

Bank archives and historical research today

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The dormant assets affair opened a new period in relations between banks and historians. The Bergier Commission enjoyed privileged access to company archives, and its work demonstrated the value of these holdings for understanding Swiss economic history. Several institutions have since organised their historical archives, published histories of their house and opened their holdings to researchers, subject to certain conditions.¹

Historical research today turns to new questions: the links between the financial centre and the colonial economy, the authoritarian regimes of the second half of the twentieth century, apartheid and the Latin American dictatorships. The interview published by the University of Geneva to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Bergier Report thus refers to the persistence of certain things left unsaid, notably concerning Switzerland's support for the apartheid regime.²

For institutions, such research represents both a reputational risk and an opportunity. It is a risk because it may reveal questionable past practices, and an opportunity because an open and responsible attitude towards history strengthens the credibility of current commitments to compliance and social responsibility. The houses that have been able to come to terms with their past have generally been better at preserving the trust of their clients and of the public.

1 Notes

1. UBS, "UBS Statement on Voluntary Review of Credit Suisse's World War II Activities" (ubs.com): voluntary review begun by Credit Suisse in 2020 and continued by UBS after the acquisition, under the supervision of an independent ombudsman, covering research in 18 public archives in seven countries and more than 16.5 million

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documents (44 million pages), with a final report expected by the end of 2026; UBS, “Virtual Museum” (ubs.com/our-history). ↩

2. “Vingt ans après le rapport Bergier, beaucoup reste à explorer”, Université de Genève, 19 May 2022. ↩

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