

## **“Remembrance is Teaching the Findings”**

**By Brigitt Keller**

Doomsday was lurking right around the corner in the minds of the right wing Swiss People's Party when beginning of March 2006 a new history textbook for middle and high-school students was introduced to the public in Zurich. The book, so the opponents, was leftist propaganda, “historical masochism” aimed at ripping into the heart of Swiss national identity. The party announced it would fight the book's introduction as a textbook in each of the Swiss cantons. How can a textbook cause such uproar? To understand the brouhaha one has to look at the context from which this teaching material emerged.

Like many other countries in the mid 1990s, Switzerland was forced by increasing international pressure to review its role in World War II. In 1996, after initial hesitation and a number of embarrassing diplomatic faux pas, the Swiss government established the Independent Commission of Experts (ICE) to review the country's ties to Nazi Germany, its refugee policies and the treatment of assets of victims of the Holocaust by Swiss financial institutions. The Bergier commission, named after its chairman Jean-François Bergier, consisted of eight historians and one lawyer, four of them from abroad. It had an extensive mandate, unrestricted access to the Federal Archive as well as private archives and operated with a budget of CHF 22 million.

Critically examining the history of one's country and doing away with ingrained folklore does not come easy to citizens in most countries. It comes close to a sacrilege to representatives of a party that builds its political program on conservative values, national identity and isolationism. While many Swiss citizens eventually got around to accepting the rewriting of their history, the Swiss People's Party held up hope that the findings would somehow disappear into oblivion. Right after the publication of the Commission's final report in 2002, it looked as if the right would get their wish granted. Much to the chagrin of the chairman, the Swiss Federal Council limited its reaction to a few meager political platitudes, careful, as Bergier put it, “to make as little noise as possible.” Not surprisingly then, that a national debate about the findings and a much needed review of constitutional issues related to the powers of the Federal Government in times of war did not take place.

Four years later however, this textbook brings the topic back into the spotlight, shattering the hope of the right to bury the uncomfortable part of the past once and for all. In five chapters, the recommended but non-mandatory book contains a depth of factual information largely based on the Bergier report. Most importantly, it also looks at the process of historiography, stressing the importance of critical thinking and sharpening the awareness of the students for the difference between history and memory. Available to schools as well as to the general public, the book helps to ensure that “what was uncovered of Switzerland's own past also gets into the minds of those who will be making its contemporary history,” as Helen B. Junz, an American member of the Bergier commission had demanded.