

ON A DELICATE MISSION

Tales of Swiss Diplomacy

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THE HISTORY OF SWISS DIPLOMACY

The beginnings of Swiss diplomacy were typical for a small republican state. Whereas in the 17th century neighbouring countries maintained lavish embassies, Switzerland allowed itself just the mayor of Basle for the most important foreign mission of the time, the delicate affair of its separation from the German Empire – and the mission was successful. With the same thrift the Swiss maintained important trade relations with absolutist France. The first official ambassador was sent to Paris at the start of the Helvetic Republic (1798), and at the end of the Napoleonic era a Swiss delegation – still on a part-time basis – was successful at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 in obtaining recognition for the independence of Switzerland and its «perpetual neutrality».

In the 19th century for the first time, as a consequence of widespread poverty and large numbers of emigrants, it became important to build up a network of consulates, staffed by Honorary Consuls. At the time of the foundation of the federal state in 1848 a Political Department (FPD) was created. At first there was still no wish to pay for professional diplomats. This was thought to be incompatible with republican virtues and democratic principles. In the face of considerable political resistance, notably from the German-speaking parts of Switzerland, it was possible gradually to recruit young diplomats and set up some foreign representations. In the second half of the 19th century, thanks to its independence and to its freedom in respect of religion, press and choice of domicile, Switzerland became the home of important international organisations and the venue for international conferences. Also at this time, in 1863, Henri Dunant created the International Red Cross (ICRC). The city of Geneva became more important for foreign countries, and the Political Department started offering various kinds of service; for example as a court of arbitration after the American War of Secession, or as a mediator after the Franco-German War. This was the beginning of Swiss professional diplomacy. Switzerland achieved international recognition and was considered to be an open-minded republic committed to higher ideals.

In the 20th century, surrounded by the horrors of two World Wars, Swiss diplomacy was in a delicate position because of its neutral stance. During the long period during which Motta was a Federal

Councillor, Switzerland again strengthened its diplomatic relations and in 1920 joined the League of Nations, although this was subject to reservations in respect of her neutrality. The role of the diplomat was particularly tricky during the Second World War: Switzerland accepted 219 mandates as protecting power and looked after the interests of various parties in many countries. As examples the activities of two diplomats are displayed, whose actions could not have been more different: Carl Lutz, Vice-Consul in Budapest, and Hans Frölicher, Ambassador in Berlin.

At the end of the War, the Foreign Minister and Federal Councillor Max Petitpierre was forced to observe that Switzerland had no friends left among the victorious powers. He initiated a foreign policy characterised as «neutrality and solidarity». The wind changed direction, however. The years from 1950 to 1990 were one of the most successful periods in the history of diplomacy, since a world divided into power blocs needed Switzerland's impartial help, indeed it depended on the diplomatic activities of this small neutral state. It was only now that diplomacy lost its feudal image, becoming objective, professional and democratic.

And today? After the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the power blocs the role of Swiss diplomacy is changing again: in the field of offering representation services, other states such as Norway are appearing on the international stage and competing with Switzerland as a mediator. What part diplomacy can or should play today and tomorrow, these are questions from the immediate present which will also be examined in the exhibition of the Swiss National Museum: at the end of the tour there are video interviews with Swiss and foreign diplomats.