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Dossier for Swiss representations and the media concerning the end of Switzerland's mandates to represent United States interests in Cuba and Cuban interests in the United States

PRESENCE SWITZERLAND

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Summary: From the end of the 19th century, but particularly during the Second World War, Switzerland took on a large number of mandates to represent the diplomatic interests of foreign states in third countries, mainly due to its policy of neutrality. Its mandate to represent the United States in Cuba is the longest in Swiss history. It lasted from 1961 to 2015, albeit in reduced form from 1977 when management of the United States Interests Section in Havana was taken over by US officials working in their former embassy. Between 1961 and 1980, the Swiss delegation faced many challenges.

From 1961 onwards, it engaged intensively in negotiations and worked hard to find solutions benefiting US citizens and interests in Cuba. This was especially true in the first years, amid the global tensions resulting from the Cold War. Discreetly but effectively, the Swiss representation in Cuba acted as a privileged intermediary between the two governments, a neutral but effective player in extremely tense political situations. In particular, it was instrumental in enabling 260,000 Cubans to leave for the United States.

Introduction

Between 1914 and 1918 and again during the Second World War, Switzerland took on a large number of mandates to represent the interests of foreign states in third countries, mainly due to its policy of neutrality in a conflict-torn world.

The United States' proposal in October 1960 that Switzerland should represent US interests in Cuba was unexpected, especially given the small size of the Swiss diplomatic mission compared with the staff of other countries such as the United Kingdom. However, its neutrality combined with its long-standing experience as a protecting power for foreign interests, dating back to the Franco-German War of 1870-1871, meant that Switzerland's good offices were called upon numerous times throughout the 20th century. It assumed 36 mandates during the First World War and 200 during the Second World War, when it represented the interests of 35 nations, including the United States and most of the other warring parties. Its assistance was also repeatedly sought during the first period of the Cold War between 1947 and 1963, most notably in the immediate aftermath of the Suez Crisis of 1956. These mandates were gradually rescinded until 1961. From 6 January 1961, just after the breaking of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States, Switzerland began to represent US interests in Cuba. This representation mandate is the longest in Swiss history, lasting from 1961 until the present, albeit in reduced form from 1977 when management of the United States Interests Section in Havana was taken over by US officials working in their former embassy. Between 1961 and 1980, the Swiss delegation faced many challenges.

1. Breaking of diplomatic relations and Switzerland's role as a protecting power

In January 1961, following the breaking of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba, Switzerland agreed to take on the mandate of protecting US interests in Havana. The request was made by US Secretary of State Christian Herter to the Swiss ambassador in Washington, August Lindt. His counterpart in Havana, Walter Bossi, was informed by the government in Bern of the Federal Council's decision to accept the mandate subject to the





consent of the Cuban authorities. The ambassador in Havana quickly secured this agreement after Czechoslovakia agreed to represent Cuba in Washington. The first major task was to explain to the new revolutionary government the international rules governing the role of a protecting power. Nine Swiss personnel were dispatched immediately to replace the 60 or so US officials. This preliminary assignment was overseen by ambassador Gaston Jaccard and his advisor Emil Stadelhofer, who would become Switzerland's ambassador to Cuba in November 1961. From the outset, the priority for the Swiss delegation, which assumed both the consular and diplomatic mandate, was to organise the departure of US citizens – a challenging task that would be one of the embassy's main preoccupations throughout the mandate.

From spring 1961, tensions ran high between the United States and Cuba, with the attempted invasion of the Bay of Pigs and other disputes surrounding the confiscation of ships and aircraft registered in one country but located in the other. The archives attest to intense diplomatic activity and many attempts by the Swiss embassy to explain and to ease tensions. Fidel Castro and his senior officials soon decided to meet Emil Stadelhofer – then still chargé d'affaires – in person: sending notes and cables via Bern and Washington took too long and the problems were urgent. A direct dialogue was established, as testified by the various photos from the Swiss Federal Archives attached to this document. From 1961 onwards, Stadelhofer – who undoubtedly played the most intense role of any Swiss ambassador during the 55-year mandate – built up a close and confiding relationship with the Cuban government, then subject to various destabilisation attempts by the CIA. He would frequently remind his interlocutors of the principles of public international law, while maintaining a strict neutrality that gained him much credit with the Líder Máximo. He also came up with quick and pragmatic solutions that met with the approval of the Cuban government, at least as regards the departure of US citizens. The issue of political prisoners and individuals arrested after the failed invasion of the Bay of Pigs proved harder to resolve. Nonetheless, the Swiss embassy showed constant concern for their plight and endeavoured to enforce humanitarian law, in accordance with its mandate and the Swiss tradition.

2. Switzerland's role as intermediary in the Cuban Missile Crisis

In 1962, with the Soviet missile crisis threatening to transform Cuba into an offensive nuclear basis, thereby triggering a third world war, the Swiss delegation played a discreet but nonetheless crucial role. In a televised address on 22 October 1962, John F. Kennedy announced a blockade on all deliveries of military equipment to Cuba and demanded the withdrawal of Soviet missiles already on the island. According to the memoirs of diplomat Edouard Brunner, the US Secretary of State Dean Rusk spoke in these terms to August Lindt, the Swiss ambassador to Washington: "If I have called you it is to ask a favour of you that only you, as the Swiss representative in charge of our interests in Cuba, can provide." Lindt was asked to inform Fidel Castro that the US would be making reconnaissance flights over Cuba and that the signal rockets should not be mistaken for bombs, triggering a response from Cuban air defences. From Brunner's house, Lindt called Stadelhofer, who forwarded the message straight to Castro and called back within an hour to confirm the transmission of the message. This allowed Lindt to get back to Rusk between 4 and 5 p.m. and assure him that no Cuban response was to be feared. According to Brunner, this was exactly the kind of service Swiss diplomacy could render during the Cold War to the great powers by acting as an "honest broker". In his memoirs he adds: "...and thus could be avoided, thanks to this rapidly conveyed message, an escalation of the crisis." The Cuban





Missile Crisis ended on 28 October with an exchange of letters between Kennedy and Khrushchev. However, an American aircraft flown by Major Rudolf Anderson, Jr. was shot down on 27 October. Undoubtedly the most important – and difficult – contribution of the Swiss delegation at this time lay in its efforts to repatriate the pilot's remains on board a US plane repainted in Swiss colours. Stadelhofer, described as an inventive and extremely dedicated man, began to play a leading role from this point. In 1964, the Líder Máximo presented him with his beret at a reception and lauded Switzerland.

Following the 1962 missile crisis, all maritime and air links between the United States and Cuba were suspended. However, an agreement between the two countries allowed the American Red Cross to deliver medicines by boat and plane in exchange for the return of the prime suspects in the 1961 invasion. Stadelhofer prevailed on senior officials to allow a number of American citizens to board these boats and the weekly flights chartered by the Red Cross on their empty return journeys. Obtaining these passages, handling the applications, checking passenger details and responding to hundreds of letters sent to the Swiss embassy was a huge burden. However, the embassy staff were motivated and resilient in the face of challenging local conditions. For example, the ambassador was unable to walk in the street without being stopped at every turn by people begging him to help them leave.

Handling the applications and practicalities for the return of US citizens and those with dual nationality would be a concern for Emil Stadelhofer throughout his time in Cuba. A historical parallel has often been drawn with the plight of those trying to flee West Berlin: although, as Stadelhofer frequently pointed out, "in Cuba, it wasn't the impossibility of leaving that was the obstacle to be overcome but rather the lack of transport", given that by this time there were no longer any commercial flights or maritime links between the US coast and Cuba. Amid the increasingly isolationist climate in Cuba, Switzerland continued its work defending the interests of two countries that were no longer talking to one another.

3. 1963: assassination of John F. Kennedy

The US authorities found out that the prime suspect in Kennedy's assassination, Lee Harvey Oswald, had applied for a Cuban visa from the Cuban embassy in Mexico City. Here again, Switzerland would assist the US judicial authorities and act as intermediaries with the Cuban government, which diligently provided what information it had. The situation was defused once more.

4. 1964: attempt to nationalise the US embassy building and turn it into the Cuban Ministry of Fishing: intervention by Stadelhofer

In 1963, the Cuban authorities wanted to know how Switzerland would react if the US embassy building were to be nationalised: Stadelhofer, based on a legal opinion issued by FDFA lawyers, persuaded the Cuban government that the Swiss mandate also included the buildings of the mandating power. He warned the Cubans that Switzerland could potentially consider this "the most unfriendly and severest act against Swiss foreign policy since the existence of the Confederation." The message seemed to have been understood, but on 2 February 1964 four Cuban fishing vessels were arrested by the US Coast Guard and their crews detained. In retaliation, Cuba cut off the water supply to the US naval base at



Guantanamo Bay, which elicited a note of protest from the United States, delivered by Stadelhofer. As Cuban officials prepared to occupy and confiscate the US embassy building, Stadelhofer intervened in person, declaring that this was diplomatic property and that the Vienna Convention would be violated only over his body. After that the Cubans made no further attempts to nationalise the US embassy. In February 1964, it was also Stadelhofer who negotiated the repatriation of the Cuban fishermen in exchange for the return of a hijacked American vessel and aircraft as well as the cessation of hostile actions against the Guantanamo naval base. Furthermore, having broken off diplomatic relations with Cuba during this period, a number of South American countries entrusted Switzerland with defending their interests in Havana. Thus by late 1964, Switzerland was representing the interests not only of the United States but also of nine Latin American countries: Argentina, Guatemala, Honduras, Chile, Brazil, Ecuador, Venezuela, Colombia and Haiti (these mandates have now ended).

5. The Camarioca Crisis and the Varadero-Miami airlift: role of the Swiss delegation

On 28 September 1965, Fidel Castro announced that any Cuban who wished to do so could leave the country for Florida by their own means. Thousands of Cubans set sail from the port of Camarioca, near Varadero; some of the vessels were unsafe and capsized, often with children on board. As happened whenever Stadelhofer made representations to the Cuban government, Fidel Castro listened and looked for solutions to avoid heightening tensions. In this case, he was moved by the drownings and wanted an immediate end to them on humanitarian grounds. Washington and Havana decided in their common interest to end the seelift. The United States instructed the Swiss embassy to negotiate the conditions for an airlift from Varadero to Miami. Stadelhofer was given precise instructions but conducted the negotiation himself. An agreement was reached between Cuba and the United States (with no time limitation), resulting in an airlift operation starting on 1 December. It enabled the departure of between 3,000 and 4,000 Cubans per month on board US aircraft departing from Varadero military airport. This airlift provided two flights per day, five days a week. In total, 9,268 refugees left Cuba in 1965, including 3,349 in December alone. The airlift remained in place for the next seven years, and the Swiss embassy played a leading role in managing it. Indeed, this was the central element of its protecting power mandate. It was tasked with interviewing all those applying to leave, for approval by Washington. By the end of the operation in April 1973, a total of 260,737 Cubans had entered the United States this way. The Swiss embassy faced numerous problems, some of them political: for example, of the 55,000 applications pending in June 1966, 700 were for American citizens and their families, whom the Cuban government had refused to allow to leave the country. Stadelhofer's sterling work in connection with this airlift was hailed by a number of witnesses, including the British ambassador to Cuba, who confided to his Swiss counterpart, Ambassador Probst: "Your Ambassador is the most outstanding diplomat in Havana. He did miracles. But he is tired now. You should take him away before he has a breakdown."

By 1977, the mandate was not over but a partial rapprochement between the two countries resulted in the establishment of a "United States Interests Section of the Swiss Embassy in Havana", enabling the return of American diplomats to Cuba. However, the Swiss mandate continued and the Swiss flag still flew over the former US embassy building. A "Cuban Interests Section" was also established in Washington (under the protection of Czechoslovakia), and Cuban diplomats returned to Washington.



In 1991, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Switzerland was asked to take over from Czechoslovakia as the representative of Cuban interests in Washington. It assumed this mandate until 20 July 2015, when diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba were restored.

Switzerland went on to resolve a number of other diplomatic crises, although not of the same magnitude as those during the Cold War: in 1980, for example, when hundreds of Cuban dissidents sought refuge in the United States Interests Section, or during disputes over maritime borders and on emigration issues. Direct dialogue between Cuba and the United States has gradually strengthened since 1977, resulting in the end of Switzerland's dual mandate today.

Switzerland welcomes the restoration of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba on 20 July 2015. Its dual mandate to protect the interests of these countries is drawing to a close. Switzerland will continue to make available its good offices during the process of normalising relations, if desired.

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For more information:

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