

'Swiss memorial to the victims of National Socialism – a place of remembrance in the city of Bern'

This background paper sets out very briefly the historical context of the Swiss memorial to the victims of National Socialism in Bern and outlines its intended thematic focus. It is intended to provide participants with a supplement to the competition programme.

Excerpt from the Federal Council decision of 26 April 2023:

"The Federal Council considers it of great importance to keep alive the memory of the consequences of National Socialism, namely the Holocaust and the fate of the six million Jews and all other victims of the National Socialist regime. This is particularly important today, as hardly any survivors or contemporary witnesses remain alive, and Holocaust relativisation and antisemitism are on the rise again. [...] In erecting this memorial, the Confederation, together with the city of Bern, is creating a strong symbol against genocide, antisemitism and racism, and for democracy, the rule of law, freedom and basic individual rights. The memorial is also intended to promote discussion and debate and to have an impact beyond the country's borders."

1. Background

2025 marks the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. While in the immediate post-war decades, remembrance revolved around the war started by Germany and the destruction it wrought, since the 1980s, historical attention has shifted to the criminal nature of the National Socialist regime and its victims. Central to this is the murder of six million Jews, subsumed into the concept of the Holocaust or Shoah. But there were many other victims of National Socialist persecution, who were systematically marginalised from the *Volksgemeinschaft* (a racially defined and ideologically pure community), stripped of their rights, persecuted and killed on racist, religious, ethnic, social, political, eugenic and homophobic 'grounds'.¹ The crimes of National Socialist Germany started in an age that was shaped by the fallout of the Russian Revolution and the rise of fascism in Europe, and were not the work of the Germans alone. In the immediate vicinity of Switzerland, the Fascist regime in Italy and the Vichy regime in France were committing their own acts of violence against opponents of the regime, and marginalising and persecuting minorities. The persecution of Jews, Roma, people with disabilities and homosexuals was tied to prejudice, stigma and discrimination, which were already widespread in many parts of the world – including Switzerland – before 1933 and after 1945. In committing their crimes, the Germans were therefore able to rely on the collaboration of authorities and individuals (partly through coercion, partly through conviction) in their forcibly expanded sphere of influence.

Historical awareness has also shifted in Switzerland in recent decades. After for a long time considering itself a neutral 'island' spared from the events in surrounding war-torn Europe, the Swiss government apologised for the first time in 1995 for its restrictive policy towards persecuted Jews.² In its investigations, the Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland – World War II (UEK, 1996–2002) shone a spotlight on Switzerland's entanglement in the National Socialist policy of looting and murder, revealing a more nuanced picture of Switzerland's scope for action and accountability. In 2004

¹ We are guided by the relatively broad and all-encompassing definition of the term 'Holocaust survivor' from the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington: "The Museum honours as survivors any persons, Jewish or non-Jewish, who were displaced, persecuted, or discriminated against due to the racial, religious, ethnic, social, and political policies of the Nazis and their collaborators between 1933 and 1945. In addition to former inmates of concentration camps, ghettos, and prisons, this definition includes, among others, people who were refugees or were in hiding." Cf. <https://www.ushmm.org/remember/resources-holocaust-survivors-victims/individual-research/registry-faq> [2.8.2024].

² Commemorating the end of the war. Speech by the president of the Swiss Confederation Kaspar Villiger, 07.05.1995, online at: <https://www.admin.ch/cp/d/1995May9.165750.4088@idz.bfi.admin.ch.html> [2.8.2024].

Switzerland joined the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) and undertook to "maintain the memory of the Holocaust and bring its horrors to the attention of younger generations so that they can develop an awareness of what racism, antisemitism and discrimination can lead to."³ The shift in awareness was reflected in teaching materials and lessons in schools, but also in the rehabilitation of those who helped people escape, who at the time had been convicted of a crime themselves. While Switzerland's refugee policy and the economic and political ties between Switzerland and Nazi Germany are relatively well researched, attention has only recently turned to the Swiss victims of National Socialism.⁴ There are still significant gaps in our knowledge in this area – as with the Soviet prisoners of war who fled to Switzerland, forced labourers, the Swiss 'gypsy policy', victims of euthanasia, and with regard to the history of fascism in Switzerland.⁵

Today, there are many state-owned and publicly funded memorials, monuments and museums dealing with the crimes of the National Socialists and commemorating their victims in many European countries, in North and South America, Australia and South Africa. Switzerland does not currently have an official national memorial site for the victims of National Socialism. Commemorating the war in general, and specifically the Shoah, has previously been a matter for private institutions and initiatives. This has led to over 60 mostly publicly accessible memorials in Switzerland.⁶

On the basis of new insights into the Swiss victims of National Socialism, a civil society working group was set up in 2019 and in the spring of 2021 submitted a concept to the Federal Council for a 'Swiss memorial to the victims of National Socialism', based on the three pillars of 'remembrance, education, networking'. In response to this civil society initiative and to two unanimously adopted parliamentary motions, the Federal Council spoke out in the spring of 2023 in favour of the creation of a memorial to the victims of National Socialism in Bern. In addition, based on a project for a cross-border education and remembrance site on the topic of flight and escape in St. Gallen, a national network of historical memorial and remembrance sites is to be developed. This implementation, proposed by the Federal Council, takes account of diverse forms of remembrance, allowing a central national memorial to be erected in the Swiss capital within the existing commemorative landscape.

The Federal Council hopes that this will keep the memory of the consequences of National Socialism alive, calling to mind both the Holocaust and the fate of the six million Jews and other victims of Nazi persecution. At the same time, the memorial site is intended to promote a thoughtful and reflective approach to the challenges of the present and future, and to send a strong message against genocide, antisemitism and racism, and in support of democracy, the rule of law, freedom and basic individual rights.⁷ The City of Bern, which has made available the site where the memorial will be erected, is pursuing the same objective.

2. Importance and relevance of the memorial

The unanimous decisions of both chambers of the Swiss parliament and the decision of the Federal Council and the City of Bern to build a memorial in the Swiss capital are a strong sign from

³ FDFA press release on the passing of the chairmanship of the IHRA to Italy, 6.3.2018. Cf. <https://www.news.admin.ch/en/nsb?id=70013> [2.8.2024].

⁴ Cf. e.g. the research project '*Zwischen Opferdiplomatie und Entschädigungsforderungen*' ('Between Victim Diplomacy and Claims for Compensation') [2.8.2024], which was carried out at the University of Fribourg under the leadership of Prof. Christina Späti. Cf. also Spörri, Balz, Staubli, René and Tuchschnid, Benno: *Die Schweizer KZ-Häftlinge. Vergessene Opfer des Dritten Reichs*, ('The Swiss Concentration Camp Prisoners. The Forgotten Victims of the Third Reich'), Zurich 2019.

⁵ See the review on: P. Bakumov: *The Ideological Alignment of Swiss National Socialists* | H-Soz-Kult. Kommunikation und Fachinformation für die Geschichtswissenschaften | Geschichte im Netz | History in the web (hsozkult.de) [2.8.2024].

⁶ Cf. Meyer, Fabienne: *Monumentales Gedächtnis. Shoah-Denkmäler in der Schweiz* ('Monumental memory. Monuments to the Shoah in Switzerland') in: Maoz Azaryahu, Ulrike Gehring, Fabienne Meyer, Jacques Picard and Christina Späti (ed.): *Erzählweisen des Sagbaren und Unsagbaren. Formen des Holocaust-Gedenkens in schweizerischen und transnationalen Perspektiven*, ('Narratives of the speakable and the unspeakable. Forms of Holocaust remembrance from Swiss and transnational perspectives'), Cologne: Böhlau 2021, p. 161-190.

⁷ Cf. FDFA press release of 26.04.2023: <https://www.news.admin.ch/en/nsb?id=94582> [2.8.2024].

Switzerland's politicians of a desire to engage with the history of the country during the era of National Socialism, to remember the victims, to take historical responsibility, and therefore also to make an impact in the present and to look to the future. The memorial in Bern will therefore be a Swiss component incorporated in the international remembrance culture – a remembrance culture that has a common reference point in the Nazis' persecution and extermination policy, which, considering the scale of the crimes, is often referred to as a 'rupture of civilisation'. At the same time, however, remembrance culture has to take account of the specific historical and political context in the respective countries and regions.

For Switzerland, the National Socialist regime and its war of conquest and extermination, coupled with the territorial claims of Mussolini's Italy, are the greatest foreign policy threats Switzerland has faced since the creation of the modern federal state in 1848. The fact that Switzerland's neighbours – with which it had close economic, cultural and social ties – had evolved to become totalitarian, criminal states constituted a sweeping challenge for the country. While neutral Switzerland was able to safeguard its independence during the war, in no way was it an uninvolved spectator, but was intertwined in various ways with other countries. From July 1940 to July 1944, the Axis powers were by far Switzerland's most important trading partner, and Switzerland was a key financial centre for the German Reich.⁸ The public and above all the authorities were well informed about the crimes of the National Socialists and were continually required to make often difficult decisions. This applied to the top leaders in government and the economy, officials and businesspeople, as well as border guards and residents in the border regions where refugees arrived. Dealing with this already distant past is therefore relevant because of the particularly dramatic events, and because of the great dilemmas of the time.

On the other hand, there are many reasons in the present for erecting a memorial. Fewer and fewer people who lived through these events are still alive to tell the story. Although the era seems ever more distant, the terms 'Holocaust', 'Nazis' and 'fascists' are bandied about in the media and politics – and often coupled with politically biased and ultimately trivialised comparisons and a great deal of ignorance. Antisemitism, racism and the discrimination of minorities have in no way disappeared. In view of the societal change owing to immigration from outside Europe, for a significant proportion of the Swiss population the Second World War and the Holocaust are not imprinted on their family or cultural memory, but other experiences of violence, displacement, persecution and discrimination may be. Ultimately, the calls of 'Never again' and the lessons that the international community drew from the devastation caused by fascism and National Socialism are losing their prominence. In the post-war period, key instruments were established and developed to protect individuals and minorities, with the founding of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Genocide Convention and the Geneva Conventions. These multilateral commitments remain the heart of the international system, which was developed as a result of the horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust. But they are being increasingly called into question and democracy is under pressure from the rise of authoritarianism all over the world. The very act of analysing and discussing the National Socialist and Fascist regimes can illustrate the importance and value of the democratic constitutional state and human rights.

3. Objective and thematic focus of the memorial site

The memorial has two tasks. First, it should commemorate the victims of National Socialism. And second, it should invite us to engage in more depth with the era of National Socialism and fascism and to discuss the relevance of the past to the present.

⁸ Cf. Final report of the Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland – World War II (ed.): *Die Schweiz, der Nationalsozialismus und der Zweite Weltkrieg* ('Switzerland, National Socialism and the Second World War'), Zurich 2002, p.185.

3.1. Who is the memorial dedicated to?

The memorial will focus on the people who were victims of the National Socialist policy of exclusion, persecution and extermination. It therefore assumes a broad definition of the word victim. National Socialist persecution centred on the murder of six million European Jews. Other people and groups were also persecuted on political, racist, religious and other grounds. By taking an inclusive and broad approach, the memorial will commemorate all victims of the Holocaust, the genocide of the Roma, and the crimes of the National Socialists, their collaborators and Italian Fascists. As an expressly *Swiss* memorial to the victims of National Socialism, particular emphasis should be placed on stories with a link to Switzerland: for example, on the one hand, looking at the Swiss people living in the area under Nazi control or in Fascist Italy who for various reasons were persecuted, disenfranchised and murdered by the National Socialist or Fascist regimes and their collaborators. And on the other, commemorating the Jews and all other victims of persecution whom the Swiss authorities turned away at the border and refused asylum due to a restrictive refugee policy.

3.2. What should the themes of the memorial be?

The memorial should serve as a basis for educating people about the crimes of the National Socialist and Fascist regimes, and about Switzerland's responsibility. Bern, the Swiss capital where the memorial is to be built, was where the highest political decisions were made. Players at all levels also made decisions and chose to act in different ways. The memorial should therefore enable a discussion of the challenge for the whole of Switzerland of having two dictatorships on its doorstep. It should also draw a line from the past to the present and into the future and show how the past continues to have an effect on us today.

The core themes of the memorial should be:

- *Entanglement*: Switzerland was entangled with other countries in various ways, and therefore also with the National Socialist and Fascist regimes.
- *Persecution*: Switzerland was well informed about the persecution and yet refused to provide sanctuary to those whose lives were in immediate danger.
- *Responsibility*: Everyone in Switzerland had scope to act within their respective roles and functions and were responsible for the decisions they made.
- *Understanding*: Engaging with National Socialism and fascism helps us understand the present and shows where the discrimination and exclusion of minorities can lead.

Art in the public space can draw attention and inspire curiosity, encourage people to question, shift perspectives, and through implicit mediation, can provide an introduction to the topic. In terms of explicit mediation, the complexity of the themes should be disseminated in both the analogue and virtual space. For the explicit mediation, the focus is on two dimensions: (1) the National Socialist policy of persecution and extermination as a basis, and in particular (2) the responsibility and scope for action of Swiss actors.

(1) The core elements of the National Socialist ideology, and of fascism more broadly, were extreme nationalism and racism that propagated the idea of their own people as strong, healthy and superior in relation to other 'peoples'. Certain groups who were seen as inferior, not belonging or foreign – including Jews, sick and disabled people, Roma, Sinti and Yenish, homosexuals, political opponents and 'Slavs' – were first defamed and ostracised through propaganda, then stripped of their rights and discriminated against, and finally persecuted and killed. This policy was based on prejudice and discrimination, which were also widespread outside of Germany – including in Switzerland. It was radicalised by the National Socialists in the shadow of war and the associated blurring of borders and escalating violence to become the policy of extermination.

(2) Switzerland quickly recognised the illegal nature of the discrimination, exclusion and ultimate killing of Jews and the political opposition, and transformation of the Weimar Republic into a dictatorship.

However, there were certainly fascist and National Socialist sympathisers in Switzerland, and both Swiss right-wing extremists and German National Socialists were for a long time able to organise and politically agitate unchecked. Although the crimes were visible, this had no impact on Switzerland's willingness to take in refugees: in the context of the antisemitic policy against 'over-foreignisation', which had been promoted since the end of the First World War, Jews were still seen as undesirable, and barely any members of the political left were granted asylum either. Aware of this massive state injustice, people in many other sectors – economic relations, diplomacy, culture and sport – stuck to a policy of 'business as usual' and the idea of mutual legal certainty until almost the end of the war. Swiss actors – government bodies, companies, private citizens – were therefore regularly forced to make decisions in an environment that was significantly influenced by state injustice – persecution, theft, murder – despite the 'business as usual' approach. Should German 'non-Aryans' have been refused entry at the border, but 'Aryan' businesspeople and tourists allowed in ('J' stamp 1938)? Should refugees whose lives were in danger have been accepted or turned away (border closure 1942)? Should works by 'degenerate' artists or from Jewish owners have been acquired? Should forced labourers have been deployed in subsidiaries of Swiss companies in Germany? Should 'Aryan certificates' which were required by Germany have been issued for couples wishing to marry? Should the Swiss National Bank have accepted gold that had been plundered from occupied countries? Should banks and insurance companies have handed over the assets of German Jews who had supposedly 'moved east' to the German authorities? And what efforts was Swiss diplomacy able and willing to make to save Swiss victims of National Socialist persecution?

The various Swiss players were not mere bystanders, but made decisions that entailed different and graduated consequences in a cascade of responsibilities from the Federal Council and General Guisan, right down to the individual civilian. So, for example, the decisions that were reflected in official policy had dramatic implications for whole groups of people, while the actions of citizens influenced and saved individual human lives. It is therefore important to engage with the differing scope for action of the people involved, the associated ambivalence, contradictions and grey areas, and the at times contradictory interests, attitudes and values that motivated and underpinned the decisions and actions.

The challenges of the persecution policy for Switzerland and how Swiss players – with differing degrees of authority, agency and responsibility – responded, could be highlighted using case studies. On the basis of victims' stories, reference can be made to the wide range of different players (from politics, business or civil society; perpetrators, helpers and observers). This can help people understand the many different ways in which Switzerland was entangled with National Socialism and fascism.

Annotated selective bibliography

There are many popular and academic historical publications, source editions and films on the history of Switzerland in the era of National Socialism. The following bibliography merely provides pointers as an introduction to the topic. Some of the works are available in several languages. The title listed here is the title of the original version.

Key overviews are shown in chronological order to document the evolution of the historical and societal debates on the topic. A few publications have been selected on the closer connection between the National Socialist policy of persecution and extermination and Switzerland. And finally, there is information on feature films and contemporary sources.

Overviews of the history of Switzerland during the National Socialist era

Overviews of Switzerland's refugee policy during the National Socialist era

Selected publications on Switzerland and the National Socialist policy of persecution and extermination

Feature films

Sources

a) Written sources

Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland (Dodis) has published key sources on Switzerland's foreign policy and made them available in an online database. Cf. Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland (Dodis) | Dodis (<https://www.dodis.ch/en/profile>).

Dodis has also published source dossiers on the topics of the November Pogrom of 1938; the Swiss perpetrator of an attack on Hitler, Maurice Bavaud; Switzerland, refugees and the Shoah; and the end of the Second World War in Europe.

Cf. e-Dossier | Dodis (<https://www.dodis.ch/en/database/e-dossiers>)

b) Audiovisual sources

Many photos and films, in particular the Swiss weekly newsreels (*Schweizer Filmwochenschaue*n) during the Second World War, can be found in the online database of the Memoriav association, Memobase. Cf. Memobase - Memoriav (<https://memoriav.ch/en/memobase/>)