

Research summary PNR42+

Design of a Swiss South Africa image in the federal administration, 1948-1990: Analysis of "policy reports" and "foreign-policy reports"

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The study involved presentation of South Africa's image in policy coverage by Swiss representatives in South Africa during 1952-1990. It became clear that one could neither speak of a unified South Africa image in Swiss diplomacy from a diacronic nor synchronic perspective during the era studied. Rather one had to assume divergent opinions. The changing importance of topics and turning points in perceiving South African development could be examined and clarified with the help of the study periods selected.

Policy reports served as the study's basic sources and were supplemented by the Foreign Policy Bulletins for the 1952-1973 period. (Policy reports are regularly written reports from Swiss ambassadors to the foreign minister in Berne on the most interesting and reliable information about the country in which they reside. Their structure and content differs according to the author's view and attitudes and the variety and reliability of his or her information sources. Although based on reports from abroad, The Foreign Policy Bulletin placed other topical weight on events in South Africa. In contrast to on-site diplomatic coverage, it was more intensively oriented toward the international focus on South Africa. In regard to its study's division into periods, it can be determined that a shift in the Bulletin's domestic perspective occurred earlier than in policy coverage by diplomats abroad.) In general it was found that policy reports could be described as an adequate body of source material for historic research, since conclusions could be drawn on the perception and worldview of coverage the individual author. The following are the most important results of the policy reports analyzed in brief summary form.

Debate during 1952-1960 on the Afrikaner nation

During the 1950s Swiss representatives in South Africa focused their major attention on the "political system" issue. The topic was primarily the continuing expansion of nationalist rule after 1948 as well as efforts to reduce Britain's influence on the Union. Thus coverage of Apartheid by Swiss diplomats was primarily of functional importance regarding rivalry in the white camp. The Swiss representatives did not discuss the issue of the political and legal status of nonwhites due to the fact that they saw the Apartheid regime as a consequence of the political conflicts between government and the opposition camp arising from ethnic policy. The "blind spot" emerging from

this was also compounded by the condition that coverage was based only on "white" information sources.

1960-1963: Shaping the white state and its "new" racial policy

Proceedings during the year of radical change, 1960, marked coverage until 1963 in many ways. While Swiss representatives diagnosed establishment of a "white culture" nation, starting with events surrounding the Sharpeville massacre they found the same nation to be increasingly threatened. The Swiss ambassador at the time identified himself largely with white nationalism. Concern over preserving the "European culture nation" marked his assessments and situation reports. Hence he perceived territorial separation of the races to be a means of winning over the "peace-loving Bantus" as well as of undercutting the increasing international criticism of South Africa's racial policy. Coverage was based above all on information sources close to the government considering the interests of nonwhites only marginally in the assessment.

1964-1973: The foreign-policy decade

Swiss representatives rated South African foreign policy of central importance in policy coverage after 1964. By contrast, domestic policy procedures drew little comment. During 1964-1968 Swiss representatives performed a tightrope act between South African domestic and foreign policy that was replaced from 1970 on by an integrated view of both policy spheres. Contacts to representatives of Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland led to a change in perception among Swiss diplomats. The natural contact of whites and blacks in these countries cast light on the abnormality of South Africa's racial relations. An intensified debate with foreign-policy actors can also be noted in reports after 1969. In their eyes white South Africa seemed to want to preserve a world that had lost its validity. Thus the Swiss representation distanced itself from South Africa's "special case" thesis and also from coverage during the early 1960s. The Indermühle report in 1970 provided the first official Swiss assessment critical of Apartheid ideology.

1974-1977: Crisis and conflict instead of détente and dialog

Foreign policy also took on an important role during 1974-1977. South Africa's détente (relaxation) policy stood at the centre of Swiss coverage, yet it failed in the perception of the Swiss ambassador due to the South Africa incursion into Angola in 1975. The ambassador viewed South Africa's foreign as well as domestic policy with scepticism. He described government policy during 1974-1976 as a series of missed opportunities and mock reforms, repeatedly criticizing the lack of democratic structures and commitment to the rule of law in his host country. The proximity of the European and Swiss financial world to official South Africa was also noted critically. The picture of blacks imparted in political reports also changed: After the Soweto events they appeared as an increasingly influential population group and as political actors to be taken seriously. In contrast to the presentation of events at Sharpeville, the Swiss embassy now clearly dissociated itself from a "ringleader theory" and explicitly described the "concerns of those protesting" as "legitimate".

1977: South Africa at the crossroads – wave of bans and sanctions

The Swiss embassy had become completely disillusioned by the end of 1977 regarding change in South Africa and considered a change in government only possible in case of an "armed interven-

tion from abroad". Its detailed coverage on the wave of bans on 19 October 1977 speaks of the government's "suppressive measures". The UN arms embargo was viewed as ineffective by the Swiss embassy. But - and this is unique in the policy reports - it recognized it and even the crucial political symbolism of the sanctions decision, even calling for action by neutral Switzerland.

1978-1984: Botha takes power – "reform era" and hope for a new beginning

In contrast to the earlier years, there was now increasing optimism evident that "something could change" in South Africa. Particularly since Prime Minister Pieter Willem Botha took office, a new assessment of the Apartheid regime by resident Swiss diplomats could be expressed. Whites now appeared in the coverage as capable of learning, and the government's "progressive steps" and will to reform moved increasingly into the foreground. Thus the assessment of policy reports agreed circles in Switzerland friendly to South Africa. Foreign policy too was judged more positively than in the past: Above all at the outset of this period it was not judged by standards of international law but by what was "politically possible" under South African conditions.

1984-1990: South Africa undergoes radical change

The policy reports of 1984-1990 continued the same perspective as in previous years in conforming to the system. In contrast to the past, the Apartheid regime's harsh acts of violence and violations of human rights were described in very detached terms. If the embassy during the 1970s clearly adapted a position of support for the protesters and criticized state violence, such a point of reference was now missing. The embassy took a clear position in the debate by opposing sanctions. It presented only arguments of those opposing sanctions, such as those represented by circles friendly to South Africa in Switzerland. During the 1980s coverage returned to a paternal position toward the non-white population. Only when Frederik Willem de Klerk took office and particularly after the release of important ANC exponents was it clear to the Swiss embassy that the liberation movement would play a vital role in the South African transition process. Coverage on foreign-policy issues declined during the last period. In contrast to domestic policy, the Swiss embassy described South African foreign policy during 1985-1990 very objectively and with critical detachment.