



BOOKS

DOUBLE STANDARD

Between the Alps and a Hard Place: Switzerland in World War II and the Rewriting of History

Angelo M. Codevilla, Regnery Publishing, 2000, \$27.95, hardcover, 248 pages.

REVIEWED BY
NICHOLAS EVAN SARANTAKES

Although the Second World War has long been seen as a righteous crusade, it was not until the mid-1990s that Americans suddenly “discovered” that Switzerland had been complicit in the Holocaust because it continued to trade with Germany instead of going to war. Angelo M. Codevilla, a professor at Boston University and a former FSO, has written *Between the Alps and a Hard Place: Switzerland in World War II and the Rewriting of History* to expose what he sees as this perverse distortion of history and the foreign policy process.

He begins by examining Swiss diplomacy during World War II, which he considers highly skillful. He contends that Switzerland survived the war intact despite its military vulnerability because it gave Nazi Germany an incentive to allow their country to remain independent and sovereign. Hitler’s desperate need for Swiss francs to purchase raw material from neutral nations (which were under considerable pressure from the U.S. and its allies not to accept German currency or gold) gave them that leverage. Codevilla concedes that the Swiss made their currency avail-

Codevilla makes a compelling case that Americans are ignorant of history.

able to the Germans on extremely generous terms, but points out that they had little choice since they depended on foreign trade for half their food and almost all of their fuel.

But the bulk of the book focuses on explaining how, some 50 years later, the actions of the Swiss during the war suddenly came under disproportionately intense criticism. The person Codevilla holds primarily responsible for this is Edgar Bronfman, the CEO of Seagram’s and president of the World Jewish Congress. Bronfman, Codevilla claims, was more interested in raising funds for the WJC than in recovering the lost inheritances of (the relatively few) German Jews who had put their savings in Swiss banks for safekeeping. And since he, his family and his company had contributed over \$1 million to the Clinton-Gore reelection campaign, it was not hard to get the State Department to issue a formal report accusing the Swiss of being Nazi sympathizers and collaborators who profited from the Holocaust.

When that failed to compel payments from Bern, the World Jewish Congress filed a class action lawsuit against the Swiss banks that allegedly

had stolen the money half a century earlier. The Union Bank of Switzerland and the Swiss Bank Corporation eventually settled the suit for \$1.25 billion in order to get a license to merge and operate in New York. Meanwhile, similar tactics by the World Jewish Congress against German, Austrian and French companies have largely failed since their governments demanded official sanction to these agreements precluding future lawsuits, which the Clinton administration was unwilling to give.

Codevilla argues that this episode occurred both because the American people are unwilling to accept how the world actually works and because they are ignorant of history. He is half-right. The historical record offers fairly conclusive evidence that Americans are a pragmatic lot who pursue policies that they believe serve their interests, though the wisdom of these policies is sometimes a different matter. However, the idea that Americans are entitled to condemn Switzerland for remaining neutral throughout the war — particularly when the U.S. pursued the exact same policy during the first two years of the conflict — offers powerful backing for the second half of Codevilla’s thesis.

Nicholas Evan Sarantakes is an assistant professor of history at Texas A&M University-Commerce, where he teaches courses on U.S. diplomatic history and World War II. He is the author of Keystone: The American Occupation of Okinawa and U.S.-Japanese Relations (Texas A & M University Press, 2001).