

Archives and historical responsibility

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The history of Basel's involvement in the slave trade could be written because the archives of the merchant houses survived. The archive of Christoph Burckhardt & Cie, preserved in Basel, allowed the historians to reconstruct the firm's business in detail. Other archives, of families, firms, foundations and public authorities, contain information about the colonial connections of Basel that remains to be explored.

The question of access to historical archives has become an issue for financial institutions. In the United States, several states and cities adopted laws in the early 2000s requiring insurance companies and banks doing business with them to disclose their historical connections to slavery. Several American financial institutions published reports on their historical involvement and apologised for it.¹ In Switzerland, the experience of the Bergier Commission, which examined the conduct of Swiss banks, insurers and companies during the Second World War with privileged access to their archives, showed how historical research can contribute to the clarification of institutional responsibility. Part D returns to the Bergier Commission.

The preservation and accessibility of archives is thus part of the responsibility of financial institutions. An institution that preserves its archives and opens them to researchers allows its history to be written, including its dark chapters, and can respond to questions about its past on the basis of evidence. The modern obligations of record keeping, which require financial institutions to keep their records for ten years, serve the purposes of supervision and law enforcement. The long-term preservation of historical archives serves the purpose of historical truth, which a financial centre that wants to be trusted cannot ignore.

1 Notes

1. On the disclosure laws on slavery-era business (e.g. California Slavery Era Insurance Policies law of 2000; Chicago Slavery Era Disclosure Ordinance of 2002) and the reports and apologies of US financial institutions, see the relevant legislation and press reports. To be verified. ↩

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