

**39th Annual Conference of the German Studies Association (GSA): Three Sessions on Swiss History**

**Veranstalter:** Peter Meilaender / Hans Rindisbacher / Daniel Schläppi / Sacha Zala; Swiss Studies Network; Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences (SAGW); Embassy of Switzerland Washington DC; History Department, University of Berne

**Datum, Ort:** 02.10.2015–04.10.2015, Washington DC

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One of the purposes of the German Studies Association for its 39th annual conference was to encourage Swiss scholars to intensify their participation in the international academic discourse. Thanks to the support of the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences, the Embassy of Switzerland and the cooperating Swiss Studies Network three complementary sessions in Swiss history could take place in the this year's conference.

**1) Swiss History Revisited. Perspectives of Critical Historiography**

2015 was a year of multiple centennials to be remembered (the battles of Morgarten in 1315 and Marignano in 1515, the Congress of Vienna in 1815). A bunch of nationalist right-wing politicians wanted to profit from those historical jubilees in the autumn general elections. For that reason they would not stop to repeat old myths about heroic Swiss history over and over. Starting with the so-called „geistige Landesverteidigung“ in the 1930s, Swiss conservatives interpreted historical events in their special way in order to make the people believe that the country's future is nothing else than a self-fulfilling prophecy towards the key concepts „neutrality“, „sovereignty“ and finally „isolation“.

Constant efforts of professional critical historiography to adjust such distorted pictures of the past had a hard time to be noticed in the polemic discourse. It is nearly useless to argue against political abuse of the past because it is much easier to tell engrossing stories about wars and battles than to spread and explain complex historical facts and processes

of „longue durée“.

The significant value of history in politics of the day in contemporary Switzerland, plus a largely bizarre range of topics marked as relevant to public discourse, together with the embarrassing attitude towards historical evidence gave reason to organize the panel „Swiss History Revisited. Perspectives of Critical Historiography“. Another motivation was the fact that new overviews of Swiss history have been published over the past years in almost epidemic amounts (negatively spoken). A more positive interpretation might point out that Switzerland's intellectual immune system is still working great even in times of fundamental disorientation, while politics towards major challenges like European integration, mass migration and economic globalization are no more rational but purely ideological.

Before commentating the results of the session from a general standpoint the most important arguments of the three lectures held in the panel should be summarized:

JONATHAN STEINBERG (Philadelphia) pointed out that numerous peculiarities of today's Switzerland root in long-lasting traditions. There is for instance the continuity of the political system in which the communities still have a particular importance. The early modern structures showed an astonishing endurance and stood the test of times and epochal boundaries. Modern democracy combined archaic structures with most modern elements. Also worth mentioning is the specific dealing with conflicts and the segmented economics, which successfully oriented themselves towards international markets in spite of their local anchoring. All this made Switzerland a so-called „Sonderfall“. But beside very strong traditional elements in Swiss society and policy a big transformation started with the economic crisis of the 1970s (the so-called „Ölschock“). Over the last decades a neo-liberal mentality took command and the political discourse was more and more dominated by reactionary populism. The Swiss „now live in a society of big units, big pharma, big banks, big industrial concerns and big cities“. As a result of this long-term transformation the political establishment in Switzerland has lost authority.

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According to J. Steinberg it is „hard to imagine a happy outcome of the present crisis“. He even issued a warning addressed to critical historians: „Swiss past embodies Swiss identity, and if the young know little of the past, Swissness may simply vanish“. Therefore it is extremely important that the upcoming generation gets a profound knowledge on the history of their country as fundament of political institutions and society.

RANDOPHL C. HEAD (Riverside) emphasized the importance of rethinking the historian's role as storytellers. Everybody will agree that telling stories is about language. And this means that one has to think seriously about the concepts and terms to be used. R. Head's paper made clear that the historian's task is „neither to dismiss myths as lies and to deny continuity across epistemic boundaries, nor yet to substitute myths for historical truth“. At the same time it is evident that terms like „nation“, „identity“ or „federalism“ are topics „loaded with mythological content“. In a more analytical than „romantic“ perspective – there's nothing wrong about being „romantic“ about Switzerland by the way –, the small country can in fact be seen as a „peripheral nation that is close to the center of Europe“. But what does this mean for practical research? According to R. Head the „fundamental lesson that critical theory delivers“ is the „dependence of all knowledge on the language and epistemic framework we use to express it“. The contributor finally pointed out that Americans who study the history of somewhere else usually have a personal connection to the place they study. One might ask if Swiss history could probably reach more relevance in international historical research not only through private affinities as usual but by accentuating comparative approaches.

According to ANDRE HOLENSTEIN (Berne) the embedding of Switzerland into the pan-European development and the close integration with the European great powers are absolutely important and formative for Swiss history. Switzerland was „the most European of all European countries“, not only but also for topographical reasons. Even its political independence originates from hegemonic interdependencies. For strategic reasons the mountains and valleys in the

center of Europe were too important to be controlled by just one of the great powers. These, therefore, had an essential interest to establish a small neutralized zone in the middle of their spheres of influence. Political interrelations found remarkable analogies in economic and cultural interactions as well as in vivid migration of many people. Transnational transfer of mercenary soldiers, workers, money, agricultural and industrial products as well as knowledge and scholars was ubiquitous. It is remarkable that a strong intellectual and mental isolationism was typical for Switzerland at least since the age of enlightenment. In this sense there is no such thing as Swiss history or even Switzerland beyond the ambiguity between entanglement and dissociation. Nevertheless the idea of being an absolutely exceptional „Sonderfall“ kept holding an enormous influence on Swiss politics up to our days. It is a key argument to strictly reject any kind of participation in the ongoing European integration process.

Rethinking the three lectures, one of the most formative features of Swissness becomes evident: the ability to blank out – or should we say: to harmonize – a huge tangle of contradictions. Despite cultural, social and economic antagonisms many Swiss tend to believe in the fiction of a well-tempered collective mentality. Simplifying conceptions of history serve as main ingredients of patriotic delusion such as this one. Considering this and the actual day to day events, critical historiography should try to answer a number of fundamental and methodological questions in five fields:

- 1) The attitude towards the 2015 grand jubilee: Even though there is not much intellectual value for professional historians in the controversy about myths in Swiss history, the discussions about history, which the current jubilee brought about, took more space in public discourse than political controversy about the hard Swiss franc. On the one hand we can notice positively: „history matters“. On the other hand, the following questions arise: In how far should history really matter, taking into account conservative and nationalistic exponent's frank admission that they don't care at all about historical facts but rather about the deeper meaning of myths?

Can history satisfy the need for orientation of rapidly changing, instable societies? And if so, what does culture of remembrance contribute to public spirit in concrete terms? Does science have to face ideological quarrels at all? And if so, how? With a confrontational or an objective and educational intention? Do outsider's views, that is, perspectives of non-Swiss individuals, have a special importance? Or should they be ignored in Switzerland on purpose?

2) Terminology and methods: Historians' debates made it clear that ideological groups instrumentalize history in order to deduce those principles that seem supportive to their political interests and their vision of a good government. History becomes the matrix of nationalistic policy dogmas, which are declared to be historical inheritance and obligation towards the ancestors. A balanced judgement definitely suggests that it is ridiculous to understand erratic and abstract categories as „neutrality“, „sovereignty“, „freedom“, „independence“, „democracy“ and „people's rights“ as traditional heritage. Besides this, battles, wars, diplomacy and politics have been much too dominant in current discussions. I consider it questionable that historical argumentations still have value today, if they mainly recur to *political* history only. On the contrary it seems imperative to include findings from at least two generations of socio- and culture-historical research.

3) The meaning of „national history“: Of course there is today the so-called „nation“ within territorial borders. And there is a constitutional construct and there are political institutions that might be called a „nation“. But isn't the idea of a „nation“ as such just a fiction? If the history of the *Corpus helveticum* is imagined as a continuum, the period during which Switzerland has constituted a complete „national state“ is relatively short. Considering this, what arguments would support the option to keep working with the concept of a „national history“? Can there even be expected new findings with this concept? Don't we wedge ourselves into unnecessary intellectual corsets with the conceptual framework „nation“? Corsets which limit our scope to proceed to new, maybe more comparative approaches? European embedding should be

considered more strongly not only for Swiss but also for general history. History of diplomacy should not only be conceived as „international relations“ looked at from an originally Swiss perspective. Moreover, we should examine the intentions and the power of other nations' policies towards Switzerland. The same goes for economical and cultural configurations, of course.

4) Epoch-spanning approaches: R. Head was right in saying that one does not have to go back to the „Pfahlbauer“ to understand Swiss history. But at the same time, it is obvious that Swiss history can only be understood by including the early modern period. But what exactly does early modern time add to the understanding of modern Switzerland? What aspects would be ignored by contemporary history, or to be precise would not be understood, if the long period, the „longue-durée“ is dismissed? And isn't there a danger that epoch-spanning approaches emphasize institutional and structural continuities which are not that unambiguous on closer examination?

5) Desiderata in future research: First, Swiss history still lacks the profound reappraisal of local and national budgeting as well as politics of fees and fiscal policy which by definition represent a modern state or „nation“. After all, the development of parliamentarism of European character eminently correlates with disputes about fiscal policy. Second, the level of knowledge of history of art and culture should be meaningfully merged with the current scientific knowledge of social history. Third, future research should watch out for new innovative paradigms and fresh narratives.

## 2) Swiss Research Infrastructures for Digital Humanities

Swiss projects often played a pioneer role in the digital humanities. The panel presented trends and developments in this field such as the database „dodis.ch“ of the „Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland“, containing thousands of documents on Swiss international relations, information on thousands of persons and organizations (online since 1997).

In the last ten years „e-codices“ has become a leading platform for digital manuscripts. E-

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codices not only collaborates with all major manuscript libraries in Switzerland but is also involved in the planning process for the systematic digitization of complete collections of national libraries such as the British Library or the Bibliothèque nationale de France. The new project „Fragmentarium“ is a scholarly network that enables libraries, collectors, researchers and students to upload medieval manuscript fragments and to describe, transcribe and assemble them online.

The „Schweizerische Rechtsquellenstiftung“ has been handling the critical edition of Swiss historical legal manuscripts for over a hundred years. By today, over 100 volumes of texts have been published, about 30 of them are available as digital editions. The texts' creation time ranges from the 10th to the 18th centuries. A database built up over the last years helps users looking for information on specific personalities/places which could have been mentioned in several volumes.

All the mentioned research infrastructures were recently transformed to divisions of the „Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences“. This measure aims at the greatest possible interoperability between the cooperating units. Therefore the networking service <http://www.metagrid.ch> is promoted. In the long term the „Historical Dictionary of Switzerland“ will develop to an interface between researchers and the general public. New types of cross-referencing systems will increase the possibilities for multilinear reading. The core medium „text“ will be supplemented through illustrative, film and audio material, as well as interactive infographics and geovisualization.

### **3) Between Isolation and Globalization. The Project of a Modern Switzerland**

This seminar focused on the new „Geschichte der Schweiz“, published in 2014 as a jumping-off point to understand the key moments, problems and themes of Swiss history. Other key issues were how historical understanding speaks to the issues that Switzerland faces. All seminar participants contributed essays on their own reading and understanding of the new „Geschichte der Schweiz“. The texts covered several periods from the 13th century

up to our days and addressed various subjects such as „das Nationale“, the politicization of „Heimat“, the relation between historiography and literature, cultural differences, relations and interactions between the German and the French-speaking parts of Switzerland, the meaning of the category gender in biographical novels and the minor role of women in Swiss history, neutrality and the problems of alpine isolation. The seminar highly benefited from the presence of Georg Kreis, editor of „Geschichte der Schweiz“, who opened every session with substantial commentaries on each essay as well as from scholarly statements by the referents of the two panels mentioned above.

#### **Conference Overview:**

1) *Panel: Swiss History Revisited. Perspectives of Critical Historiography*

Moderator: Peter Meilaender (Houghton)

Commentator: Daniel Schläppi (Berne)

Jonathan Steinberg (Philadelphia), Switzerland as a Sonderfall

Randolph C. Head (Riverside), Swiss History from Inside and Outside. An American-Swiss Perspective

André Hostenstein (Berne), Entanglement and Dissociation. Historic Considerations on the Microstate's „condition d'être“

2) *Panel: Swiss Research Infrastructures for Digital Humanities*

Moderator: Sacha Zala (Berne)

Commentator: Enrico Natale (Geneva)

Sacha Zala (Berne), The Dodis Database of the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland: A Pioneer of Digital Humanities

Roberta Padlina (Fribourg), e-codices – Virtual manuscript library of Switzerland. A digital humanities project for Swiss sources with an international influence

Natalia Korchagina (Zurich), Database of historical places, persons and lemmas. The Collection of Swiss Law Sources

Philipp von Cranach (Berne), The New Historical Dictionary of Switzerland. A Node for Digital Humanities

3) *Seminar: Between Isolation and Globaliza-*

*tion. The Project of a Modern Switzerland*

Convenors: Peter Meilaender (Houghton),  
Hans Rindisbacher (Pomona)

Commentator: Georg Kreis (Basle)

Authors of the discussed essays: Donovan  
Anderson (Allandale), Barbara Bush (San  
Diego), Peter Gilgen (Ithaca), Irene Kacandes  
(Hanover), Vesna Kondrić Horvat (Maribor),  
Thomas Lau (Fribourg), Marc Lerner (Univer-  
sity of Mississippi), Adam Woodis (Bloom-  
ington), Margrit Zinggeler (Ypsilanti)

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