

Refugees and asylum policy

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

Swiss policy towards refugees during the war is one of the most painful aspects of the period. The Bergier Commission devoted one of its principal studies to the subject.¹ The Swiss authorities adopted a restrictive policy that led to many refugees, Jewish refugees in particular, being turned back at the border.

A researcher quoted by *Réformés.ch* recalls that the summer of 1942 was the moment when Jews living in or having fled to France, Belgium or the Netherlands began to be systematically deported and exterminated, and the moment when Switzerland sought to close its borders completely.² The Geneva border, adjoining France, was one of the places where these tragedies played out. Some refugees were turned back, while others managed to enter, sometimes with the help of private individuals, smugglers or organisations.

This policy had direct consequences for the question of assets. People who were turned back or prevented from entering Switzerland were deported and murdered, although they sometimes held assets in Swiss banks. Their heirs, where they survived, were often unaware that these accounts existed or came up against requirements of proof that were impossible to meet. The question of refugees and that of dormant assets are therefore intimately linked.

Caution. Switzerland's restrictive policy towards refugees during the Second World War, and in particular the closing of the borders from the summer of 1942, was the subject of detailed studies by the Bergier Commission. It is one of the most sensitive aspects of Swiss history in this period, and it illuminates the context of the dormant assets.

1 Notes

1. swissinfo.ch, “L’accord sur les fonds juifs a “libéré” la Suisse”, cited above, which mentions the ICE’s work on Jewish refugees. ↩
2. “Pourquoi la Suisse n’a toujours pas digéré le rapport Bergier”, Réformés.ch (accessed September 2026). ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/geneva-refugees-and-asylum-policy