of the Russians, to whom the war began in 1941, despite the fact that the Soviet Union had, by that time, managed to attack Poland and Finland.

The second important factor influencing the start of the war from the perspective of Swiss society in the Polish context is the internment by Switzerland of the 2nd Rifle Division commanded by Gen. Bronisław Prugar-Ketling. This formation, taking part in combat as part of the French XLV Army Corps, was forced during the military operations to cross the Swiss border together with its French allies, where it was interned. In the case of the French internees the problem ended with the capitulation of France, the formation of the Vichy government and with sending these soldiers home. The Polish division, however, was subordinated to the Polish government in London, which the Swiss consistently recognized until July 1945 as the only legal representation of the Polish state, and this state did not sign the capitulation. Hence the need to organize long-term internment and provide the Poles with living conditions in accordance with the rigors of international law under the 5th Hague Convention of 1907 r. (i.e. as soldiers interned in camps, who could not be released until the end of the war) became a certain challenge both to the authorities and to some part of society. It was the matter of 13 thousand people who, with time and doing the jobs they were entrusted with, were gradually integrated with the Swiss. The story of the internment was therefore the natural object of interest of the historiographies of both countries, although to a greater degree in Poland⁶.

The most important aspect of the Third Reich's aggression against Poland, which provoked Swiss discussion over the arisen situation and became a kind of leitmotif in local historiography, was, however, the German policy of territorial revindications pursued in the name of the unification of all areas inhabited by Germans. It should be remembered

⁶ M. Matyja, *Internowanie polskiej 2. Dywizji Strzelców Pieszych w Szwajcarii w latach 1940–1945 na podstawie V konwencji haskiej z 1907*, Łódź 2013; Z. Prugar-Ketling, *Zwyciężeni, ale nie pokonani: Polska Dywizja na szwajcarskiej ziemi 1940–1945*, Warszawa 2000; J. Smo-liński, *Polacy internowani w Szwajcarii (1940–1945)*, Warszawa 2003; T. Stempowski, *Polskie drogi przez Szwajcarię. Losy żołnierzy 2. Dywizji Strzelców Pieszych 1940–1945 na fotografiach ze zbiorów Muzeum Polskiego w Rapperswilu / Auf Polenwegen durch die Schweiz. Die Schicksalsjahre 1940–1945 im Leben der Soldaten der 2. Schützendivision, dargestellt in den Fotografien aus den Beständen des Polenmuseums in Rapperswil*, Warszawa–Rapperswil 2015; A. Vetulani, *Poza płomieniami wojny. Internowani w Szwajcarii 1940–1945*, Warszawa 1976.

that the Third Reich's policy in this respect did not refer only to the states that were beneficiaries of World War One lost by Germany and of the resulting change in the territorial shape of that country. Equally important was the aspect of the new definition of the idea itself of Germanness, which, according to a large portion of the German political class, associated in particular with the fascist movement, went far beyond the issues of the territorial affiliation of one region or another. The stakes were far higher, amounting to the need to end the several-centuries-long odyssey of the unification of Germany into one common state organism. This meant a return to the nineteenth-century discussion on who was in actual fact a German, or at least should consider him/herself German. According to some part of theorists of (not only German) nationalism, World War One ultimately ended the stage of defining ethnicity from the angle of state by changing this viewpoint, i.e. ethnicity should imply state affiliation (nationality) and not the other way round. In such an approach it was no longer necessary for the Austrians or the Alemannic Swiss to retain separate states. They all should be accepted by the Third Reich like the Alsatians or the inhabitants of the Sudetenland. Hence the active abolition of the Versailles System; in particular, the Munich Pact became a very distinct turning point that determined the way the German Swiss perceived the German measures intended to abolish one state or another in the name of realizing the abovementioned idea of uniting all Germans. The year 1938 was certainly not the beginning of the whole process of drawing the attention of the Swiss public to the potential threat from the north, but it was without doubt the most prominent moment and it is incredibly significant in this respect. After the Munich Agreement, Switzerland began to prepare very seriously for a military confrontation with the Third Reich, that is why attention was focused on the Polish problem as potentially the first that would begin the military stage of implementing the idea of uniting all 'Germans' in one state, with speculations whether and when the time would come for the Swiss Germans and with attempts to take preventive measures. Already in 1936 work started on adapting the economy to the political situation in Europe. In 1937 Prof. Paul Keller was appointed a plenipotentiary for war economy in the trade division of the Economic Department, which would be obliged to handle the problem⁷. However, it was only after the Third Reich's invasion of Poland that main actions were taken in this field. 'Economic diplomacy' was launched on a large scale to enable the conduct

⁷ H.U. Jost, *Politik und Wirtschaft im Krieg. Die Schweiz 1938–1948*, Zürich 1998, pp. 51.

of foreign trade under the changed geopolitical conditions in Europe, thereby securing Switzerland's own independence⁸.

When the war started, also the Swiss public turned very clearly towards the subject of preparation for potential German territorial claims. Many examples of this phenomenon could be provided. The most characteristic in this respect is the case of Gdansk. The question of incorporating it into the Reich was present long before September 1, 1939; nevertheless, it became a leading one from that date. The invasion by Germany was initially perceived by the Swiss not so much as a confrontation whose objective was to destroy Poland but more as a war for German Gdansk. The first newspaper headlines of most of the September issues presented the situation in this way. This stemmed certainly from the proclamation issued by the NSDAP Gauleiter Albert Forster about the incorporation of Gdansk into the Third Reich, while the perception of the war for the city on the Baltic rather than with the Poles as a nation was the dominant one in the first days of the war, with very few exceptions only⁹. The significance of the incorporation of Gdansk into the Third Reich as an element of the policy of reunification of the German nation was also attested by Hitler's and J. Ribbentrop's speeches on the subject, which the Swiss noticed and thoroughly analyzed¹⁰. Not without significance for the presence of the Gdansk theme was also the question of the Swiss living there and their fate¹¹. The best known of them was Carl Jacob Burckhardt holding the office of the League of Nations High Commissioner in Gdansk. This Swiss diplomat, who made many attempts to preserve peace before the outbreak of the war, was forced by A. Forster to leave Gdansk immediately after the war broke out, which of course became the object of interest in Switzerland¹². The press informed therefore about his evacuation, his journey to Kaunas, from where he finally reached Geneva, where he submitted a report to the League of Nations about the situation

⁸ Cf. H. Homberger, *Schweizerische Handelspolitik im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Erlenbach 1970.

⁹ The illustration of the perception of the situation can be such publications as: *Hitler beginnt den Krieg! Danzigs Ausschuß ans Reich*, "Berner Tagwacht" 1 September 1939; *Danzig als Teil des Deutschen Reiches proklamiert*, "Der Bund" 1 September 1939, Ausgabe 2; *Danzig ins Deutsche Reich einverleibt*, "Murtenbieter" 2 September 1939; *Danzig ab heute ein Teil des Deutschen Reiches*, "Bote vom Untersee und Rhein" 1 September 1939.

¹⁰ Among others: *Eine Rede Hitlers in Danzig*, "Bieler Tagblatt" 20 September 1939; *Rede Ribbentrops in Danzig*, "Der Bund" 25 October 1939, Ausgabe 2.

¹¹ M. Andrzejewski, *Schweizer in Polen. Spuren der Geschichte eines Brückenschlages*, Basel 2002, pp. 253–256; *Die Schweizer in Danzig*, "Oberländer Tagblatt" 5 September 1939; *Die Schweizer in Danzig*, "Engadiner Post" 9 September 1939, no. 104.

¹² *Burkhard hat Danzig verlassen*, "Der Bund" 2 September 1939; *Völkerbundskommissar Burckhard verläßt Danzig*, "Bieler Tagblatt" 2 September 1939.

in the Free City of Gdansk¹³. The violation of international law, which was the expulsion of C.J. Burckhardt, provoked in any case the Swiss periodicals to identify and comment on analogous situations, this time affecting the Polish population or Polish institutions in Gdansk or those belonging to the Free City¹⁴. Very soon this resulted in some change in the viewpoint of Swiss comments on the war, which was gradually becoming a far deeper conflict than territorial questions, while German actions contributed to arousing natural sympathies for the Poles.

Another, almost equally characteristic object of interest by the Swiss in the context of the war for the territory inhabited by Germans was Upper Silesia. Also here the history of struggle for state affiliation after World War One had its Swiss context, and was even more significant for the Swiss public than Gdansk itself. It should be reminded that at the time of forming the borders of the reborn Republic of Poland, these territories were ultimately divided between Germany and Poland after three Silesian uprisings, but, in order to guarantee basic national freedoms to the populations in those areas regardless of which state they came to live in and in order to preserve the efficiency of the local infrastructure divided between the two political organisms, the two countries were obligated to conclude a special convention on this matter. To observe the provisions of the Geneva Conference on Upper Silesia of 15 May 1922, the Upper Silesian Mixed Commission was set up with the headquarters in Bytom and headed by Swiss Chairman Felix L. Calonder. The Commission worked until 1937 and during the fifteen years of its functioning it managed to rivet the attention of Swiss society, the more so that its chairman held high state positions: he was, among others, Chief of the Department of Internal Affairs, Department of Political Affairs (Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs), and President of Switzerland¹⁵. F.L. Calonder was an ardent follower of the Wilsonian idea of national self-determination and during his political activity in the international sphere he often devoted himself to such problems, which additionally won him support as a defender of values that were fundamental to the political culture of the Swiss. In addition to the cause of Upper Silesia he also committed

¹³ Prof. Dr. Karl Burckhardt in Genf, "Oberländer Tagblatt" 29 September 1939.

¹⁴ *Die Deutsche Reichsbank übernimmt die Bank von Danzig*, "Der Bund", 10 September 1939, Band 90, no. 421; *Einziehung des polnischen Staatsvermögens in Danzig*, "Der Bund" 6 September 1939, Ausgabe 2; *Konfiskation des polnischen Eigentums in Danzig*, "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" 6 September 1939; *Raub des polnischen Vermögens in Danzig*, "Bieler Tagblatt" 6 September 1939; *Vermögensraub in Danzig*, „Berner Tagwacht" 6 September 1939.

¹⁵ J. Simonett, Felix Calonder, in: *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz*, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/003562/2003-07-14/> [access: 12.12.2023].

himself to the work of the League of Nations Commission for the Aland Islands or was active for the recognition of the right of the Vorarlberg inhabitants to join Switzerland. After he ended his mission in Silesia, Calonder returned to Switzerland and opened a law office in Zurich but he was still one of the most recognizable personalities of Switzerland's political life, hence his 'flagship' issue of Upper Silesia became an object of keen interest of the Swiss in September 1939.

Another significant aspect that influenced the perception of the September 1939 events was the question of potential civil refugees, who might appear in the Swiss territory. The problem was one of essential issues that determined the internal life of the country during World War One. The experience of that period required that the federal authorities should adopt appropriately early precautionary measures mainly in order to prevent a situation in which some larger group of foreign nationals arriving in the Confederation's territory would disturb Switzerland's foreign relations or, which was equally essential, lead to internal upheavals. After Hitler took over power in Germany, and especially after the Nuremberg Laws, such a group were German Jews seeking shelter on the Aare. The Swiss authorities devoted considerable attention to the issue, seeking potential ways of solving the approaching migration crisis. In this context they usually looked to the United States, where Jewish communities played a considerable role and could to some extent exert pressure on the U. S. Congress and President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The American side took up the subject but its viewpoint was diametrically different from the expectations of the Swiss. Washington insisted on establishing special quotas of refugees that every country interested in the problem would pledge to receive. The United States were the first to define this quota for itself expecting the other countries to do the same. The Swiss found this solution unacceptable because it was harmful to their current asylum policy to which they were attached, and, what was even more difficult to accept, it imposed the adoption of solutions prepared by foreign countries. The resistance of Bern was so great that the idea of organizing a conference on this matter by the Swiss was eventually abandoned. The conference was held on 6–15 July 1938 in Évian-les-Bains, a small town in France situated near Switzerland on the other side of the Geneva Lake. The place of the conference itself was meant to be a kind of pressure on the Swiss who, from the moment the League of Nations chose Geneva as its headquarters, worked intensely to develop international recognizability and achieved specific political capital by organizing diverse agencies of the new international organization. The conference was attended by representatives of 32 governments of Western European states and from both Americas. Despite the fact that already before the

sessions began it was decided that none of the countries participating in the meeting would be forced to change its immigration policy, the conference turned out to be a fiasco. It did not end in any concrete decision apart from the establishment of the Intergovernmental Committee for Political Refugees, which managed to assemble only three times before the outbreak of the war, without any meaningful results¹⁶. Incidentally, during the conference Switzerland was represented by Chief of the Aliens' Police (Fremdenpolizei) Heinrich Rothmund, who obtained the result that Switzerland refused further cooperation in this field as the only European country. Although the last session of the committee in question took place in his presence, his role consisted only in informing the others that Switzerland considered itself a transit country and would take into consideration the so-called Judenstempel – a special seal on the passports of German Jews to identify them as potential immigrants.

In such a situation, the Third Reich's attack on Poland could potentially be another shock reactivating the apparently closed issue of receiving Jewish refugees because according to official figures alone there were ca. 3.47 million Jews in Poland. Nothing of the sort happened for various reasons, mainly because of unfavorable geopolitical conditions resulting in the choice of other directions of emigration or – which was more often the case – entirely preventing it. This does not mean, however, that in the context of Poland's military collapse and the occupation of its territory by Germany the Jewish question did not appear in the space of Swiss public opinion and later in Switzerland's historiography as well as in the coming to terms with the past. From the very beginning, this problem was divided into two competing narratives: the attitude of the authorities and that of society. The former was exceedingly useless and even restrictive and amounted to the well-known policy of 'Das Boot ist voll' ['The boat is full']¹⁷. With time and as the threat of the Third Reich's open aggression against Switzerland receded, the asylum policy regime was relaxed, which made it possible to save thousands of Jews but this happened mainly in the last years of the war and in no way does it change the image of the unfriendly attitude of the federal authorities. In contrast, Swiss society themselves showed considerable sensitivity.

¹⁶ A. Straw, *The Evian Conference – Hitler's Green Light for Genocide*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-evian-conference> [access: 12.12.2023].

¹⁷ Cf. U. Gast, *Aspekte schweizerischer Fremden- und Flüchtlingspolitik vor und während des Zweiten Weltkrieges*, in: *Schweden, die Schweiz und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, eds. I. Lindgren, R. Walder, Frankfurt am Main 2001, pp. 203–220; A.A. Häsler, *Das Boot ist voll. Die Schweiz und die Flüchtlinge 1933–1945*, Zürich 1967; H.U. Jost, *op. cit.*, pp. 118–127; C. Ludwig, *La politique pratiquée par la Suisse à l'égard des réfugiés de 1933 à nos jours*, Lausanne 1957.

The population of the border cantons repeatedly faced the situation when illegal refugees were caught by the police or prevented from reaching the Swiss side, or those who managed to do so were sent to Germany. This often provoked protests, actions of civil disobedience or Bern's official directives were simply sabotaged, which was done not only by diverse aid organizations or even individual citizens but also sometimes by canton authorities.

From the Polish standpoint, the aspect of reluctance to receive civil refugees was of negligible importance hence it played a far lesser role in comparison with the Swiss-French or Austrian-Swiss relations. Somewhat different, however, is the issue of the involvement of the Poles themselves in saving Jews (not necessarily with Polish citizenship), which took place in Switzerland. The activity in this field by some employees of the Legation of the Polish Republic in Bern consisting in the mass production of forged passports of South American countries and in distributing them to Jews in danger of transportation to concentration camps was impressive. This so-called Ładoś group¹⁸ (also called the Bern group) saved about 10 thousand people in this way¹⁹. It worked under difficult, clandestine conditions, being exposed to persecution by the Swiss police and running the risk of compromising the Legation in the eyes of international opinion as an institution breaking all the rules that apply to a diplomatic mission. It was the object of interest by the aforementioned Chief of Fremdenpolizei – H. Rothmund, and by the member of the Federal Council, favorably disposed to the Germans, Marcel Pilet-Golaz, who conducted Swiss foreign policy. The activity of the Poles (in cooperation with the Jewish communities) was certainly not known to larger circles hence it is difficult to assess in any way how this type of actions could have been construed by the Swiss. The subject itself appeared in the public space comparatively recently owing to the popularization efforts of the Polish authorities, particularly of the Republic of Poland's former ambassador to Bern Jakub Kumoch²⁰. It aroused incidentally certain

¹⁸ The initiator and main coordinator of the action was the Polish envoy in Bern in 1940–1945 Aleksander Ładoś.

¹⁹ A. Haska, „Proszę Pana Ministra o energiczną interwencję”. Aleksander Ładoś (1891–1963) i ratowanie Żydów przez Poselstwo RP w Bernie, *„Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały”* 2015, 11, pp. 299–309.

²⁰ J. Kumoch, *Grupa Berneńska – dyplomaci Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z pomocą Żydom. Wystąpienie ambasadora RP w Szwajcarii dr. Jakuba Kumocha, wygłoszone 4 lutego 2018 r. w Muzeum Pamięci Shoah w Paryżu*, *„Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny”* 2018, 2; *Lista Ładosia. Spis osób, na których nazwiska w okresie II wojny światowej zostały wystawione paszporty latynoamerykańskie przez Poselstwo RP i organizacje żydowskie w Szwajcarii*, ed. J. Kumoch, Warszawa 2019, p. 70; M. Maniewska, J. Uszyński, B. Zygmunt, *The Ładoś list*, Warsaw 2020.

controversies connected with the wrong assessment and even distortion of facts by Jewish circles (e.g. Yad Vashem). It is therefore a relatively little investigated area and without doubt worthy of both an in-depth monographic study and popularization.

An entirely different position is occupied by another question partly connected with the fall of the Polish state and then with the policy of extermination of the Jewish population introduced by the German authorities. The issue is about deposits left in the Swiss banks by Holocaust victims. Owing to bank secrecy and the obvious benefits derived from that situation by the Swiss financial circles, this subject was entirely absent from the space of Swiss public opinion. This was, as a matter of fact, the case not only during the war but also long after it ended. In such a situation it is extremely difficult to determine how this problem influenced the perception of the war by an average Swiss citizen. Obviously, the whole issue goes far beyond the problems of Polish-Swiss relations because there were far more victims of the Holocaust than only Polish citizens of Jewish nationality. Nevertheless, it is impossible to pass over this matter in silence when studying the question of the correlation between the Third Reich's invasion of Poland and the resulting consequences for Switzerland albeit in the longer term. These problems became an object of increased interest of historians as late as in the 1990s. Numerous, not necessarily always scientific, publications on the subject resulted in the creation of a special compensatory fund financed by Swiss banks, which closed the matter to some extent. In Poland this matter did not, however, have any greater repercussions, which stemmed mainly from the takeover by the Jewish circles, chiefly in the United States, of the legal legacy left by Holocaust victims, and in this context the dormant bank accounts had more impact on the American-Israeli-Swiss relations rather than on Polish-Swiss ones. Incidentally, it should be added that the 1990s in Polish historiography regarding the Swiss theme were very fruitful for a change and brought a number of publications, from the first comprehensive monograph of Switzerland by J. Wójtowicz to the studies by H. Florowska-Frančić, M. Andrzejewski and by several other authors, which almost completely satisfied the interest in the history of Switzerland by Polish readership and created a very favorable image of the Swiss and mutual relations over the centuries.

Another aspect that was an object of interest by the Swiss authorities in the context of Germany's invasion of Poland and the resulting consequences for both states was the question of legal recognition of the Polish state's continuity in the situation when Poland was under complete German and Soviet occupation. It was not a self-evident question and caused both many legal and practical problems to the Swiss. The main

problem was the stance of Berlin, which, after September 1939, consistently demanded that all states not directly involved in the conflict should shut down the Polish diplomatic posts. From the standpoint of governments of the states situated on the frontiers of Europe, such as Sweden or Portugal, the problem was not urgent and could be postponed in time. The situation of Switzerland was entirely different – it was not only surrounded at each side by the Axis powers but also fundamentally dependent on the deliveries of mineral goods because Switzerland has none at all (except water). The risk of economic blockade, which would eventually result in the collapse of the economy, or simply the threat of direct military intervention by the Third Reich were the arguments that could not be ignored. Initially, the Swiss tried to apply solutions of the World War One period when the comparatively restrictive censorship (for a neutral country) and occasional interventions of the federal authorities or cantonal police towards excessively exhibited sympathies by the Swiss or towards alien elements (which happened more often) to some extent quenched the annoyance of the interested governments of the warring states. It turned out very soon, however, that such a policy can be applied as a balance between one side and the other but it cannot be pursued in the conditions of total isolation. On top of that there were also problems with a fairly popular fascist movement called ‘frontism’ in Switzerland²¹. The ideas propagated by its followers - of introducing ‘authoritarian democracy’ or directly urging political and cultural unification with Germany as it happened in the case of Austria - were a very real risk of disintegration of the Swiss Confederation²². It should be added that this movement had its adherents not only in the ‘street’

²¹ Cf. H. Bütler, „Wach auf, Schweizer Volk!“. *Die Schweiz zwischen Frontismus, Verrat und Selbstbehauptung 1914–1940*, Bern 1980; B. Glaus, *Die nationale Front. Eine schweizer faschistische Bewegung 1930–1940*, Zürich, Einsiedeln, Köln 1969; W. Rüthemann, *Volksbund und SGAD, Nationalistische Schweizerische Arbeiter Partei, Schweizerische Gesellschaft der Freude einer Autoritären Demokratie*, Zürich 1979; Y. Schumacher: *Nazis! Fascistes! Fascisti!: Faschismus in der Schweiz 1918–1945*, Zürich 2019; W. Wolf, *Faschismus in der Schweiz. Die Geschichte der Frontenbewegungen in der deutschen Schweiz 1930–1945*, Zürich 1969; K.D. Zöberlein: *Die Anfänge des deutschschweizerischen Frontismus: die Entwicklung der politischen Vereinigung “Neue Front” und “Nationale Front” bis zu ihrem Zusammenschluss im Frühjahr 1933*, Meisenheim a. G. 1970.

²² This aspect was also raised relatively often by later Swiss historiography inter alia: J. Adam, *Haltung der Schweiz gegenüber dem nationalsozialistischem Deutschland im Jahre 1940*, Mainz 1972; D. Bourgeois, *Le Troisième Reich et la Suisse 1933–1941*, Neuchâtel 1974; J. Fink, *Die Schweiz aus der Sicht des Dritten Reiches 1933–1945*, Zürich 1985; A. Meyer, *Anpassung oder Widerstand. Die Schweiz zur Zeit des deutschen Nationalsozialismus*, Frauenfeld 1966; K. Urner, «Die Schweiz muss noch geschluckt werden !», Zürich 1997.

but its followers were sometimes representatives of the intellectual circles significantly influencing or even molding its ideological character and contributing to its spread in the intelligentsia circles²³. In that situation the issue of recognizing or not recognizing the authorities of the state that in fact ceased to exist could by no means balance potential losses in case of open aggression by Germany or at least of the ruining of the Swiss political system. Finally, the Bundesrat (the Swiss government) defined the assumptions of Swiss policy in the diplomatic space for the period of war that consisted in the principle that Switzerland recognized all countries that did not sign capitulation regardless of whether they controlled their territories or not. All changes on that level could be carried out only after the end of the armed conflict and the establishment of a new political order through a peace treaty.

The political line thus defined compelled Switzerland to maintain diplomatic relations also with Poland's government-in-exile. This led to numerous turbulent moments both on the level of German-Swiss relations and in the context of the later political struggle for the shape of Poland's political system in 1944–1945. However, from the standpoint of ordinary citizens of the Swiss Confederation this matter was of small significance, at least such conclusions result from the analysis of the published press articles in Switzerland devoted to the developments in Poland. With reference to September 1939, reports on the course of military operations prevail in the local press, and, of course, humanitarian actions for the Poles, who had already, one could say, traditionally taken advantage of Swiss support in their history of struggle for independence in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The above-outlined elements influencing the perception by Swiss society of the events in 1939 and the subsequent years of the war gradually blended into two basic subjects underlying the collective Swiss memory of World War Two, both on the level of social consciousness and historiography. They are worth recalling when trying to define the perspective of research on this period in Switzerland and the resulting consequences for its historical policy.

The first subject is the issue of the indomitable attitude of the Swiss to the threat from the Axis powers, in particular Germany. From the end of the war until the 1970s, in the Swiss public space there were

²³ Some of the most important figures of science and culture who promoted frontism were Gonzague de Reynolds and Paul Lang, who laid the foundations for the belief that democracy had exhausted its formula and the development of society should move in the direction of authoritarianism. W. Wolf, *Paul Lang*, in: *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz*, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/028231/2008-11-13/> [access: 07.12.2023].

ever-present posters referring to the famous renewal of the Rütli Oath²⁴, pictures of Gen. H. Guisan, iconography referring to the 'civil mobilization' of all social estates for work, not necessarily on the front, to preserve independence. A very important role was played by the publications referring to the Swiss army, its Commander-in Chief Gen. Henri Guisan and the ethos of the Helvetian-the soldier, which was, in any case, a permanent element of the Swiss memory of the 1939–1945 events²⁵ The presence of this type of pictures in the public space and the increased number of publications were not the remnants of the past war but were an essential element of active self-promotion or even of creating the identity of the Swiss. Hence the graphic motifs referring to the staunch will to remain neutral were put in all important places or at least in those where they were sufficiently intensely displayed (federal and cantonal offices, post offices, railway stations etc.)²⁶. Interestingly enough, this steadfast will to oppose potential aggression was articulated only towards the Axis powers while in reality during the war the Swiss contended with quite serious problems of protecting their own territory and the status of a non-aligned state against the actions of the Allies, principally the Americans. Violations of Swiss airspace and even bombings of the Swiss territory by the British and American air forces were not unusual, which is attested by 7379 air-raid warnings issued in that country during the war. What's more, some of the bombings, as it turned out later, were not accidental, i.e. caused by navigation errors or bad weather. Some of them were planned in detail and were meant to raze to the ground industrial plants that manufactured equipment used by the Third Reich, mainly products of precision engineering. The bombardment of Basle, Schaffhausen, Zurich, Geneva and a dozen or so other towns (although to a very limited extent) drove the Swiss to irritation and made them introduce a procedure for absolutely shooting down all aircraft without warning. Additionally, the fairly frequent cases of American airplanes, damaged by the German air defense, landing on the territory of the neutral country was the reason why a special internment camp was established for American pilots. The conditions in the camp and the unfavorable attitude of the population

²⁴ On 25 July 1941 on the Rütli meadow (the site where a pact was made in 1291, which is recognized as the beginning of Switzerland's history) a solemn oath was sworn by Swiss officers and NCOs vowing to defend the country in case of aggression by the Third Reich.

²⁵ O.F. Fritschi, *Geistige Landesverteidigung während des Zweiten Weltkrieges. Der Beitrag der Schweizer Armee zur Aufrechterhaltung des Durchhaltewillens*, Winterthur 1971; W. Gautschi, *General Henri Guisan. Die schweizerische Armeeführung im Zwierten Weltkrieg*, Erich 1989.

²⁶ G. Kreis, *Schweiz*, in: *Mythen der Nation. 1945 – Arena der Erinnerungen*, vol. 2, ed. M. Flacke, Berlin 2005, p. 594.

towards the interned American pilots were a clear sign of disapproval for the Allied actions. Hence after the war there was an urgent need to delete or at best to marginalize this kind of subjects in Swiss memory and, characteristically, to 'assign oneself' to the camp of victorious defenders of freedom and democracy.

The other significant comment is that Swiss neutralism during World War Two was clearly deformed towards so-called 'holy egotism'. The issue of neutrality, its determinants and practical application of the policy of non-involvement in armed conflicts played a huge role in Swiss political life. From the Vienna Congress, where such a role in European policy was imposed on the Swiss, the problem of neutrality was redefined several times by the Swiss themselves. During the period of Napoleon's fall, when Switzerland began to be regarded as neutral, its neutrality was understood as not being involved in any attempts to return to revolutionary ideals, which in that country were, in any case, associated more with French occupation and 'the terror of freedom' than with the realization of noble slogans used by the revolution. The first upheaval in this field was the Spring of Nations, which, in the case of this Alpine country, meant throwing off the role of the stabilization element previously imposed on it, as a result of which the Swiss turned towards socio-economic liberalism (although not in every canton), and neutrality began to be understood as non-interference of the neighboring countries in the political and legal solutions of the newly established state (Switzerland), which did not on its part try to promote its own ideas in the neighboring states. The second half of the 19th century was marked by Switzerland's active involvement in international politics with respect to meeting problems and making attempts at international mediations. The beginning was the famous case of Alabama Claims concerning financial settlements between the United States and Great Britain in connection with the British support for the Confederate States of America and provisioning its ships during the American Civil War. At the same time, the second vital branch of neutralism was developed which was humanitarian activity. Henri Dunant's initially private initiative to establish an aid organization for war victims was backed up by the federal government, and the founding of the International Red Cross with its headquarters in Geneva as well as the adoption by this organization of the marking that was the reverse color of the Swiss flag became, as it were, the icon of this activity of Switzerland. In turn, the Alpine republic, albeit not without difficulties, went through the period of World War One very skillfully, continuing its earlier traditions. In 1914–1915 Switzerland acted as an intermediary on very different levels in contacts between the warring countries. The range of matters in which the Swiss were involved was so great that Bern

had to set up a special agency specializing in diplomatic mediation²⁷. Although the period of World War Two did not stop this activity, on the contrary, it significantly increased it, yet the position assumed by the Swiss state changed from that of an active creator of potential solutions into a passive participant in the international constellation, concerned above all with its own interests, forced by the situation of being surrounded on all sides by one military bloc. Switzerland's policy, both foreign and domestic, was therefore largely meant to keep the distance to the Western Allies as long as possible with the simultaneous reversal of narrative as the situation developed. Hence the noticeable tendency to involve Swiss industry in cooperation with the Third Reich, turning a blind eye to the gold of doubtful provenance brought to Switzerland or taking into consideration the German expectations regarding the Swiss asylum policy at the beginning of the war and, on the other hand, eager participation in the program of rebuilding Europe²⁸ and the narrative about the staunch will to defend the fatherland in the last years of the conflict. After 1945 the issue of maintaining neutrality, its definition and practical determinants became therefore a very important element in Swiss literature²⁹. One can even venture a thesis that it was (or tended to be) even a dominant one and unlike the others that element was present in fact in every decade, regardless of what tendencies were currently prevalent. Not only legal but also social, military, economic and sometimes moral aspects of neutrality were analyzed, at times comparing the position of Switzerland to other neutral countries³⁰.

²⁷ J. Wójtowicz, *Historia Szwajcarii*, Wrocław 1989, p. 210.

²⁸ The participation of Switzerland was of no small importance. Cf. G.F. Bauer, *La participation de la Suisse à la reconstruction économique de l'Europe au lendemain de la Seconde guerre mondiale (1947–1948)*, in: *Cinq siècles de relations franco-suissees. Hommage à Louis-Edouard Roulet*, Neuchâtel 1984, pp. 305–323.

²⁹ The best known study devoted to the subject is the nine-volume work by a Basle historian E. Bonjour, see: E. Bonjour, *Geschichte der schweizerischen Neutralität – Vier Jahrhunderte eidgenössischer Aussenpolitik*, Basel 1965–1976.

³⁰ Out of very many studies devoted to the problem, the following should be named: G.A. Chevallaz, *op. cit.*, Vevey 1995, p. 273; U. Gast, *Aspekte schweizerischer Fremden- und Flüchtlingspolitik vor und während des Zweiten Weltkrieges*, in: *Schweden, die Schweiz und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, eds. I. Lindgren, R. Walder, Frankfurt am Main 2001, pp. 203–220; H.U. Jost, *op. cit.*, pp. 118–127; P. Marguerat, *La Suisse et la neutralité dans le domaine économique pendant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale 1940–fin 1944*, in: *Les états neutres européens et la Seconde Guerre Mondiale*, ed. L.-E. Roulet, Neuchâtel 1985; H.R. Reginbogin, *Enemies and Friends. Eine Analyse der finanzwirtschaftlichen Verflechtungen zwischen den kriegführenden und neutralen Ländern 1938–1945*, in: W. Hofer, H.R. Reginbogin, *Hitler, der Westen und die Schweiz*, Zürich 2003, pp. 451–465; *Schwädische und schweizerische Neutralität im Zweiten*

Looking comprehensively at the Swiss memory of the events of 1939 and their consequences both for the Swiss themselves and other nations a conclusion thus arises that is somewhat selective. Certainly, the area of interest was strongly determined by the specificity of Switzerland's geopolitical situation, but this only partly explains the whole problem. While under the conditions of war it was fundamental for the perception of current events to take account of the German threat, after several decades from the end of the conflict one could expect a considerable broadening of the scope of potential research subjects that could be studied by Swiss historiography. Nothing of the sort happened to a greater degree. Its literature remained focused on the typical Swiss aspects of the war, with neutrality and the will to maintain freedom as the main ones. All larger and major studies revolved around this subject matter, while other issues were raised only when this was forced by external conditions, for example the question of dormant accounts of Holocaust victims. A similar remark arises with regard to Polish-Swiss motifs of the World War Two period: this area for the most part concerns the history of the internment of the 2nd Rifle Division, which matches the narrative about the neutral country supporting those fighting for freedom. It remains an open question whether the Swiss circles of historians are interested in changing this state of affairs. It appears that also on this level Switzerland is following its own path.

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NOTA O AUTORZE

Piotr Bednarz – doktor habilitowany, pracownik Instytutu Historii Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej w Lublinie. Zainteresowania naukowe koncentrują się wokół tematyki szwajcarskiej. W szczególności interesuje się procesem formowania się świadomości narodowej Szwajcarów w kontekście skomplikowanych stosunków etnicznych, religijnych i językowych panujących w Szwajcarii. Drugim polem badawczym są stosunki szwajcarsko-polskie ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem przełomowych momentów w historii obu stuleci: okresu napoleońskiego, pierwszej i drugiej wojny światowej.