

Switzerland and apartheid: an open file

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

Relations between Switzerland and apartheid-era South Africa constitute a sensitive chapter, which historical research has illuminated only in part. Throughout the decades of apartheid, Switzerland declined to join the international sanctions against the South African regime, invoking its neutrality and its commercial universality. At the same time, its banks and companies maintained significant economic relations with that country, notably in the gold trade and in financing.¹

The interview published by the University of Geneva to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Bergier report observes that the monument to Nelson Mandela unveiled in Geneva in 2015 makes no mention of Switzerland's support for the apartheid regime, which, according to the historians interviewed, illustrates the persistence of certain things left unsaid.² A national research programme devoted to these relations was obstructed in the early 2000s by restrictions on access to the archives, imposed in the context of legal proceedings brought in the United States against companies that had done business with the regime.³

This file concerns the Geneva financial centre in several respects. It shows that neutrality and commercial universality, invoked to justify relations with every regime, were put to the test by a system that the international community condemned. It also shows that historical responsibilities can resurface, as Part D recalled in relation to the Second World War. Finally, it invites reflection on the way in which the financial centre approaches its relations with contested regimes today.

1 Notes

1. Swiss National Science Foundation, press release of 27 October 2005: synthesis report of the National Research Programme “Les relations entre la Suisse et l’Afrique du Sud” (Relations between Switzerland and

South Africa) (NRP 42+, 2000-2005, endowed with CHF 2 million, chaired by Georg Kreis): “Switzerland did not follow the movement, invoking freedom of trade”, “Swiss industry circumvented the arms embargo on a large scale”, “The administration was aware of numerous illegal and semi-legal dealings”; Sandra Bott, Bouda Etemad and Sébastien Guex, *Les relations économiques entre la Suisse et l’Afrique du Sud durant l’apartheid (1945-1990)*, Lausanne, Antipodes, 2005: Swiss imports possibly representing up to 50 per cent, or even 80 per cent, of South African gold production (several hundred tonnes per year), UBS’s pioneering role in lending, gold import statistics rendered indistinct. ↩

2. “Vingt ans après le rapport Bergier, beaucoup reste à explorer” (Twenty years after the Bergier report, much remains to be explored), University of Geneva, 19 May 2022. ↩
3. swissinfo.ch, 17 April 2003, “La Suisse verrouille ses archives sur l’apartheid” (Switzerland locks up its apartheid archives): suspension by the Federal Council of access to Federal Archives files naming companies involved in South Africa, the Department of Finance taking the view that free consultation “would risk [...] placing the accused Swiss companies in a weaker position” in the face of class actions filed in the United States since 2002 against some 80 companies, including UBS, Credit Suisse, Nestlé, Novartis, Sulzer and Schindler; reaction of Georg Kreis; SNSF, 27 October 2005: the embargo of April 2003 affected five of the ten projects of NRP 42+. ↩

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