

Presentation of Swiss Diplomatic Documents

Origins and organization of the research programme

The initiative to publish documents for the study of Switzerland's foreign policy and international position was taken in 1972 by a group of young researchers¹. A «draft project on the publication of Swiss diplomatic documents» was sent to all Swiss Institutes of History, who gave it their full support. The reasons for the initiative are clearly revealed in the draft project. The authors based their work on the following remarks: *Is it not regrettable that, despite its long history in the heart of Europe, Switzerland is unable to present to the public its scientifically documented «State papers» in the area of international politics, given that Switzerland's historical experience should interest not only the Swiss citizen but also foreigners for whom our country is often a myth or an enigma. It even seems that, at a time when there are increasing numbers of «Small States» across the world, documentary evidence of the way in which Switzerland has managed to trace a path through the most varied situations in contemporary international politics would be of interest. The absence of a systematic, scientific publication is felt all the more keenly that most European States and many non-European States have published or are in the process of publishing collections of their «State papers».*

The objective of the project initiators was clearly stated:

1. The role of the publication is not to give specific explanations or to suggest ways of interpreting events. Its aim is basically historical.
2. Regarding methodology, the research includes, a priori, all existing archive collections, for it aims to provide the historical framework for Swiss foreign policy from 1848 to 1945.
3. The publication will meet the needs of academics and researchers - both inside and outside Switzerland - who wish to study Swiss international relations, elucidate the role played by Switzerland in certain international affairs, or quite simply know the «neutral» point of view on certain questions.
4. The publication will cover a priority research area for Switzerland and will help to renew historical research by making available large volumes of documentation.
5. It will provide resources for new text-books and other publications and for the teaching of history both in Switzerland and outside the country.
6. It will be the first instance, in the area of historical studies, of an undertaking of national interest simultaneously involving the Federal Archives and the History Institutes of all the Swiss universities with the backing of the Federal

¹ Regarding the origin of the project, see Antoine FLEURY, «Les documents diplomatiques suisses. Histoire d'une publication majeure des historiens suisses», in: *Revue suisse d'histoire*, 1991, vol.41, pp. 521-533.



Department of Foreign Affairs and the National Foundation for Scientific Research.

7. It will enable decision-makers and politicians, the administration and public opinion to have a better understanding of the importance of international relations for Switzerland and of the problems faced by the Swiss government in its implementation of foreign policy.

Such was the objective. The authors still needed, however, to define a way of organizing the project which would both safeguard the historians' scientific independence and guarantee ongoing research and publication. It was therefore decided to request scientific collaboration from all the interested institutes; the project initiators did not want the undertaking to be the work of a single author or group.

Regarding the dimension and organization of the research, the question was raised as to whether each research group should be free to prepare an unlimited number of documents and therefore of volumes. The formula seemed dangerous and likely to slow up the publishing programme. The National Publication Commission (Commission de publication) founded in 1975 and chaired by Jacques Freymond, decided to go ahead with the publication of some fifteen volumes covering the 1848 - 1945 period. The figure, which may seem arbitrary, proved realistic regarding the implementation of the programme by a whole generation of academics. It was, at the same time, extremely ambitious in view of the large-scale scientific research projects in the area of the Humanities in Switzerland. For these reasons, each volume corresponds to a period, the beginning and end of which were chosen according to the importance of the period: great events, wars, negotiations etc.

From the beginning of the 20th Century, the period per volume becomes shorter, as a result of the constantly increasing amount of documentation becoming available with the intensification of international relations. The fifteen volumes programmed for the 1848 - 1945 period, one of them in two parts, were published between 1979 and 1997.

However, even before this first series covering the 1848 - 1945 period was finished, measures had been taken to carry out research into a new period, from 1945 - 1961. The Publication Commission was restructured in 1992 and chaired by Jean-Claude Favez. The research was re-organized so that work would continue uninterrupted and above all with computerised methods. A database - Dodis - now exists with data which will gradually be made available on the Internet. At the same time six 500-page volumes will be published for the years concerned.

Conception of the research

First, the researchers made an inventory of all the federal administration archives containing documentation likely to shed light on the various aspects of

Switzerland's international relations and of world politics in general. The authors of the project wanted to avoid a selective approach, whereby documents would be published to illustrate specific Swiss government foreign policy decisions; the method adopted therefore had to ensure that there would be no omission of information regarding the international stand taken by Switzerland at various times in contemporary history, in - for instance - political, economic, social, financial or cultural matters.

Second, each researcher, after systematically studying the chosen documents, decides which ones, either for reasons of form or of content, are worth publishing. But it is obvious - and here the national Publication Commission has largely followed the guidelines and experience of researchers in other countries - that «the way in which the documents are chosen depends, in the end, on the discernment of persons working with the commission and of those members directly involved in the examination of the documents»². In the selection process, priority was, in fact, given to texts which shed light on the general orientations of Swiss foreign policy or which, at a given moment in time, may have influenced them; next came texts showing Switzerland's role in international politics or clarifying her attitude to given events or problems; reports, situation analyses containing original data or reflecting the country's instructions, announcements, notices and correspondence which are basic reading for the understanding of a given affair.

Results of the research

For the researchers, the SDD collection has been a vital lead towards several important or significant aspects of Swiss international relations during the periods covered by the different volumes, therein achieving one of the essential aims of the project, which is to open up new research prospects in basic aspects of Swiss international relations instead of focusing on the one hitherto dominant theme in Historiography³, that is to say neutrality. What is more, the publications of several collaborators in the project and students' doctoral or graduate research have already made a substantial contribution to studies in the history of international relations⁴.

Regarding the publications themselves, the documents reproduced in the volumes are a fairly good reflection of the basic concerns of the Swiss authorities in the area of international relations. The forewords to the various volumes do,

² «Introduction» to Volume 1 of the 2nd series, 1936-1939, in: *Documents diplomatiques français*, Paris, 1972, p.XII.

³ Cf. A. FLEURY, «L'étude de l'histoire des relations internationales en Suisse», in: *Relations internationales*, no. 30, 1982, of the same review, totally devoted to Swiss foreign policy and, in particular, the paper by D. BOURGEOIS, «Notice bibliographique sur les publications récentes concernant les relations internationales de la Suisse de 1848 à nos jours», pp. 231-248.

⁴ For a first assessment of the various research prospects opened up by the SDD publications, see «Un siècle de politique extérieure de la Suisse à la lumière des « Documents diplomatiques suisses ». Communications de la Journée nationale des historiens suisses, le 24 octobre 1986 à Berne», in: *Itinera*, 1987, 7, pp. 1-104 and «La Suisse dans le système international de l'après-guerre 1943-1950», in: *Itinera*, 1996. For various studies undertaken by collaborators in the SDD publication project, by students or the federal archives journal, *Studies and Sources*, published regularly since 1975; numerous suggestions for researchers are given.

of course, contain references to various aspects, problems and issues which, despite the interest they arouse, have not been documented for reasons of space. The number of pages per volume was, indeed, decided beforehand: some 1000 printed pages for the volumes in the 1848 - 1945 series and approximately 500 pages for the volumes in the 1945 - 1961 series, the latter being supplemented by documents which can be accessed through the database Dodis. For the researchers, having to leave out whole questions which seem important to them is never an easy decision; it is the least gratifying part of the job!

As far as the results are concerned, it is to be noted that, thanks to the organigrams published in each volume, documentation is provided not only on the diplomatic machinery but also on the competence and workings of the Federal State.

Observations

It is worth noting that the original texts reproduced by the SDD collection are not only useful for the history of diplomacy or of foreign policy. On the contrary, the publication of all these important documents is a means of exploring the internal aspects of life in a society which is increasingly affected by the external environment: countries are no longer cut off from each other and Switzerland, a country where all kinds of exchanges take place, is particularly exposed in this respect. The SDD have thus made a far greater contribution to non-diplomatic history than the researchers themselves first imagined. Indeed, the collection contains data and has opened up often unexplored research areas in fields other than foreign policy in the strict sense of the term, in particular financial, social, cultural, humanitarian and historical issues. For if the scope of all these questions is international, they nonetheless relate to internal problems.

In the same way, close examination of these documents leads to an understanding of the way Swiss government functions, of the workings of the collegial system and of the mentalities of diplomats and both Swiss and foreign leaders.

In other words, the scientific spin-off from a collection of documents of this sort is vast, unexpected and long-term, reaching far beyond the immediate impact it may have had on the researchers directly concerned. The kind of information transmitted by a diplomat on what is happening in a given country may well be a realistic, condensed chronicle but this type of documentation is not always a sufficient basis for facts. It goes without saying that the diplomat cannot always check out the original information he is given; he may - and this is not a rare occurrence - be misled by his contacts. His information must be compared with other sources and the historian, unlike the diplomat, can take the time to do this. Diplomatic information should, indeed, serve the historian as a basis for new questions and explanations and should provide him with the incentive to broaden his research.

In a collection of diplomatic documents like this one, presented as a study of international relations from a broad standpoint, each volume can be consulted and interpreted at several levels. The publication of Swiss diplomatic documents already is a considerable source of documentation, of use not only to the historian of Swiss international relations but also for anyone wanting information on the history of Switzerland's foreign partner countries or on certain important international facts. It is certainly no longer possible for any historian to write even the shortest chapter on Switzerland's role in today's world without consulting the SDD collection, a true landmark in Swiss historiography at the end of the XXth century.

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