

Introduction

Chris Walton & Stephanus Muller

This book has its origins in the papers given at a conference organised in May 2023 by the Bern Academy of the Arts HKB (Institute Interpretation) in collaboration with the Basler Afrika Bibliographien, the Centre for Africa Studies at the University of Basel and Africa Open Institute at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. The conference was the culmination of a research project at HKB, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), on cultural relations between Switzerland and South Africa, 1948–1994.

At first glance, organising a large-scale research project on cultural relations between two such seemingly different countries might seem odd, even absurd. South Africa is a geographically vast, mineral-rich, subtropical ex-colony of the West with a long history of racial segregation, political oppression and stark social inequality; Switzerland is a tiny, landlocked state some six thousand miles to the north with no (overt) colonial history, no natural resources bar grass and water, an alpine climate, and republican, democratic traditions that stretch back several centuries. But during the latter half of the 20th century, political and economic circumstances drew them ever closer; and this, in turn, had repercussions for cultural production, exchange and diplomacy.

It was only in the late 1990s that the close relationship between Switzerland and South Africa became a topic of open discussion. The catalyst for this was the Volcker Commission, set up in 1996 under the former Chairman of the US Federal Reserve Bank Paul Volcker to investigate the dormant accounts held by Swiss banks in which Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany had stored their valuables. After the Second World War, the banks had erected bureaucratic hurdles to prevent Holocaust survivors and their descendants from accessing their funds. The findings of the Commission were damning to Switzerland, the public fallout considerable,¹ and questions subsequently began to be asked about Switzerland's role in providing economic and political support for other non-democratic regimes in the 20th century. Parallels were soon inevitably being drawn – rightly or wrongly – between Switzerland's links with Nazi Germany and its economic and political support for fascist South Africa. In February 1997, the Swiss Federal Council was still insisting that no Volcker-style

¹ See Independent Commission of Eminent Persons, *Report on Dormant Accounts of Victims of Nazi Persecution in Swiss Banks*, at https://www.crt-ii.org/ICEP/ICEP_Report_english.pdf (accessed May 2025).

investigation into Swiss-South African relations was necessary. But a torrent of negative articles in the press meant that by May 2000, the Federal Council had no choice but to commission just such a report. They assigned the task to the Swiss National Science Foundation and appointed the historian Georg Kreis to oversee it. It was given the title “National Research Project 42+”, NFP 42+ for short, and its goal was to investigate the economic, diplomatic and administrative relations between Switzerland and South Africa from 1948 to 1994 (thus from the election of the first National Party government in South Africa to the first fully democratic elections, after which the ANC assumed power). Ten subprojects in all were set up, whose results were published either in paper form, online, or both.² They ranged from an investigation of the political reports sent to Bern by the Swiss Embassy in South Africa³ to discussions of the Swiss churches and missions in South Africa⁴ and of South African sanctions and Swiss politics.⁵ Georg Kreis drew on all these projects in his large-scale Final Report that “summarises the ten projects and relates them [to each other]”, which was published in 2005 in German and in 2007 in English translation.⁶

The scope of NFP 42+ was unprecedented at the time, as was the candour of its results, and its final report was a model of its kind. However, the project’s official remit had three significant consequences, as Kreis stated openly. First, the field of intelligence was excluded from the remit of NFP 42+, and in fact official fears of what Kreis & Co. might find and reveal resulted in the active destruction of incriminating material by the Swiss agency in question, as Kreis explains in his Introduction to his Final Report.⁷ Secondly, the research for NFP 42+ was conducted almost solely in Switzerland from a Swiss perspective with Swiss-based researchers, though Kreis openly admitted that “It would ... have been desirable in

² See NFP 42+ “Beziehungen Schweiz – Südafrika”, at www.snf.ch/de/rtpTAr8376DfTqCe/seite/fokusForschung/nationale-forschungsprogramme/nfp42plus-beziehungen-schweiz-suedafrika (accessed November 2024).

³ Michael H. Bischof, Noëmi Sibold and Andreas Kellerhals-Maeder, *Südafrika im Spiegel der Schweizer Botschaft: die politische Berichterstattung der Schweizer Botschaft in Südafrika 1952–1990*. Zurich: Chronos, 2006.

⁴ Caroline Jeannerat, Eric Morier-Genoud and Didier Péclard, *Embroiled. Swiss Churches, South Africa and Apartheid*. Berlin etc.: Lit Verlag, 2011 (*Schweizerische Afrikastudien – Etudes africaines suisses*, 9).

⁵ Christoph Hefti and Elke Staehelin-Witt, *Wirtschaftssanktionen gegen Südafrika während der Apartheid. Die Wirkung der offiziellen Handels- und Finanzsanktionen und der Einfluss der Schweizer Politik*, at: www.bss-basel.ch/images/stories/bss-basel/downloads/bss-studie_wirtschaftssanktionen_apartheid.pdf (accessed November 2024).

⁶ Georg Kreis, *Die Schweiz und Südafrika 1948–1994: Schlussbericht des im Auftrag des Bundesrates durchgeführten NFP 42+*. Bern etc.: Peter Lang, 2005; and Kreis: *Switzerland and South Africa 1948–1994. Final report of the NFP 42+ commissioned by the Swiss Federal Council*. Bern etc.: Peter Lang, 2007. The quotation here is from page 61 of the English version.

⁷ See Kreis, *Switzerland and South Africa 1948–1994*, 35.

one or the other case to have had a bit more South African expertise as a permanent element in the programme”.⁸ This Swiss perspective is also why sources in Afrikaans do not figure large (the bibliographies of the individual reports contain sources in French, English and German, but Afrikaans books are listed only in English translation, such as F.W. de Klerk’s *Die laaste trek*).⁹ Finally, NFP 42+ also excluded any in-depth discussion of cultural relationships between South Africa and Switzerland, though Kreis included a highly informative, nine-page chapter on them in his overall report,¹⁰ confirming that cultural issues played a substantial role in relations between the two countries. The reason for this omission was understandable at the time. Focusing on arts and culture was inevitably going to take a back seat when the prime purpose of the project was to reveal the large-scale economic and political connections between Switzerland and the apartheid state.

In fact, as Kreis’s brief chapter intimates, cultural relations blossomed between Switzerland and South Africa in parallel with their increasing importance as trading partners. It was not least in order to rectify the omission of culture from NFP 42+ that the Bern Academy of the Arts (HKB) initiated a new research project in 2019, also funded by the SNSF: “Cultural relations between Switzerland and South Africa, 1948–1994”.¹¹ Georg Kreis generously supported our project, even when it was still in its conceptual phase. Without his earlier work, our project would have been impossible, and without his later assistance, it might never have come about at all.

There were five subprojects to this new project: an overarching study of Swiss cultural connections with South Africa, primarily through the lens of state diplomacy; a project looking at classical music; another investigating jazz; one looking into Afrikaans translations of Swiss literature; and one investigating South African theatre in Switzerland. Our partner institutions included Africa Open Institute at Stellenbosch University in South Africa (Prof. Stephanus Muller) and the Department of Modern History at the University of Fribourg.

Our project began in the autumn of 2019. Just half a year later, the Covid pandemic struck. A few days before the first lockdown, one of our team arrived in South Africa for what was supposed to be an extended research visit. We only just managed to get him back on the last flight out of the country, travelling on a lengthy, circuitous route with stops in Central Africa. Just a few weeks later, the team member responsible for the jazz subproject, Christian Steulet, died quite unexpectedly of a heart attack. We were lucky that Steff Rohrbach was able and willing to take his place several months later, and we are especially

⁸ Kreis, *Switzerland and South Africa 1948–1994*, 61.

⁹ See Hefti and Staehelin-Witt, *Wirtschaftssanktionen*, 134.

¹⁰ See Kreis, *Switzerland and South Africa 1948–1994*, chapter 6.10, “Cultural and scientific relations”, 483–491.

¹¹ See <https://data.snf.ch/grants/grant/182311> (accessed November 2024).

grateful to Christian's family for allowing us access to his files. Steff had known Christian well and was able to revise some of the interviews he had conducted but had been unable to bring to publication. This is why three of the chapters in this book are listed as jointly by Christian and Steff.

No less than two years elapsed between our first and second team meetings. Over the course of the project, our team members have also endured several deaths among family and friends – not just from Covid – though one of us has also boosted the population by having two babies and another has become a grandparent. Covid meant we had to change our way of working, not least by moving as many of our activities as possible online. It was a matter of no little surprise that many of the people we wanted to interview, some of them of an advanced age, were readily amenable to engaging on Zoom or Skype. One of the oddest things any of us experienced during the project was perhaps an interview conducted in Afrikaans in a house in the Alps at 1600 metres above sea level during a snowstorm, the interview partner being a former member of the South African Prison Band sitting at home in Johannesburg at the height of summer. But not everything can be done online. We were fortunate in that Africa Open Institute at Stellenbosch University was able to facilitate excellent research assistants to help us with interviews and archival research on the ground in South Africa. Chatradari Devroop, then at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and later at Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), Pretoria, also provided local assistance, as did colleagues at universities in Johannesburg, Pretoria and Bloemfontein. We owe them all our sincere thanks.

Sometimes, of course, the vicissitudes of Covid could not be overcome. Just a couple of days before one of our assistants was due to fly to Pretoria to interview the opera singer Mimi Coertse, her small son came down with Covid and she had to stay in the Cape (regrettably, we were unable to organise any follow-up interview before Mimi's health thwarted our plans altogether). On another occasion, one of our team members travelled to Pretoria for archival work, only to be locked out of the archive the next day because of a local case of Covid. Our project also coincided with a period of widespread power cuts and water rationing in South Africa that provided even more complications. Some of the individual subprojects had to be tweaked and adjusted to cope with shifting circumstances, though this also occasionally resulted in previously unforeseen, positive outcomes such as the book on the coloured South African repetiteur Gordon Jephtas, edited by three of the contributors to the present volume and also published by BAB Verlag in Basel.¹²

Writing or editing a book on South Africa necessitates careful consideration of terminol-

¹² Hilde Roos, F.-J. Davids and Chris Walton, eds., *I'm Sorry. I am what I am.* The life and letters of the South African pianist and opera coach Gordon Jephtas (1943–92), Basel: BAB Verlag, 2023.

ogy, also because different terms are connoted differently in Europe, Africa and the United States. This fact caused problems even before our research project began. The peer reviewers employed by the SNSF to assess project proposals, like all such research bodies across Europe, tend to be white, liberal, middle-aged, Central European academics whose experience of the English-speaking world is focused on the United Kingdom and the United States of America. This means, for example, that the use of the word “coloured” has to be explained carefully. In the USA (and often in the UK), its use is considered offensive (and would rightly result in the automatic disqualification of any research proposal in which it figured). In South Africa, however, it has a specific historical and political meaning, referring to a diverse group of people categorised as “coloured” under apartheid – a label many thus categorised still use today themselves, particularly in official or legal contexts, while others reject it in favour of terms such as “Khoi”, “Black”, or more localised identifications. We were also candidly advised to avoid the word “race” throughout in our proposal, as the mere mention of the word could be considered by many (white, middle-aged, liberal, Central European) peer reviewers as in itself racist. But since apartheid South Africa was founded on spurious notions of what “race” is supposed to be, and since the word is used openly by South Africans of all races, avoiding it when talking or writing about apartheid South Africa can result in linguistic absurdities (we nevertheless decided to replace “race” with “ethnicity” in our project proposal, as the latter term still remains largely untainted in the Global North). Retaining the nomenclature of apartheid in order to write about it naturally risks perpetuating the offensive notions that lurked behind that nomenclature, and while we have no straightforward answers to the linguistic conundrums that we have faced, we can only assure our readers that we have given intense thought to them. We wish to note that we here follow the custom of the New York Times and elsewhere by capitalising the word “Black”. However, on the recommendation of a colleague who happens to be coloured, we use this term in the present book in the lower case throughout in order to give it an adjectival function similar to “white”.

This volume represents the first sustained attempt to document and analyse the cultural dimensions of Swiss-South African relations during apartheid, drawing together archival research, critical essays, and rare oral histories – including invaluable interviews with jazz musicians – for a multifaceted perspective on transnational cultural exchange. In doing so, it addresses a notable gap left by NFP 42+, expanding the historiography beyond economic and political frameworks to foreground music, theatre, literature and translation as key arenas of encounter. By recovering overlooked narratives, exposing the complexity of complicity and resistance, and attending to the mobility of artists, texts and instruments across borders, this book opens new avenues for understanding how culture functioned as

both a site of soft power and a means of subversion during an era of Cold War tensions and apartheid repression.

The present volume includes papers from the conference held in Basel in May 2023 along with several essays that similarly emerged from the project and a number of interviews with musicians from the jazz scene and its periphery. We are grateful to all the authors who have contributed to this volume – both those who gave papers at the conference and those who joined us later. We also owe thanks to those who have provided illustrations. We have in all cases endeavoured to ensure the rights to the images reproduced here. If we have inadvertently used images whose rights lie elsewhere, we kindly request that the rights holders contact us.

Our thanks are due to the many people who agreed to be interviewed in the course of our research or contributed in other ways, including Rob Allingham, Michael Blake, Isabel Bradley, John Wolf Brennan, Pim Broer, Christine Canu, Bernard Caplan, Michelle Cooper, John Coulter, Bob Degen, Frederick Fourie, Pienaar Fourie, Pieter Fourie, Athol Fugard, Ronald Gehr, Roland Jung, Stephan Kurmann, Jürgen Leinhos, Johannes Lüthi, Mannie Manim, Rose Ntshoko, Esther Nyffenegger, Walter Prystawski, Barbara Pukwana, Dietbert Reich, Jill Richards, Cobus Rossouw, Renée Sigel, Paul Simmonds, Danie Stander, Louis de Stoutz, Harald Strebel, Niklaus Troxler, Obed Ureña, Barend van den Bergh, Fritz Weber, Beat Wenger and Aude Widmer (see also the acknowledgements in the individual chapters below).

Special gratitude goes to Georg Kreis, to the team of the Bern Academy of the Arts (Thomas Gartmann, Martin Skamletz, Daniel Allenbach, Reto Witschi), to the team of Basler Afrika Bibliographien (Dag Henrichsen, Christian Vandersee, Heidi Brunner, Susanne Hubler, Petra Kerckhoff, Corinne Lüthy, Jasmin Rindlisbacher, Lisa Roulet, Sarah Schwarz, Micha Seitzinger, Reto Ulrich and Antonio Uribe), to Veit Arlt and the Centre for Africa Studies at the University of Basel, to Claude Hauser of the University of Fribourg, to SUIISA (especially Andreas Wegelin and Noah Martin) and to everyone at Africa Open Institute at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. The archives and libraries consulted are listed at the close of this book.

Solothurn & Stellenbosch, June 2025

STEPHANUS MULLER AND CHRIS WALTON (EDS)

**Cultural Relations between Switzerland
and Apartheid South Africa**

Basler Afrika Bibliographien 2025

The open access version of this book has been published with the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation.



Hochschule der Künste Bern
Haute école des arts de Berne
Bern Academy of the Arts

2025

Published by

Basler Afrika Bibliographien

Namibia Resource Centre & Southern Africa Library

Klosterberg 23

PO Box

4010 Basel

Switzerland

www.baslerafrika.ch



The Basler Afrika Bibliographien is part of the Carl Schlettwein Foundation

Text © The authors 2025

Cover image: Niklaus Troxler's 1994 poster for the Willisau Jazz Festival. Courtesy of Niklaus Troxler

Cover design: Candice Turvey, Spiritlevel

ISBN 978-3-906927-74-9

eISBN 978-3-906927-75-6

<https://doi.org/10.53202/LHFY9620>



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