

# DISSONANT MEMORIES: NATIONAL IDENTITY, POLITICAL POWER, AND THE COMMEMORATION OF WORLD WAR TWO IN SWITZERLAND

by Christof Dejung

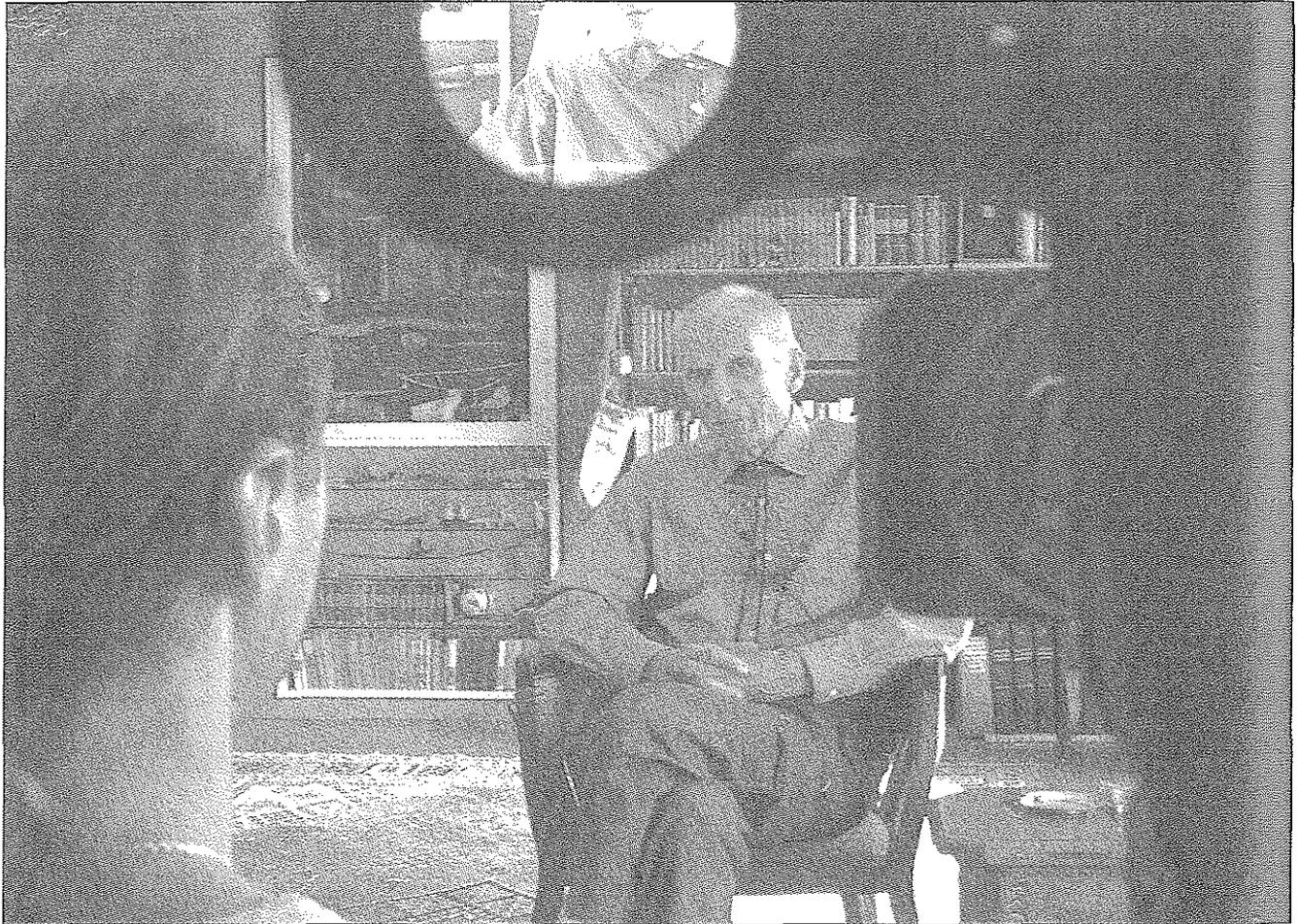
The 1990s debate surrounding the Swiss bank accounts of Holocaust victims has led to a revision of the historical view of Switzerland's role in World War Two, which until then was dominated by the image of an innocent and resisting nation. The theory of commemoration of German researchers Jan and Aleida Assmann can help us to understand the ostensible clash of history and memory that occurred during this debate. Based on the results of the oral history project Archimob. The article shows that despite the long-time dominant view of the country's past, several partial memories have existed which have threatened to oppose this, but which had no chance of being articulated in public. This leads to the conclusion that the dominance of a certain method of commemoration in public is always a means for gaining social power.

## ABSTRACT

**KEY WORDS:**  
Communicative  
Memory;  
Cultural  
Memory;  
Holocaust;  
World War  
Two;  
Switzerland

The commemoration of wars is central for national identity in many countries. War memories not only have the function of translating individual grief into public mourning, grief being a human response to the death and suffering that war engenders on a vast scale. Since they commemorate the willingness of members of a nation to kill and die in its defence, they also have a fundamental political significance.<sup>1</sup> Commemorating war is a key element in the symbolic repertoire available to the nation-state

for binding its citizens into the national community. It is a powerful narrative which legitimates authority and socialises populations into a common culture but supersedes at the same time memories of minorities or marginalised social groups that have no chance to articulate their memories in public.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, war memories not only seem to be important in countries which actually did wage war but also in non-belligerent countries. In Switzerland for instance, the commemoration of World War



*Photo of an interviewed man. All the interviews conducted by Archimob were filmed on video.*

Two has always played a crucial role for national identity, even if Switzerland was one of the very few countries in Europe that did not get involved directly in this conflict.<sup>3</sup> The threat of a German invasion, however, dangled like a sword of Damocles over Swiss society during the wartime years. After 1945, it was precisely the fact that the country did escape unharmed from the war which was considered to be proof of the validity of the patriotic wartime discourses. The dominant attitude was that the period of World War Two had been a hard but beautiful time which should serve to set an example for the 'coherence of our Swiss people', as a veteran put it as late as in 1983.<sup>4</sup>

This paper seeks to investigate the relations between public representations of World War Two in Switzerland after 1945 and private memories of men and women who had lived in Switzerland during the wartime period. First, I will show how the discussions in the 1990s regarding the accounts of Holocaust victims in Swiss banks shattered the dominant view of the past and led to a revision of the perception of the historical role of Switzerland in World War Two. This revision, founded on new historical research, was a shock for many members of the wartime generation, since it seemed to mock

their personal experience of the war. Second, however, I will argue that the notion of a clash of history and memory appears inadequate to understand this evolution and I will explain why I think that the theory of commemoration of German researchers Jan and Aleida Assmann can provide deeper insight as a means to understand this. Third, I will present some of the results of Archimob, the largest oral history project in Switzerland ever, and I will show that several social groups cultivated distinct war memories which were dissonant to the long-time dominant view of the nation's past but which could not find expression in the public sphere. Fourth, I will show how this relates to the distribution of social power and I will argue why I think a social historical analysis of remembrance is a research path that should be more strongly pursued than is the case in a considerable part of memory studies to date.

#### **A UNITED AND RESISTING NATION**

The official Swiss war memory was for many decades dominated by the image of a united and resisting nation that had always been true to its traditional humanitarian mission.<sup>5</sup> At the core of the official commemoration stood the army and the conviction that the German *Wehrmacht* did

not dare attack Switzerland due to the presence of the Swiss soldiers ready to defend themselves in their shelters in the Alps. General Henri Guisan, commander-in-chief of the Swiss army during the war, emphasised in his order of the day from 8 May 1945 the role of the army: 'The army was our shelter and our shield. It saved us from harm and misery, from war, occupation, destruction, imprisonment and deportation.'<sup>6</sup>

Because Switzerland did not experience the devastation of modern warfare, the wartime years were not remembered as a traumatic time but as a time in which 'from the General to the least serviceman, from the Federal Council to the old woman that cropped vegetables in a flower pot everybody worked on the maintenance of the independence of our country and of the freedom of its citizens', as former Federal Council member Friedrich Traugott Wahlen asserted in a memoir from 1975. In the same book, the period between 1939 and 1945 was described as a time of 'national proving', in which the danger 'welded together a people with all its different individuals'.<sup>8</sup>

It was last but not least the desire for social stability that induced the vast majority of the population to accept this harmonious view of their past and to push away the memories of unpleasant experiences that could have called it into question. The official method of commemoration and especially the significance of the army in it helped to settle the political tensions that had prevailed in Swiss society before the war.<sup>9</sup> Notably General Guisan had emphasised repeatedly that the communal experiences of the soldiers in military service during the war ought to establish a basis to overcome the social polarity. This military comradeship was meant to be the archetype for coherence in civil society. Guisan claimed in his last order of the day as commander-in-chief of the army from the 20th August 1945 that in the army one could gain 'experiences of mutual understanding and assistance whose benefit should be transmitted to our living together as a populace.'<sup>10</sup> Indeed the solidarity of the wartime years prepared the ground for social and political reforms after 1945 that would have been unthinkable during the 1930s. One example was a bill for the institution of social insurance for the elderly and the widowed that was supported by eighty percent of the votes in a referendum in 1947. This insurance system had been a demand of the political left since the beginning of the 20th century. Its institution was – and still is today – a symbol for political settlement between upper class and working class. After 1959, the social democratic party was granted two seats in the national government, until then all seats of which were held exclusively by members of conservative and

liberal parties. But all the same, these liberal and conservative parties remained the dominant powers in the postwar period. Even with the integration of the social democrats into the national political consensus the mental attitude of Swiss society was virulently anticommunist during the Cold War.

However, the political equality of women was not implemented until 1971. The patriotic confraternity of the postwar period was sustained by the experiences of the servicemen in military service and these experiences were no basis for women's rights. In several cantons the male citizens held a vote on the question of women's rights in the late 1940s. In each of them the institution of women's rights was rejected.<sup>11</sup>

With regard to foreign affairs, the official view of the wartime years with its emphasis on military defence and self-determination led to a policy of isolationism. Switzerland joined the United Nations only in 2003 as one of the last countries of the world. Accession to the European Union has been and still is fought by national conservative parties with reference to the heroic self-assertion of Switzerland during World War Two.

But even if the official view of the war had a great effect on Swiss society, it was also contradicted. Already in May 1945 Max Wolff, judge at the *Obergericht* (appellate court) of the canton of Zurich and president of the synod, asserted in a speech that the Swiss 'complicity with the global catastrophe' of the last twelve years was evident since 'certain circles, even religious ones, reacted indifferently if not sympathetically to the rise of hitlerism'. Furthermore the 'Federal Government suppressed the reports on the situation and the activities in the German concentration camps until recently [...] in order to preserve the interests of the state' and it had rejected thousands of Jewish refugees 'from the redeeming frontiers of Switzerland and sent them to death'.<sup>12</sup> Wolff did not make any friends with such an opinion. Military intelligence investigated his attitude towards the army and Swiss neutrality. The press ignored his speech or entertained the suspicion that Wolff, who was from a respectable family and a member of the Democratic Party, was a communist sympathiser.<sup>13</sup>

This reaction was typical within debates about Switzerland's role in World War Two for many decades. Challenging the official historical discourse was considered to be a sign of a communist attitude and therefore a potential act of treason. Access to governmental archives was restricted to protect the official view of the past from challenges from new historical research. In some cases official institutions conspired against inquisitive historians to avert the exploration of

problematic details which could stain the immaculate image of the wartime years.<sup>14</sup> Sometimes, however, critical aspects of the wartime period could not be ignored any longer due to new results from historical or journalistic research. As a consequence, they were integrated into the official view of the past – but only as a ‘footnote to a heroic epic’ as the writer Adolf Muschg put it in 1997.<sup>15</sup>

Writers and journalists have claimed since the late 1960s that Switzerland was unharmed not only because of the army, but also – or perhaps only – because of economic collaboration with the powers of the Axis. They have repeatedly criticised Switzerland’s policy against refugees in the wartime period,<sup>16</sup> while academic historians have continued to sustain the traditional view of the past within their studies. The most prominent historical study until the 1990s were the three volumes of Edgar Bonjour’s *History of Swiss Neutrality* dealing with the period between 1933 and 1945, which were published in 1970. Bonjour, professor at the University of Basel, had gained exclusive access to governmental archives otherwise blocked for historical research.<sup>17</sup> The journalist Niklaus Meienberg – whose works on the killing of alleged traitors during the war and on the German-friendly dynasty of the Willes were milestones towards a more critical view of the Swiss past<sup>18</sup> – has excoriated the study of Bonjour. Meienberg has argued that Bonjour had overrated the deterrence capability of the army and had neglected the significance of the economy. This caused Bonjour to ignore ‘that we collaborated economically with the fascists, that we were integrated economically into the “new Europe” and that with our formal bogus sovereignty we could render better services to the Third Reich than as an occupied country’.<sup>19</sup>

But such a critical view on the role of Switzerland during World War Two never reached the wider public. For the majority of Swiss, the traditional image of Switzerland as a united and resistant country continued to determine their view of the past. They remained unperturbed by the research of a new generation of historians who referred to the similarities of the ideology of the Swiss ‘spiritual defence’ (*geistige Landesverteidigung*) in the 1930s and 1940s and the culture of fascism and who, since the 1980s, had highlighted the economic causes for Switzerland’s escape from the devastation of warfare.<sup>20</sup>

In the 1990s, however, Switzerland came under great pressure from Jewish organisations and from the government of the United States as a result of the emergence of existence of Swiss bank accounts belonging to Jewish Holocaust victims. Even if most of the questions that were

brought up had by now been covered in detail in many historical studies, the majority of Swiss were caught off guard by this new debate. They were surprised that it was now no longer just a few Swiss historians and journalists who were focusing on the sore spots of their wartime past and who could be defamed as Marxist or be ignored. Nearly every week, American Senators and the British tabloids presented new ‘disclosures’ that gave the impression of Switzerland as wartime profiteer. ‘I am as puzzled as all of my fellow Swiss countrymen’ a journalist exclaimed in wonder ‘how it came to be that we have been pilloried as a people of robbers, receivers of stolen goods, ghouls, crypto-fascists, backers of the Nazi-regime half a century after the end of World War Two.’<sup>21</sup>

In 1996 an international commission of historians chaired by Swiss historian Jean-François Bergier was installed by the Swiss government and began to investigate the economic collaboration with the Axis and the policies against Jewish refugees. The results of this Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland – Second World War (ICE) were seen by many people as an officially revised history of the state, since the commission was set up by the government itself – even if this claim was emphatically rejected by the members of the commission, who insisted on their scientific autonomy.<sup>22</sup>

Many leftist politicians, intellectuals and journalists acclaimed this evolution of a new historical image whereas national conservative politicians and members of the wartime generation uttered scathing criticism.<sup>23</sup> In particular military veterans saw the discussions of Swiss anti-Semitism and economic collaboration with the Axis as a mockery of their engagement during the war. A man born in the 1930s claimed in a letter to the newspaper *Beobachter* that every action of Switzerland during the war had been justified, since after all, it had concerned the survival of the nation: ‘We lived, people and government, with this basic principle to survive and we must not apologise! Today’s wise guys want to know everything better. We had the right to survive! And we were able to as well, thank God.’<sup>24</sup> Supported by right-wing politicians, the veterans criticised the fact that most of the historians who investigated the wartime period were born after 1945 and were therefore not able to understand the wartime situation.

### **HISTORY VERSUS MEMORY?**

Many observers have tried to understand this clash between historians and members of the wartime generation. One very common explanation has relied on the theory of French histo-

rian Pierre Nora. Nora sees history – as written by professional historians – and memory – that is based in social groups that remember their past – as two distinct forms of commemoration. History tries, according to Nora, using critical analysis to separate the present and the past, whereas memory stresses the continuity between past and present.<sup>25</sup> History therefore should be able to construct a more reliable and less mystified image of the past than the memory of witnesses of a certain period.

In my opinion Nora's standpoint is not convincing for three reasons. First, we know that memories are not a direct continuity of the past as Nora asserts, but are reconstructions of the past in the present and are therefore influenced and shaped by current debates. The same, of course, is true for history. Second, when we consider the commemoration of World War Two in Switzerland, we see that for a long time also professional historians helped to build – or at least, failed to deconstruct – the mythological image of the past. It took a new generation of historians in important positions in universities and national research programmes for academic history to question the long-time dominant view of the past. Third, there have always been autobiographies and since the late 1980s also several collections of personal recollections based on oral history that show a very controversial view of everyday life in Switzerland during the war.<sup>26</sup> Surprisingly, the critical potential of these testimonials, diverging as they often did from the image of a united and homogeneous nation, was not recognised in the acrimonious debates of the 1990s.

A theoretical approach other than the idea of a hierarchy between history and memory as suggested by Pierre Nora can help us to understand the clash between historians and members of the wartime generation in the 1990s. German researchers Jan and Aleida Assmann relied for their theory of commemoration on the concept of collective memory of Maurice Halbwachs,<sup>27</sup> a theory that they have tried to enhance.<sup>28</sup> The Assmanns distinguished between three types of remembrance:

- a) a communicative memory that is actualised in every day communication in a social group or a family and reaches as far back as three generations
- b) a cultural memory that is kept alive by official ceremonies, by rites or by memorials. It is more structured and hierarchical than communicative memory. Only a small group of opinion-formers has access to its framing
- c) a scientific occupation with the past by professional historians

These three modes of commemoration bear

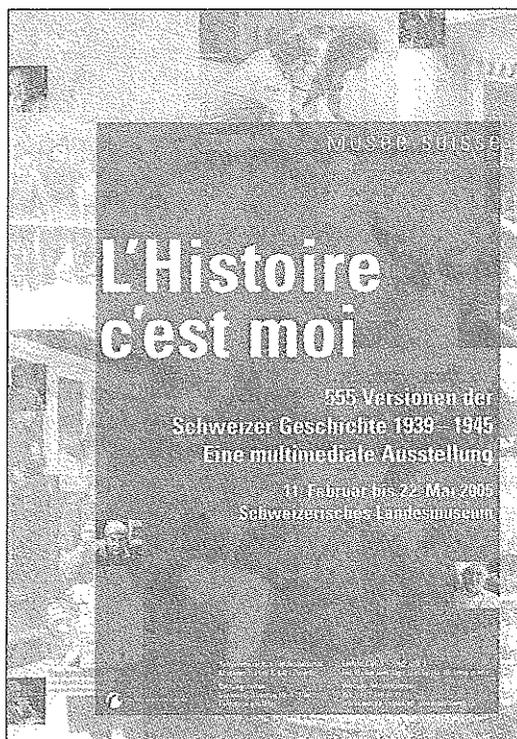
different relations to the past but are in principle equivalent.

By using the Assmanns' concept for the analysis of the commemoration of World War Two in Switzerland, we can state that there was a significant change in the cultural memory after the end of the Cold War. Until the end of the 1980s, the Swiss government sustained the official image of the past that stressed the independence of Switzerland and the capability to defend itself militarily. It then became clear that in an age of globalised economy it was not possible to ignore the pressure of a country like the United States or from international Jewish organisations to revise its own past. Furthermore the government saw that the traditional historical image was an obstacle to the integration of Switzerland into international organisations like the United Nations or for relations with the European Union. This explains the readiness of the government to install the ICE and to accept – even reluctantly – the results of historical research that until then it had chosen to ignore. It is a sign of the fact that wartime commemorations – even if they are a distinct national feature – always depend on the evolution in international politics. The central point of the new view on Swiss history was that Switzerland had not been an innocent country during the war but was entangled in the crimes of fascism and National Socialism by its economic collaboration with the powers of the Axis and by its anti-Semitic policies against Jewish refugees. After the end of the Cold War, it became politically and economically necessary to include the traumatic memory of the Holocaust in cultural memory. Many members of the wartime generation were not willing or able to do so.<sup>29</sup> This resulted in the above-mentioned frictions between the communicative memory of the wartime generation and the modified cultural memory which was endorsed by the results of new historical research.

#### **HETEROGENEOUS COMMEMORATIONS**

In this controversial climate, the oral history project Archimob began its work. The aim of Archimob – which is an abbreviation of 'archives of the mobilisation' – was to understand what the members of the wartime generation had experienced in the years between 1930 and 1945 and how they remembered this period half a century later. Between 1999 and 2001 over 500 witnesses of World War Two were interviewed. They responded mostly to calls in newspapers. The sample of interviewees is not representative in the statistical sense but it is the attempt to acquire the experiences of as large a spectrum of people as possible. The interviewees belonged to such different groups as soldiers,

Poster of the multimedia-based exhibition *L'Histoire c'est moi* touring through Switzerland since 2004.



housewives, workers in factories, farmers, communists, Jewish refugees, Polish internees or Swiss Jews. The interviews were two hours long and filmed on video. The material of over one thousand hours of testimonials has led to a series of TV-documentaries,<sup>30</sup> two books – one in French and one in German<sup>31</sup> – and the multimedia-based exhibition *L'Histoire c'est moi* that toured through several Swiss cities.<sup>32</sup> The collection of Archimob interviews will be made public at the Historisches Museum in Bern in the near future.

The interviews conducted by Archimob researchers show that the wartime generation is much less homogeneous than was always assumed, although the majority of the contemporary witnesses expressed dissent with the latest historical publications on Switzerland in World War Two. Martha Gosteli, born in 1917, claimed that 'it isn't fair that the people of that time are treated in such a manner. [...] I have to say I have been shocked by the way we have been criticised. Sometimes I have really been sickened upon hearing how certain historians have expressed themselves.'<sup>33</sup> And Hans Wymann conceded that indeed some 'boards of directors had made mistakes' between 1933 and 1945. But these exponents of government and banks 'weren't the Swiss people.' In his opinion, the Swiss people had 'accomplished a masterly achievement during the war.'<sup>34</sup>

However, the Archimob interviews show also that several social groups shared communicative memories that are quite different from the traditional historical image: People who stood polit-

ically on the left stressed the point that many members of the upper class sympathised with fascism. Max Siegrist for example claimed that indeed 'many people would talk very rudely when the Nazis were mentioned. But beyond a certain income group the attitudes began to blur.'<sup>35</sup> And Ralph Winkler asserted: 'I never believed the fairy tale that Switzerland didn't get involved in the war only because of the army. Hitler would have been quite an idiot if he had attacked Switzerland that, as a matter of fact, was such an efficient manufacturer of weaponry.'<sup>36</sup> A minority of the interviewees approved of the research of the ICE. Leni Aitweg, who comes from a religious-socialist background, said that with the decision to authorise a commission of historians to reinvestigate World War Two, the Swiss government 'outgrew itself and also the bankers. In my opinion this is one of their main achievements lately.'<sup>37</sup>

Swiss Jews also voiced experiences quite different from the long-time dominant self-perception of Switzerland in World War Two. They talked about everyday anti-Semitism in Switzerland during the 1930s and 1940s and about their relatives in foreign countries who were killed by the Nazis in the Holocaust. Moritz Abrach for example completed military training school in the 1930s and aspired to a career in the army. But his commandant told him that in his unit no Jew would become an officer. 'To me, this was a painful experience', said Abrach.<sup>38</sup> And Marianne Gromb recalled the day of the armistice, when she and her family applied for emigration to Israel: 'We saw clearly that the Swiss wouldn't have defended any of us', Gromb assumed. 'The Swiss would have defected. By opportunism, not by conviction. They would have taken the path of least resistance.'<sup>39</sup>

And there is also a very interesting gender difference in the interviews. Women are less offended by the fact that the image of the wartime period has been revised. The revision of the role of the army did not bother them since they generally had not served in the army during the war.<sup>40</sup> And the criticism of official wartime policies offended them less since Swiss women gained their full political rights only in 1971. The peasant woman Elise Scherer whose husband had frequently been conscripted together with the male farm labourers and who had often remained alone with her children and her grandfather on the farm during the war, claimed in her interview that the military service of the men was not very demanding: 'Once we had a unit of radio operators quartered on our farm. They just lay about and we had plenty of work to do. This put us in a bad temper some-

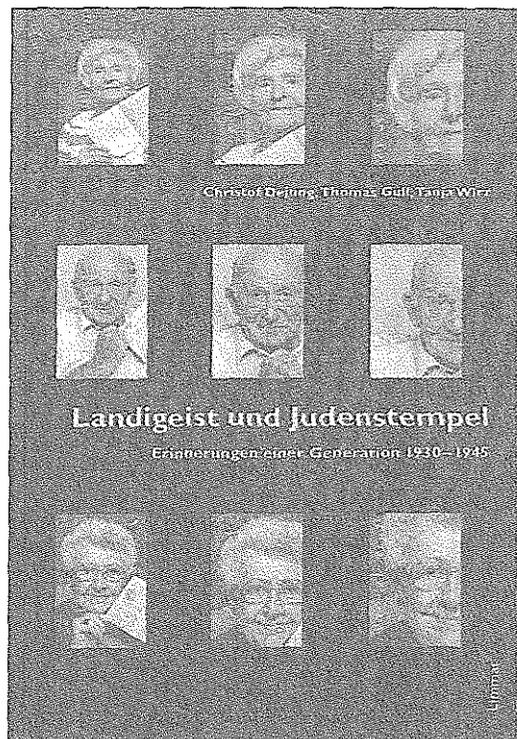
times.' Asked if her work during the war had been more wearisome than that of the servicemen, Scherer answered resolutely: 'Of course!'<sup>41</sup> None of the male contemporary witnesses expressed themselves in such a way. Also, in earlier studies women had a more reserved attitude towards the wartime years.<sup>42</sup> Men seem to be more strongly affected by the challenge to the traditional view of the wartime years. They have in general a stronger vested interest in critical aspects vanishing behind the image of a united and resisting nation and that only this image should be present in cultural memory.

## TWO LEVELS IN COMMUNICATIVE MEMORIES

All the findings above challenge the position adopted in many recent studies of memory. They often have a cultural historical orientation and focus on the way social collectives remember the past. These collectives, mostly nations, are often regarded – explicitly or not – as homogeneous entities with a consistent culture of commemoration.<sup>43</sup>

The fact that several social groups share communicative memories that are quite different from the traditional historical image of the Swiss nation is the first reason to state that it would be by far too simple to treat the discussions about the role of Switzerland during the war only as a clash between history and memory. And there is a second reason to question this notion. Interestingly, not only do various social groups have a communicative memory that differs from the traditional historical image, but contemporary witnesses who defended this traditional image on an ideological level also talked in their interviews about experiences that stood in striking contradiction to it. Hans Köfer for example, who witnessed the war as a child, said at the beginning of his interview that the whole Swiss people was united and ready to fight against fascism until death. He would not accept the criticism of certain historians since they had not themselves lived in this period. Only the people involved, 'who gained a better insight and experienced this period deeply' and who 'pledged loyalty to the country and stood up for it' could really judge the situation of Switzerland in the wartime years.

But a little later, when Mr. Köfer talked about his own experiences, one got the impression that there was no great difference between his memories and the historical research of the ICE. Mr. Köfer assented that he knew that Swiss factories had manufactured for the Axis powers: 'When I learned this during the war I thought: No, this is just not possible!' Furthermore he asserted that several members of the social elite – 'regrettably important men in the economy

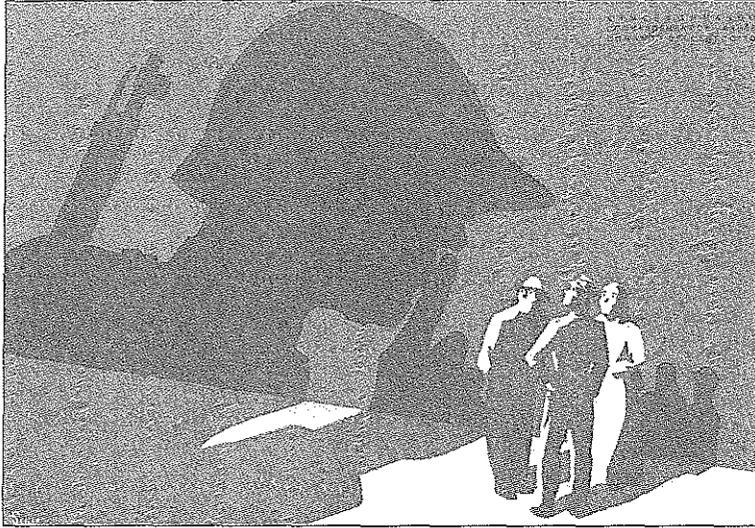


The book 'Landigeist und Judenstempel' brings together some of the interviews conducted by Archimob.

and in politics, even one member of the Federal Council' –had sympathised with Nazism and he said he had been ashamed already during the war about the policy against refugees. But then he assured the interviewer that only 'ten percent of our population' had sympathised with Nazism. 'The other ninety percent were loyal Swiss.' Therefore he came to the conclusion that 'it had been to our merit that we could keep the Germans at bay.' Asked if it was not a contradiction to claim that the Swiss people were determined to withstand Nazism after he himself had said that a considerable part of the social elite had sympathies for Hitler, he specified that only a small portion of the Swiss population had done so and that the ICE focussed too much on the objectionable activities of a few industrial magnates and kept quiet about the rest of the populace.<sup>44</sup>

This example shows that the patriotic resisting 'we' in many interviews gained a different meaning depending on context. If the interviewees got the impression that the young generation, the historians or the Americans wanted to malign Switzerland they closed ranks and the 'we' became synonymous with Switzerland. On request they specified this 'we'. Now, all of a sudden it seemed to stand for the population at large, in opposition to the social elite.

From this follows that the communicative memory of many members of the wartime generation consists of two levels. The first level conveys an image of a united and resisting nation. It was dominant in the public sphere for a long time and had been an important moral



'Who is not able to keep silent harms his own country': Illustration from Hans-Rudolf Kurz, *Dokumente des Aktivdienstes*, Frauenfeld: Huber, 1965, p 121.

resource for many Swiss during the war. This is why they defend it even if they know that the reality behind this image had been much more controversial than was admitted in public for many decades. The second level consists of personal memories that often stand in contradiction to the official wartime memory and that are therefore only told in private or in the semi-private situation of an interview. For many members of the wartime generation it was quite a shock to see that precisely these dissonant memories<sup>45</sup> were becoming headlines in national and international newspapers. They orientated themselves still around the wartime propaganda, which said: '*Wer nicht schweigen kann, schadet der Heimat*' ('He who is not able to keep silent harms his own country').

#### **DOMINANT PUBLIC MEMORIES AND THEIR POLITICAL FUNCTION**

However, the debate in the 1990s did not come as a shock for all members of the wartime generation. Former journalist Charles Inwyler, himself a veteran of World War Two, never took offence. On the contrary, he had been disturbed that objectionable facts relating to policy about refugees had been hushed up for such a long time: 'But I must say that I understand the people of my age group. For them, the discussions of the last years were a rude awakening. [...] Of course, you don't always have to rub salt into the wounds. But the important thing is: you are not to forget that the wounds exist. The truth can sometimes be a very unpleasant thing.'<sup>46</sup>

Niklaus Meienberg had already stated at the end of the 1980s: 'We live in a nice country: it lives on amnesia. With a little bit more memory the governors would live less conveniently, and so would the governed.'<sup>47</sup> This statement suggests that the manner of reminiscence has a function for the political order of a nation. From the view of the past that is accepted in a nation,

one seems to be able to draw conclusions for future developments.<sup>48</sup> A historical discourse therefore has an influence on the allocation of political power. Michel Foucault described the connection between rules of interpretation and political power in his work *The Order of Discourse* by claiming that 'discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized.'<sup>49</sup> In a nation, many different strands of memory can take shape. These individual communicative memories, however, are usurped by the historical view framed by the social group predominant in a certain nation. This historical view dominates the other strands of commemoration as the cultural memory of the nation.<sup>50</sup>

It is not coincidental that the image of the patriotic Swiss confraternity is normally sustained by the members of the wartime generation in public comments whereas in private or semiprivate conversations they tend to admit that indeed there had been events that do not fit with the harmonious image of the wartime years. Cultural memory as an important support for the stability of a national community depends on diffusion in the general public. Only as a discourse circulating in public can it be relevant for a social group. Benedict Anderson claimed in his famous work *Imagined Communities* that 'all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact ... are imagined.'<sup>51</sup> Members of a nation are sure that this nation exists and that it is also relevant for its other members, even if they will never know them personally. National identity depends on discourses made public by mass media, especially books and newspapers. Anderson described this as follows: 'The newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed in his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbourhood, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life. As with *Noli me Tangere*, fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations.'<sup>52</sup>

As long as certain problematic aspects of the past are only discussed in a private or semiprivate space – in other words, as long as they remain a part of the communicative memory – they will not threaten the cohesion of a national community. Only when they begin to be debated in public do they jeopardise the cultural memory. Dominant social groups therefore will try to control views of the past expressed in the public sphere. After 1945, the army was at the centre of the cultural memory

of the wartime years: a politically conservative and predominantly male institution. In this way, the conservative orientation and the masculine predominance within Swiss politics were reinforced. The political left cultivated an independent culture of commemoration at least until after the 1960s. Even if the working class had endorsed military defence in the wartime years and after 1945, their attitude towards the army remained ambivalent. But the leftist strand of retrospection towards the wartime years never attained major significance compared to the hegemonic historical discourse. As a further group, women focused in their memories on different aspects of the past. And the recollections of Swiss Jews differed from the manner of retrospection prevailing among Swiss of Christian denomination. But these dissenting strands of memory never were of major relevance for the cultural memory of Switzerland. One way to account for memories which are not expressed publicly

is through oral history, as is demonstrated in this case by the results of the Archimob project. The famous statement of Ernst Renan that '[f]orgetting [...] is a crucial factor in the creation of the nation' certainly helps to understand the cultural memory of a nation<sup>35</sup> but does not apply to the recollections in the communicative memory of its members.

I draw two conclusions: First, oral history can help to examine the differences between publicly and privately expressed memories and can help to understand how people cope with the dissonances between these two different types of commemoration. Second, we should leave behind the idea that there is one homogeneous memory in a certain nation and more strongly pursue a social historical analysis of memory, which stresses that there are different types of memories in different social groups and that the hegemony of one of these memories in the public sphere is always a means for gaining social power.

## NOTES

1. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed., London and New York: Verso, 1991, pp 6-9; Reinhart Koselleck and Michael Jeismann (eds), *Der politische Totenkult, Kriegerdenkmäler in der Moderne*, München: Fink, 1994; Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning, The Great War in European Cultural History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

2. Popular Memory Group, 'Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method', in: Richard Johnson et al (eds), *Making Histories, Studies in History-Writing and Politics*, London: Hutchinson, 1982, p 205-252; Timothy G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper, 'The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration: Contexts, Structures and Dynamics', in: Ashplant, Dawson and Roper (eds), *Commemorating War, The Politics of Memory*, New Brunswick and London 2004: Transaction Publishers, p 13.

3. The other European nations not involved directly in the war were Sweden, the later Republic of Ireland, Portugal, Turkey and Spain: Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes, The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*, London: Abacus, 1995, p 24.

4. Oberstbrigadier Richard Suter, 'Zum Geleit', in: Ehemalige Mitr. Kp. IV/82 (ed), *Eine besondere Kompaniegeschichte, Besinnliches Heiteres aus der Zeit 1939-1945*, Thayngen: self-published, 1983, p 13. All quotes from sources in this paper are originally in German and were translated into English by the author.

5. For the reminiscence of World War Two in Switzerland see: Georg Kreis, 'Vier Debatten und

wenig Dissens', *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte*, vol 47, no 4, 1997, pp 451-476; Mario König, 'Politik und Gesellschaft im 20. Jahrhundert, Krisen, Konflikte, Reformen', in: *Eine kleine Geschichte der Schweiz, Der Bundesstaat und seine Traditionen*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1998, pp 21-90; Christof Dejung, 'Schweigend gedenken, dann rasch weitergehen, Das Kriegsende in der Schweiz und die gesellschaftlichen Folgen des offiziellen Geschichtsbildes nach 1945', *Jahrbuch für Forschungen zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung*, no 1, 2005, pp 19-34.

6. BAR (= Swiss Federal Archives, Bern) E 27/14112: Tagesbefehl vom 8. Mai 1945.

7. Friedrich Traugott Wahlen, 'Einleitung', in: Andri Peer (ed), *Der Aktivdienst, Die Zeit nationaler Bewährung 1939-45*, Zofingen: Ringier, 1975, p 5.

8. Peer, 1975, p. 9.

9. Christof Dejung, *Aktivdienst und Geschlechterordnung, Eine Kultur- und Alltagsgeschichte des Militärdienstes in der Schweiz 1939-1945*, Zürich: Chronos, 2006.

10. BAR E 27/14112: Tagesbefehl vom 20. August 1945.

11. Yvonne Voegeli, *Zwischen Hausrat und Rathaus. Auseinandersetzungen um die politische Gleichbehandlung der Frauen in der Schweiz 1945-1971*, Zürich: Chronos, 1997; Annette Frei Berthoud, 'Fakten, Mythen, Erinnerungen, Die unterschiedliche Wahrnehmung und Beurteilung von Aktivdienst und Fraueneinsatz', in: Philipp Sarasin and Regina Wecker (eds), *Raubgold, Reduit, Flüchtlinge, Zur Geschichte der Schweiz im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Zürich: Chronos, 1998, pp 105-119; Regina Wecker, 'It wasn't War! The

Situation of Women in Switzerland 1939-1945', in: Joy Chamley and Malcolm Pender (eds), *Switzerland and War (=Occasional Papers in Swiss Studies No 2)*, Bern etc.: Lang, 1999, pp 61-81.

12. Quotation from Mario König, 'Die Verlegenheit vor dem Frieden, Vom schweizerischen Umgang mit dem Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs', *Traverse, Zeitschrift für Geschichte*, vol 2, no 2, 1995, supplement "Mai 1945", p 15.

13. König, 1995, p 15.

14. Luc van Dongen, 'La mémoire de la Seconde Guerre mondiale en Suisse dans l'immédiat après-guerre (1945-1948)', *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte*, vol 47, no 4, 1997, pp 709-729; Sacha Zala, 'Das amtliche Malaise mit der Historie, Vom Weissbuch zum Bonjour-Bericht', *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte*, vol 47, no 4, 1997, pp 759-780; Hans Ulrich Jost, *Politik und Wirtschaft im Krieg, Die Schweiz 1938-1948*, Zürich: Chronos, 1998, p 213.

15. Tages-Anzeiger vom 24.1.1997.

16. Alfred A. Häsler, *Das Boot ist voll, Die Schweiz und die Flüchtlinge 1933-1945*, Zürich: Ex libris, 1967; Max Frisch, *Dienstbüchlein*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1974.

17. Edgar Bonjour, *Geschichte der schweizerischen Neutralität, Vier Jahrhunderte eidgenössischer Aussenpolitik*, vol IV/1, Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1970.

18. Niklaus Meienberg, *Die Erschiessung des Landesverrätters Ernst S.*, Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1974; Niklaus Meienberg, *Die Welt als Wille und Wohn, Elemente zur Naturgeschichte eines Clans*. Zürich: Limmat, 1987.

19. Niklaus Meienberg, 'Bonsoir, Herr Bonjour', in: *Vielleicht sind wir morgen schon bleich u. tot, Chronik der fortlaufenden Ereignisse, aber auch*

der fortgelaufenen, Zürich: Limmat 1989, p 219 [first published in: AZ, Mai 1971].

**20.** Hans Ulrich Jost, 'Bedrohung und Enge (1914-1945)', in: Beatrix Mesmer et al (ed), *Geschichte der Schweiz – und der Schweizer*, Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn 1983, pp 101-189; Jakob Tanner, *Bundeshaushalt, Währung und Kriegswirtschaft, Eine finanzsoziologische Analyse der Schweiz zwischen 1938 und 1953*, Zürich: Limmat, 1986; Werner Rings, *Raubgold aus Deutschland, Die 'Golddrehscheibe' Schweiz im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Zürich: Artemis, 1985.

**21.** Sebastian Speich et al, *Die Schweiz am Pranger, Banken, Bosse und die Nazis*, Wien: Ueberreuter, 1997, p 11.

**22.** The ICE published its results in 2001 and 2002 in 25 Volumes. A summary appeared in print as: Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland – *Second World War, Switzerland, National Socialism, and the Second World War, Final Report*, Zürich: Pendo, 2002. See also: <http://www.uek.ch/en/>.

**23.** Jakob Tanner, 'Geschichtswissenschaft und moralische Restitution: die Schweiz im internationalen Kontext', *zeitgeschichte*, vol 30, no 5, 2003, pp. 268-280; Christof Dipper, 'Die Geburt der Zeitgeschichte aus dem Geist der Krise, Das Beispiel Schweiz', in: Alexander Nützenadel and Wolfgang Schieder (ed), *Zeitgeschichte als Problem, Nationale Traditionen und Perspektiven der Forschung in Europa*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004, pp. 149-174.

**24.** Quotation from Christof Dejung, "Die heutigen Schlaumeier wollen alles besser wissen", *Das Spannungsfeld zwischen historischer Forschung und den Erinnerungen der Aktivdienstgeneration in der jüngsten Debatte um den Zweiten Weltkrieg*, in: Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv (ed), "... denn es ist alles wahr", *Erinnerung und Geschichte 1939-1999*, Bern: Dossier Bundesarchiv, 1999, pp 51.

**25.** Pierre Nora, *Zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis*, Berlin: Wagenbach, 1990, p 12. For historical studies drawing on the theory of Nora compare amongst others: Jakob Tanner, 'Krise der Gedächtnisorte und die Havarie der Erinnerungsorte, Zur Diskussion um das kollektive Gedächtnis der Schweiz und die Rolle der Schweiz während des Zweiten Weltkrieges', *Traverse, Zeitschrift für Geschichte*, vol 6, no 1, 1999, pp 16-37.

**26.** See: Meienberg, 1974; Frisch, 1974; Walter Kern, *Was kümmert uns der Hut? Ein "Frontbericht" aus der Schweiz im zweiten Weltkrieg mit Bezügen zur Gegenwart*. Zürich: Veritas, 1983;

Simone Chiquet (ed), *"Es war halt Krieg", Erinnerungen an den Alltag in der Schweiz 1939-1945*, Zürich: Chronos, 1992.

**27.** Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, Paris: Michel, 1997 [1950]. English version: Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, New York: Harper and Row 1980.

**28.** Jan Assmann, 'Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität', in: Jan Assmann and Tonio Hölscher (ed), *Kultur und Gedächtnis*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1988, pp 9-19; Aleida Assmann, '1998 – Zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis', in: Aleida Assmann and Ute Frevert, *Geschichtsvergessenheit und Geschichtsversessenheit, Vom Umgang mit deutschen Vergangenheiten nach 1945*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1999, pp 21-52.

**29.** Thomas Maissen, *Verweigerte Erinnerung, Nachrichtenlose Vermögen und Schweizer Weltkriegsdebatte 1989-2004*, Zürich: Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 2005.

**30.** They are collected on the DVD *Rückblickend, Eine Sammlung von 21 Filmen in Zusammenarbeit mit der Wanderausstellung "L'Histoire c'est moi"*, Zürich: Limmat, 2004.

**31.** Christof Dejung, Thomas Gull and Tanja Wirz (eds), *Landgeist und Judenstempel, Erinnerungen einer Generation 1930-1945*, Zürich: Limmat, 2002; Fabienne Regard and Laurent Neury, *La vie... malgré tout, Mémoire d'une Suisse en guerre*, Yens sur Morges: Cabédita, 2002.

**32.** The interview clippings shown at this exhibition are collected on *L'Histoire c'est moi, 555 Versionen der Schweizer Geschichte 1939-1945*, Die Archimob Ausstellung auf 4 DVD, Lausanne: Archimob, 2005. See for the Archimob project: [www.archimob.ch/](http://www.archimob.ch/).

**33.** Interview with Marthe Gosteli, born in 1917, conducted by Tanja Wirz, 11th February 2000.

**34.** Interview with Hans Wymann, born in 1917, conducted by Christof Dejung, 7th July 1999.

**35.** Interview with Max Siegrist, born in 1918, conducted by Christof Dejung, 7th July 1999.

**36.** Interview with Ralph Winkler, born in 1915, conducted by Christof Dejung, 1st December 2000.

**37.** Interview with Leni Alweg, born in 1924, conducted by Theo Stich, 14th November 2000.

**38.** Interview with Moritz Abrach, born in 1913, Zurich, conducted by Gisela Blau, 10th December 1999.

**39.** Interview with Marianne Gromb, born in 1920, conducted by Thomas Schärer, 21st July 1999.

**40.** Only a small number of women had volunteered for female military service. See: Regula Stämpfli, *Mit der Schürze in die Landesverteidigung, Frauenemanzipation und Schweizer Militär 1914-1945*, Zürich: Orell Füssli, 2002.

**41.** Interview with Elise Scherer, conducted by Christof Dejung, 9th December 1998.

**42.** See Chiquet, 1992, pp 10-12.

**43.** This applies especially to the lieux-de-mémoire-research stimulated by Pierre Nora (ed), *Les lieux de mémoire*, Paris: Gallimard 1984-1992. English version: Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory, Rethinking the French Past*, 3 vols, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996-98. See for a criticism of the current research on memory: Peter Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997, p 55; Anna Green, 'Individual Remembering and "Collective Memory", Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates', *Oral History*, vol 32, no 2, 2004, pp 35-44.

**44.** Interview with Hans Köfer, born in 1927, conducted by Christof Dejung, 14th September 2000.

**45.** See for the theory of cognitive dissonance in social psychology: Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957.

**46.** Interview with Charles Inwyler, born in 1919, conducted by Thomas Schärer, 25th January 2000.

**47.** Niklaus Meienberg, 'Vorwärts zur gedächtnisfreien Gesellschaft! Schuldzuweisung und Unschuldsvermutung', in: *Vielleicht sind wir morgen schon bleich u. tot*, 1989, p 244.

**48.** See: Reinhart Koselleck, "Erfahrungsraum" und "Erwartungshorizont" – zwei historische Kategorien", in: Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft, Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1979, pp 349-375.

**49.** Michel Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', in: Robert Young (ed), *Unjuring the Text: A Poststructural Reader*, Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, pp 52.

**50.** Tanner, 1999, p 20.

**51.** Anderson, 1991, p 6.

**52.** Anderson, 1991, p 35.

**53.** Ernst Renan, 'What is a nation?', in: *Nation and Narration*, London: Routledge, 1990 [1882], p.11.

Address for correspondance: christof.dejung@uni-koustanz.de