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Uncovering Myth: Counter-archiving Switzerland's Involvement in the Trading of Nazi Gold

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Abstract
Switzerland was heavily involved in the trading of gold with the Nazi's during World War II. However, this financial complicity was obscured in the post-war years. Instead, the Swiss government moulded an official narrative, deeming the steadfastness of the Swiss Army as the reason the Swiss were not invaded by the Nazis. The extent of this financial entanglement was only revealed half a century later, when a government-appointed, independent commission was granted full archival access.

This contribution seeks to expose the duality of revelation and concealment, as well as inclusion and exclusion, that characterise these historical events and the structure of the archive. In the video, white-gloved hands uncover objects from the counter-archive, an archival system I built as part of my artistic research. These seemingly innocuous objects and patriotic symbols, representative of Switzerland's wartime myth, contrast with the audio, which provides historical information collated and summarised from the literature in the accompanying bibliography. By emphasising the dissonance between the official narrative and financial complicity, the video offers a reinterpretation of these historical events. In a short text following the video, I explain the concept of the counter-archive and how it raises questions about the attribution of value in material, financial, political, historical and moral discourses, and examines what is preserved in, and how history is mediated through, archival practices.

The video attempts to make evident Switzerland's involvement in the trading of gold with the German National Socialist regime, which was both extensive and essential for the Nazis to sustain their warfare. After the war, however, the Swiss government obscured these entanglements and moulded a "patriotic wartime memory", which became central to Switzerland's national identity.[1]

The extent of Switzerland's complicity was only revealed half a century after the end of the war, when, following international pressure, the Swiss government appointed a committee of historical and legal scholars who were granted full archival access. Over a period of five years, the Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland Second World War (ICE) conducted extensive research and published numerous reports, revealing problematic

refugee policies and Switzerland's extensive cooperation with the Nazis.[2] Their findings directly contradicted the Swiss wartime myth and public reactions to the investigation revealed the important function of patriotic wartime memory for the country's self-image.

In 2014, Swiss sociologists Nicole Burgermeister and Nicole Peter studied the impact of ICE's historical and legal research on intergenerational perceptions of Switzerland's wartime role. Their study described how public opinion remained divided and that the ICE reports are frequently perceived as overly academic and abstract.[3]

In my artistic research, I adopt a different approach by constructing a counter-archive that examines various facets of the historical context through material interventions, metaphorical frameworks, archival processes and performative gestures.[4] For this contribution, I focus on the concepts of revelation and obfuscation and the assignment of value. These themes are explored in the video through the presentation of selected objects from collections of the counter-archive, contrasted with a narration of the historical events based on the ICE's investigation and additional references. The objects presented function as cultural symbols evoking Switzerland's patriotic wartime memory. I acquired these seemingly innocuous objects from online marketplaces such as eBay and Ricardo, and they can be roughly divided into three categories: stereotypical souvenirs, commemorative objects and military paraphernalia.

In their material presence, these objects perpetuate Switzerland's patriotic wartime memory and notions of innocence. However, in their material memory, they represent a mnemonic absence. The personal associations and mnemonic connotations of these objects get lost once I buy them online. By contextualising and ordering these objects into a counter-archive, I question readings of the archive as a place of historical presence with the aim to instead configure it as a place of mnemonic absence.

In the counter-archive, these objects are not ordered according to conventional archival principles of provenance and original order. Instead, their financial value, as determined by their previous owner, dictates their placement within a collection. By prioritising financial worth over documentation of provenance, my counter-archival structure draws attention to the lack of moral consideration by Swiss banking officials in accepting the Nazi's precarious gold. Through gilding certain counter-archival objects, I incorporate the unknown provenance tied to gold's materiality and obscure some of the objects' features, further anonymising their past while simultaneously increasing their value. Incorporating gold further connects the past and the present; Switzerland's involvement in the ethically questionable gold trade persists today, with 50 70% of global gold refining happening in Switzerland.[5] This is particularly problematic, given that goldmining is often linked to numerous human rights abuses and environmental catastrophes.

Using old bank safety deposit boxes as containers for the counter-archive's different collections further underlines this connection with the contemporary Swiss financial system. Although safety deposit boxes are typically intended to secure valuable items such as jewellery and documents, the objects in the counter-archive possess value primarily in a representational context. These objects perpetuate Switzerland's wartime myth and continue to obscure the country's economic position during the war, thereby impeding critical engagement with its current role in the global gold trade. Ordering and cataloguing these objects not only transform them into mnemonic absences but strips them of their significance as cultural symbols, which further alludes to how archives not simply preserve but actively shape the past.

Drawing on theories that view the archive as a dynamic apparatus manipulated by ideological and historical objectives, the counter-archive interrogates the so-called perceived claim of the archive's neutrality and its

status as a source of historical truth.[6] It does so by containing not the past that reveals this historical gold trade but instead the past that further obscures it, highlighting the gaps that continue to inform the present.

Footnotes

1. Ludi, Regula. "What Is so Special about Switzerland? Wartime Memory as a National Ideology in the Cold War Era". In *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*. Ed. Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner and Claudio Fogu. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2006, pp. 210 48. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388333. ↑

2. Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland Second World War (ICE) (ed.) *Switzerland, National Socialism, and the Second World War: final report*. Zürich: Pendo. 2002. Available at https://www.uek.ch/en/schlussbericht/synthesis/ueke.pdf (accessed 2020-10-18). ↑

3. Burgermeister, Nicole and Peter, Nicole. *Intergenerationelle Erinnerung in der Schweiz: Zweiter Weltkrieg, Holocaust und Nationalsozialismus im Gespräch*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS. 2014. DOI:10.1007/978-3-658-03305-7. ↑

4. I started this research during my PhD at the London College of Communication, University of the Arts London (2020 25). See Zurbrügg, Vera. "Articulated Absences and Silenced Souvenirs: exploring Switzerland's complicity in the trading of Nazi gold through a counter-archive". PhD thesis. University of the Arts London. 2024. Available at https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/id/eprint/23585/ (accessed 2026-07-13). ↑

5. See Pieth, Mark. *Gold Laundering: the dirty secrets of the gold trade and how to clean up*. Zurich: Elster & Salis AG. 2019. ↑

6. See Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Tavistock Publications Limited. 1972; and Derrida, Jacques. *Archive fever: a Freudian impression*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1996. ↑

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Claudio Fogu. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2006, pp. 210–48. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388333.

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3. Burgermeister, Nicole and Peter, Nicole. *Intergenerationelle Erinnerung in der Schweiz: Zweiter Weltkrieg, Holocaust und Nationalsozialismus im Gespräch*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS. 2014. DOI:10.1007/978-3-658-03305-7.
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