

Max Petitpierre: the courage to negotiate with the “bad guys”

by Guy Mettan,* Geneva



Guy Mettan.
(Picture ma)

On Wednesday 18 March, we celebrated the 80th anniversary of the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Switzerland and Russia (then the Soviet Union).

To say the least, these relations have been tumultuous. In 1945, having just joined the Federal Council as Minister of Foreign Affairs, **Max Petitpierre** found himself in a very delicate situation. The two main victors of the Second World War, the United States and the Soviet Union, were angry with Switzerland because of its relations with Nazi Germany. The country found itself completely isolated. Within eighteen months, however, Max Petitpierre managed to restore relations with both the Americans and the Soviets, despite his anti-Bolshevist stance. He did so with a flair and audacity that should inspire our political leaders today.

On the one hand, the Allies criticised Switzerland for harbouring gold and numerous Nazi assets in its banks and for refusing to return them on the grounds of banking secrecy. In retaliation, the United States froze Swiss assets held in the country and boycotted Swiss companies that had traded with the Third Reich.

On the other hand, the Soviet Union has been angry with Switzerland ever since 1923, when, out of anti-communism, Switzerland acquitted one of its nationals, **Maurice Conradi**, who had murdered the Russian diplomat **Vatslav Vorovski** in Lausanne. In 1924, Switzerland continued to refuse to recognise the USSR whilst all other powers had done so, resulting in the severing of diplomatic ties. The **Aubert** Committee and anti-communist propaganda went into overdrive.

* **Guy Mettan** (1956) is a political scientist, freelance journalist and author. He began his journalistic career in 1980 at the Tribune de Genève, where he was director and editor-in-chief from 1992 to 1998. From 1997 to 2020, he was director of the «Swiss Press Club» in Geneva. He has been a member of the Grand Council of Geneva for 25 years.



Swiss Federal Councillor Max Petitpierre, seated on the right, with the chief delegate of the Soviet Union, General Nikolai Slavin, seated in the centre, at the signing of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the two Additional Protocols on 12 August 1949 in Bern. (KEYSTONE/PHOTOPRESS ARCHIVE/Str)

But twenty years later, in late 1944, as the USSR emerged as the principal victor over Hitler’s Germany on the continent and the United States pressed to recover Nazi gold and assets, the Swiss position became untenable.

Petitpierre acted on both fronts with equal determination. He dispatched one of his finest diplomats, **Walter Stucki**, to Washington. After several rebuffs, Stucki managed to negotiate an unexpected agreement on 25 May 1946, under which Switzerland paid 250 million francs to the Americans in exchange for the lifting of sanctions against the **Swiss National Bank (SNB)**, accused of harbouring Nazi gold, and Swiss companies. German assets in Switzerland were allocated 50% for the reconstruction of Europe and 50% for Swiss war victims. The skies cleared on the Western Front and Switzerland was able to resume both its commercial and diplomatic relations with the “Western Allies”.

As for relations with the “Eastern Ally”, the Soviet Union, these had been settled a few months earlier, on 18 March 1946 to be precise. For Petitpierre, this was a priority. Yet he had to force himself to do so, coming as he did from a bourgeois, anti-Bolshevik (or, as we would say today, Rusophobic) family in Neuchâtel.

Under pressure, he lifted the freeze on Soviet assets in October 1945. 20 million francs were

paid to the Russians and the issue of the 10,000 Soviet prisoners of war held in Switzerland was resolved. Then, on the initiative of the Swiss ambassador to Yugoslavia, *Eduard Zellweger*, negotiations opened in Belgrade, leading to the agreement of 18 March, with the Federal Council modifying “its previous attitude insofar as it had been unfriendly towards the USSR”. A phrase that resonates strongly with the criticisms levelled by contemporary Russia, which has regarded Switzerland as “unfriendly” ever since it took up Ukraine’s cause in 2022 despite its professed neutrality ...

The way was thus clear for the resumption – albeit very tentative – of trade relations, and more intensive diplomatic relations. In 1954, at the height of the Cold War, Switzerland hosted the Geneva negotiations on Korea and Indochina, which led to the Geneva Accords, and in 1955 the *Summit of the Big Four* between *Eisenhower*, *Khrushchev*, *Anthony Eden* and *Edgar Faure*, paving the way for the development of what was to become “International Geneva” and the mediating role we have known until 2022.

Better still: despite his prejudices, Petitpierre understood the nature of the changes underway.

Still in 1955, he stated that he had “always strived to understand the world in which we live today, which is no longer the same as the one we knew during the war, a world that seems to me to be changing every day. We find ourselves in a process of evolution whose outcome I find impossible to discern. [...] This evolution is driven

Max Petitpierre (Canton of Neuchâtel)

Born 26 February 1899, died 25 March 1994.

Studied law, obtained a doctorate, qualified as a barrister and notary,

from 1932, extraordinary professor of private international law and civil procedure at the University of Neuchâtel.

Elected to the Federal Council on 14 December 1944, resigned on 30 June 1961.

Following his resignation, Max Petitpierre served on the ICRC (1961–1976).

(Source <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/004647/2014-04-22>)

by powerful collective forces, far more so than by individuals and governments. [...] During the centuries of its supremacy, the arrogant West believed it held a monopoly on civilisation and political power. It undoubtedly had the power, but it may have lacked the wisdom, foresight and moderation.” (Quoted by Mr *Perrenoud*, “Le Temps”, 16 February 2023).

At a time when hatred is raging against Russians, in the name of blind Russophobia; against Iranians, in the name of narrow-minded anti-Islamism; against Palestinians, in the name of excessive anti-anti-Semitism; or against Jews, in the name of virulent anti-Zionism, it would be wise for Swiss leaders and political parties to rediscover the wisdom, foresight and moderation of Max Petitpierre. Switzerland’s place on the world stage over the next 80 years depends on it ...