

CWRN Panel Presentation Abstract

Swiss Good Offices in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1992

Summary and Overview

Between 1979 and 1992, the Swiss government became deeply involved in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan as a provider of neutral good offices. Yet this episode remains largely unknown to the literature. The Swiss authorities delivered humanitarian aid, took in Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) and eventually mediated directly between the Afghan government and the armed resistance – the *mujahideen* – as hostilities continued despite the Soviet withdrawal of 1989. What is puzzling about this development is that initially, following the Soviet invasion of 1979, both government and parliament expressly refused to become involved in the Afghan crisis. They originally argued that as a small, permanently neutral state and as a non-member of the United Nations (UN), Switzerland was unable to make a difference in the context of this sudden invasion.

My monograph explains the gradual change in Swiss foreign policy, which led the Swiss government to become increasingly active in the Afghan crisis between 1979 and 1992. Some might contend that this increasing involvement was part of a larger trend. Olga Pavlenko, for instance, has recently argued that, “...there was a clear surge in the foreign policy activities of Switzerland against the background of the system-wide collapse that covered not only the USSR, but also the entire Yalta-Potsdam system of international relations.”¹ I would argue that a more nuanced picture emerges when Switzerland’s good offices in Afghanistan are looked at not just through the prism of the end of the Cold War, but in light of the developments that had originally led to the formulation of Swiss Cold War foreign and neutrality policy between 1945 and 1954. In other words, I argue that the nature of Switzerland’s growing involvement in Afghanistan at the end of the Cold War was symptomatic of a political path dependency that now exposed the inconsistencies between much vaunted Swiss neutrality and the provision of good offices.

My book contributes to the Brill series *New Perspectives on the Cold War*, edited by Jussi Hanhimäki and Marco Wyss, which builds on new historiographical research into the Cold War history of medium and smaller powers. It is a single case study on Swiss neutrality in the context of a major Cold War crisis in the so-called Third World . As such, it addresses a number of conceptual questions on the meaning of

¹ Olga Pavlenko, ‘The Soviet Union and Neutral Switzerland: Concerns and Hopes in 1989,’ in Peter Ruggenthaler and Aryo Makko, *The Soviet Union and Cold War Neutrality and Nonalignment in Europe* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021), 179.

neutrality, its idiosyncratic, case-specific forms of expression, as well as on the complicated relationship between neutrality and humanitarianism. It engages with current historiographical debates on the relationship between the Swiss government, the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). In line with the overall aims of the series *New Perspectives on the Cold War*, it also stresses the role of non-state actors, civil society organizations and private individuals in both humanitarian diplomacy and track-two mediation. In doing so, it draws on multi-archival, recently declassified and at times still-classified source material from the Swiss Federal Archives in Berne, the Bibliotheca Afghnica in Bubendorf (Switzerland), the ICRC archives in Geneva, the Yale University Archives in Connecticut and the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California.

Main Findings

What originally inspired my interest in Swiss Cold War foreign policy was the assumption in mainstream research that permanently neutral states played only marginal roles during the Cold War. These neutral states include Switzerland, Sweden, Finland, Austria and Ireland. As permanent neutrals, they may neither initiate nor take sides in armed conflict. This is why mainstream research has also tended to assume that neutral foreign policy is primarily characterized by disengagement and by relative continuity over time.

In the case of Switzerland, however, I have found that this was anything but the case during the closing decade of the Cold War. More specifically, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and its immediate aftermath from 1979 to 1992 have served as my test case to investigate the degree of change versus continuity in Swiss foreign policy at the end of the Cold War – a subject which continues to be of great relevance for Swiss researchers, policymakers and the informed public.

The question driving my research is: *How did Swiss foreign policy towards Afghanistan evolve between 1979 and 1992 and what does this tell us about Switzerland's role as a small neutral state at the end of the Cold War?* Not only did Switzerland begin to deliver humanitarian aid to the region in 1979, but between 1982 and 1986, Switzerland also agreed to extend a protective power mandate to Soviet prisoners of war and after 1990, the Swiss government led clandestine talks between the Afghan government and the armed resistance. The rationale of my research is to explain the significance of this gradual change in Swiss foreign policy over time and to address its conceptual impact on the meaning of neutrality for Swiss national identity and foreign policy.

Paradoxically, its practical impact was relatively benign, yet at a deeper level, the Afghan crisis revealed fundamental inconsistencies in the long-standing relationship between Swiss good offices and Swiss neutrality. Good offices refer to those acts of third-party diplomacy that are in pursuit of peaceful conflict resolution. In line with a foreign policy doctrine which dated back to the early post-war period, the Swiss had conventionally sought to compensate for their relative diplomatic isolation on account of their absence from the major Cold War alliance systems and from the UN. Apart from joining a number of non-political intergovernmental organizations, they primarily attempted to do this by offering varied forms of good offices in times of international conflict. These included hosting international conferences, providing formal and informal channels for diplomatic communication, and mediating peace talks between belligerents.

These good offices are still widely practised. Yet one of the principal findings of my research has been that despite providing these good offices, the Swiss have not actually succeeded in overcoming the threat of diplomatic isolation inherent in permanent neutrality. I shall argue that Switzerland's approach to the Afghan crisis was in fact strongly influenced by this very dilemma. More specifically, Switzerland's involvement in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1992 shows that the Swiss authorities continued to struggle with this issue. Hence, I reveal that Swiss foreign policymakers were still confronted with the same foreign policy dilemmas at the very end of the Cold War that their predecessors had failed to resolve at its very beginning.

Source Material

In terms of source material, I have relied primarily on interviews with significant protagonists and on recently declassified archival materials. The Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs has granted my research project Freedom of Information Access (FOIA) to archival materials from 1991 to 1993 both at the *Bibliotheca Afghonica* in Bubendorf, Switzerland, and at the Swiss Federal Archives in Berne (CH-BAR). These still fall under the Thirty-Year Rule and will only become publicly available over the coming years. I was among the first to consult these records for research purposes and there exists as of yet no academic review of these documents. I have also relied on the Swiss Federal Archives for numerous other documents on the overall conduct of Swiss foreign policy over the course of the Cold War.

Further, the ICRC has given me special access to their classified archives on the internment in Switzerland of Soviets prisoners of war. Special access does not change the status of the consulted archives, which remain classified for as long as the series is not open to the public. However, in line with Article 7 of the Rules governing access to the Archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross,

adopted on 2 March 2017, I was allowed to consult the ICRC archives for triangulation purposes. Per request of the ICRC, my research does not quote or reference the consulted classified archives, some of which remain protected by the ICRC's privilege of non-disclosure. Instead, where information contained in these archives confirms information gathered from other archives, I have agreed to cite the latter. Where information contained in the ICRC archives contradicts information gathered from other archives, I have added a footnote instructing the reader to apply for specific access to the classified archives at the ICRC to verify the relevant details. The decision of granting special access remains at the sole discretion of ICRC.

The remaining archives that I have consulted include the *Fondation Jean Monnet* in Lausanne, the Yale Archives and Manuscripts Division in New Haven, Connecticut, the British National Archives (UKNA) at Kew in London and the Ronald Reagan Archives in Simi Valley, California. In contrast, most Soviet archives have remained inaccessible as most of the relevant materials in current-day Russian archives remain classified. Instead, I have relied on three archives that publish selected translated Soviet sources online and in the English language. These were the Wilson Center Digital Archive, the National Security Archive of George Washington University, as well as the Current Digest of the Soviet Press.

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