


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Worse than Hitler and Nazi Germany: Swiss Diplomats and the Cultural Revolution

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(Received 13 October 2021; revised 20 March 2022; accepted 21 March 2022)

## Abstract

This article relies on reports written by Swiss diplomats during the Cultural Revolution in Beijing to discuss how they experienced the Cultural Revolution, and how the violence and chaos that they witnessed in 1966 and 1967 affected their mental health. Switzerland's importance as a hub for China in Western Europe meant that the Swiss diplomats were not harmed by the Red Guards. As a result, the Swiss diplomats gained a unique perspective among Beijing's foreign diplomats, observing and documenting the Cultural Revolution in fascinating detail in their reports to Bern. However, while they were protected from outright violence, they struggled with the helplessness they felt in the face of Red Guard brutality, being forced to witness the suffering of their colleagues and employees, traumatizing some of them to such an extent that they had to leave Beijing.

**Keywords:** Cultural Revolution; Switzerland; China; Diplomats; Nazi Germany

In September 1966, the Swiss Ambassador in Beijing, Hans Keller (1908–1999), wrote a letter to the Eidgenössisches Politisches Department (EPD, the Swiss Foreign Ministry) in Bern, in which he described the horrors of what was then known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (Wuchanjieji Wenhua Dageming 无产阶级文化大革命). He concluded: “It is almost unbearable here.”<sup>1</sup> Little did Keller know that this was only the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, which would last from 1966 to 1976 and become infamous for the chaos, destruction, and violence it caused. Diplomacy deals with ceremonial functions, management, information and communication, negotiation, as well

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I would like to thank Zhao Ma and the *Journal of Chinese History's* anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this article. I am also grateful for Charles Kraus's comments on a blog post I wrote about two sources mentioned in this article: Ariane Knüsel “The Swiss Witnesses to China's Cultural Revolution,” Sources and Methods, Wilson Center History and Public Policy Program, [www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/the-swiss-witnesses-to-chinas-cultural-revolution](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/the-swiss-witnesses-to-chinas-cultural-revolution) (accessed March 20, 2022). Part of the research for this article was carried out with funding by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

<sup>1</sup>Keller, “Traurige Rückkehr nach Peking,” September 16, 1966, Swiss Federal Archives (SFA) E2300–01#1973/156#54\*.

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as legal issues and protection.<sup>2</sup> Although Swiss diplomats in China were active in almost all those areas during the Cultural Revolution, the following pages focus on their communication with Bern in the 1960s. The reports that Keller and other Swiss diplomats in Beijing sent to Bern highlight not only how diplomats perceived the development of the Cultural Revolution (including the years before the official beginning) but also the mental toll the experience had on some of the foreign diplomats in China, even if they were not among those attacked by Red Guards (Hongweibing 红卫兵).

The Swiss reports are unique because, during the Cultural Revolution, Swiss diplomats enjoyed a special status that protected them from outright violence. Switzerland had been among the first Western nations to establish official relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1950. This had the effect that, in the 1950s and 1960s, China used its Embassy in Bern and its Consulate-General in Geneva to operate a variety of national, international, and transnational networks; some were of a more legal nature (e.g., networks with economic and political contacts), others less so (e.g., intelligence and Maoist networks).<sup>3</sup> As a result, during the Cultural Revolution, Swiss diplomats were treated fairly well by the Chinese authorities, at least compared to most other European diplomats. They also continued to have access to Chinese government officials when many other Western diplomats did not. This allowed the Swiss Embassy's staff in Beijing to observe and document the Cultural Revolution in fascinating detail, relaying information that adds yet more insight into this turbulent period. However, Swiss diplomats also suffered because they felt helpless in the face of Red Guard brutality, since they were forced to witness how their (Western) colleagues and Chinese employees were attacked without being able to help them. This was so traumatizing that some diplomats demanded to leave Beijing.

The Cultural Revolution has been discussed both as a domestic phenomenon<sup>4</sup> and as a global<sup>5</sup> one. Several publications have analyzed the role of the Chinese Foreign

<sup>2</sup>R.P. Barston, *Modern Diplomacy*, 3rd edn (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2006), 2–4.

<sup>3</sup>Ariane Knüsel, *China's European Headquarters: Switzerland and China in the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

<sup>4</sup>See for example Andrew G. Walder, *Agents of Disorder: Inside China's Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2019); Jeffrey Wasserstrom, "The Red Guard Generation Revisited," *Journal of Chinese History* 1.2 (2017), 365–68; *Red Shadows: Memories and Legacies of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, special issue edited by Patricia Thornton, Peidong Sun, and Chris Berry, *The China Quarterly* 12 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); *The Cultural Revolution: Memories and Legacies 50 Years On*, special issue edited by Bin Yang and Yuan Wang, *Modern China Studies* 32:2 (2016); Frank Dikötter, *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962–1976* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Yang Guobin, *The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Alexander Cook, *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Barbara Mittler, *Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of the Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Daniel Leese, *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual in China's Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Andrew G. Walder, *Fractured Rebellion: The Beijing Red Guard Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup>Cyril Cordoba, "La Suisse au cœur de la propagation du maoïsme en Occident," *Schweizerisches Jahrbuch für Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte* 34, *Transnationale Geschichte der Schweiz*, special issue edited by Nathalie Büsser, Thomas David, Pierre Eichenberger, et al. (Zurich: Chronos, 2020), 61–73; Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History* (London: The Bodley Head, 2019); Matthew Rothwell, "Secret Agent for International Maoism: José Venturelli, Chinese Informal Diplomacy and Latin American Maoism," *Radical Americas* 1.1 (2016), 44–46; *Kulturrevolution als Vorbild? Maoisten im*

Ministry during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>6</sup> Some diplomats have also published memoirs of their experiences.<sup>7</sup> Diplomats' experiences of the Cultural Revolution, however, have only been discussed in a handful of studies.<sup>8</sup> Swiss diplomatic reports are valuable sources about (Western) diplomats' traditional roles like gathering information and representing their government's interests in interactions with Chinese officials during the Cultural Revolution, and they show how foreign diplomats perceived and interpreted the Cultural Revolution. Yet, the reports also shed light on the Cultural Revolution's effects on the Swiss diplomats' mental health and their subsequent interaction with the EPD in Bern. What is particularly striking about the reports is how often they compared the Red Guards and the situation in Beijing to Nazi Germany and the persecution of the Jews in order to come to terms with what they perceived as senseless violence and brutality. While it is not the intention of this article to make a comparison between the two,<sup>9</sup> it is noteworthy that for the Swiss diplomats the situation in China was so horrifying that they felt impelled to frame it as comparable to Nazi Germany, and even the Holocaust. Moreover, some of the diplomats actually requested to be moved to another post, and when the EPD in Bern did not immediately agree, they engaged in quite terse conversations with Bern. Therefore, the reports also contribute to studies in diplomatic history that challenge the perception of one-directional diplomatic agency, in which diplomats function solely as representatives of their government's interests; here diplomats are seen as actors or agents driven by various interests who could, at times, clash with those of the nation they represent.<sup>10</sup>

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*deutschsprachigen Raum*, edited by Sebastian Gehrig, Barbara Mittler, and Felix Wemheuer (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter-Lang, 2008); Julia Lovell, "The Cultural Revolution and Its Legacies in International Perspective," *The China Quarterly* 227 (2016), 632–652; Matthew D. Rothwell, *Transpacific Revolutionaries: The Chinese Revolution in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Christophe Bourseiller, *Les maoïstes: la folle histoire des gardes rouges français* (Paris: Plon, 1996); *La Révolution culturelle en Chine et en France: Expériences, savoirs, mémoires*, edited by Miao Chi, Olivier Dard, Beatrice Fleury, and Jacques Walter (Paris: Riveneuve Editions, 2017).

<sup>6</sup>Ma Jisen, *The Cultural Revolution in the Foreign Ministry of China* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2004); Barbara Barnouin and Changgen Yu, *Chinese Foreign Policy during the Cultural Revolution* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1998); Barbara Barnouin and Changgen Yu, *Ten Years of Turbulence: The Chinese Cultural Revolution* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1993); Melvin Gurtov, "The Foreign Ministry and Foreign Affairs during the Cultural Revolution," *The China Quarterly* 40 (1969), 65–102.

<sup>7</sup>D. W. Fokkema, *Report from Peking: Observations of a Western Diplomat on the Cultural Revolution* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1972); Percy Cradock, *Experiences of China* (London: John Murray, 1994). Anthony Grey, *Hostage in Peking* (London: Michael Joseph, 1970) contains a chapter that is based on the experience of John Weston and others.

<sup>8</sup>Chi-Kwan Mark, *The Everyday Cold War: Britain and China, 1950–1972* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Roberto Puzzi, "The Hong Kong Riots and the Sterling Empire Last Stand," in *Roads to Reconciliation: People's Republic of China, Western Europe and Italy During the Cold War Period (1949–1971)*, edited by Guido Samarani, Carla Meneguzzi Rostagni, and Sofia Graziani (Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari-Digital Publishing, 2018), 99–110; Beverly Hooper, *Foreigners under Mao: Western Lives in China, 1949–1976* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016); J. Hoare, *Embassies in the East: The Story of the British and their Embassies in China, Japan and Korea from 1859 to the present* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>9</sup>See for example Mobo C.F. Gao, "Debating the Cultural Revolution: Do We Only Know What We Believe?," *Critical Asian Studies* 34.3 (2002), 419–34; Vera Schwarcz, "The Burden of Memory: The Cultural Revolution and the Holocaust," *China Information* 11.1 (1996), 1–13.

<sup>10</sup>Giles Scott-Smith and Kenneth Weisbrode, "Editorial," *Diplomatica* 1 (2019), 1–4; Marcus Holmes, "Re-evaluating Theory and Methods in Diplomatic History: Bringing in Psychology, Neuroscience,

### The Years Leading to the Cultural Revolution

Communication is an essential feature of diplomacy. Diplomats have to gather information and relay it to their government, and communicate with other diplomats, foreign officials, and civilians (verbally and nonverbally).<sup>11</sup> Swiss diplomats in Beijing were career diplomats who had been trained in Bern and at various posts around the world. As was customary, the Swiss Embassy in Beijing sent weekly or monthly reports about Chinese politics, economy, society, and military affairs to Bern. These reports are highly interesting sources about the advent of the Cultural Revolution.

Jeffrey Wasserstrom has warned against treating the Cultural Revolution as a unique, isolated event in PRC history, arguing that instead it should be analyzed within the wider historical context.<sup>12</sup> For the Swiss diplomats in Beijing, the Cultural Revolution did not appear out of thin air in 1966. Already in the early 1960s, some of their reports warned of the potential effects of Mao's control of the masses. The Great Leap Forward, which began in 1958 as part of the PRC's Second Five-Year Plan (1958–1962), resulted in a horrific famine and Mao's temporary loss of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) leadership. Mao claimed that reactionaries and counterrevolutionaries were sabotaging the revolution, and that class struggle was the only way forward. By mobilizing youths and students as new revolutionary forces, Mao attempted to regain his power over the Party as the only person to dictate China's ideological, political, and economic future and silence his critics and rivals.<sup>13</sup> In 1966, students rose as the fanatic harbingers of revolution but the Chinese government's mass mobilization and indoctrination that the Red Guards personified had been noted by worried Swiss diplomats long before. In 1961, Ambassador René Naville (1905–1978) had compared Mao's use of slogans for mobilizing the masses to a wizard's spells, insinuating that unnatural forces were at play and that the masses, once mobilized, could not be controlled by mere mortal politicians. In an act of foreboding, Naville warned Bern about the devastating effects that Mao's slogans could have if they continued to rely on enemy images to transform the students into revolutionaries.<sup>14</sup>

While the populace was molded into the proper revolutionary shape, foreign diplomats were not yet affected by this development. Naville's successor, Hans Keller, complained in 1964 that even popular tourist spots near Beijing had become no-go areas for foreigners, stating: "We are currently more or less locked up in the city." However, there had been no sudden hostile turn by the authorities against foreigners in the early 1960s. Beijing had never been a sought-after post among Swiss diplomats, but Keller found it a very difficult location, even though he had been stationed in Vienna while it was part of Nazi Germany, in Eastern Europe while it was under Soviet occupation, and in Moscow during Stalin's rule. After his arrival in Beijing in 1964, Keller complained to Bern that foreign diplomats were under constant surveillance by the Chinese police and were not allowed to have contact with Chinese civilians or take pictures. He even felt that Beijing was such a tough post for foreign diplomats that staff who had not been properly

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Micro-Sociology and Quantum," *Diplomatica* 1 (2019), 19–25; Paul Sharp, "Who Needs Diplomats? The Problems of Diplomatic Representation," *International Journal* 52.4 (1997), 609–34.

<sup>11</sup>Christer Jönsson and Martin Hall, "Communication: An Essential Aspect of Diplomacy," *International Studies Perspectives* 4.2 (2003), 195–210.

<sup>12</sup>Wasserstrom, "The Red Guard Generation Revisited," 365.

<sup>13</sup>MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*; Thomas Heberer, "The 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution': China's Modern Trauma," *Journal of Modern Chinese History*, 3.2 (2009), 165–81.

<sup>14</sup>Naville to Abteilung für Politische Angelegenheiten, March 16, 1961, SFA E2001E#1976/17#2118\*.

prepared risked “nervous breakdowns and other difficulties.” He noted: “The situation in Peking is worse and more complicated than in Moscow.”<sup>15</sup>

Keller’s portrayal is in stark contrast with the recollections of John Boyd (1936–2019), who arrived in Beijing as Third Secretary of the British mission in 1965. In 2012, Boyd described diplomatic life during the period right before the Cultural Revolution in the following way: “It was perfection in some ways. ... I primarily remember picnics, swimming in the Summer Palace lake, singing picnics at the Ming tombs—a wonderful life. We did very little work.”<sup>16</sup> No doubt, Boyd’s memory of diplomatic life in Beijing has been affected by the fact that this statement was made almost fifty years later. Boyd had also returned to China in the 1970s, and this might have influenced his recollections. Nevertheless, the quite dramatic differences in the portrayals of diplomatic life in 1964 and 1965 demonstrate that a diplomat’s experience of China was, despite all the professional training, quite an individual affair, even among career diplomats.

By 1965, the Swiss Embassy reported that Chinese society had been increasingly militarized, with weapons drills and competitions in military skills, and that the politicization of Chinese society had caused everything to be permeated with propaganda.<sup>17</sup> The first purges within the CCP began in November 1965, and they quickly spread to high-ranking party officials who were accused of anti-Maoist, counterrevolutionary or capitalist behavior.<sup>18</sup> Despite the unease about Chinese society’s indoctrination with Maoist propaganda, the lives of foreign diplomats in Beijing continued within their exclusive bubble. Some diplomats, however, felt more and more apprehensive about the situation. After a man wielding a knife brutally attacked and almost killed the pregnant wife of an East German diplomat and a diplomat from Mali in May 1966, Keller wrote a report to Bern, in which he warned that China was witnessing anti-foreign sentiment comparable to that during the Boxer Uprising in 1900, but this time it was “in red.” Keller felt that the exclusive lifestyle of foreign diplomats in China, for example their flashy new cars and access to foreign goods, turned them into easy targets.<sup>19</sup> Keeping in mind Keller’s worry—if not paranoia—about anti-foreign sentiment in China, it should not come as a surprise that Keller was also among the Swiss diplomatic staff that would suffer most from Red Guard terror.

Until the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, Keller’s alarm seems not to have been shared by most Western diplomats. The Western diplomatic community in Beijing remained small, with Swiss, French, British, Finns, Danes, Swedes, Norwegians, and Dutch diplomatic staff and their spouses forming a fairly close-knit community.<sup>20</sup> Their behavior towards Chinese officials was not always strictly in accordance with their governments’ interests. A report by the Swiss Chargé d’Affaires in Beijing,

<sup>15</sup>Keller to Abteilung für Verwaltungsangelegenheiten, June 3, 1964, SFA E2001E#1980/83#1778\*.

<sup>16</sup>John Boyd quoted in M.D. Kandiah, ed., *Witness Seminar: The Role and Functions of the British Embassy in Beijing*, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, held on June 7, 2012, published on July 3, 2013 [https://issuu.com/fcohistorians/docs/beijing\\_embassy\\_witness\\_seminar\\_tra/6](https://issuu.com/fcohistorians/docs/beijing_embassy_witness_seminar_tra/6) (accessed on March 7, 2022).

<sup>17</sup>Brügger, “Sport, Wehrsport und Militärpropaganda in China,” April 15, 1965, SFA E2001E#1978/84#2384\*; Keller to Abteilung für politische Angelegenheiten, April 20, 1965, SFA E2001E#1978/84#2384\*; Hugentobler to EPD, December 28, 1965, SFA E2300#1000/716#816\*.

<sup>18</sup>Leese, *Mao Cult*, 122–27. According to MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, the first Cultural Revolution purges in the party took place in May 1966: MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao’s Last Revolution*, 38–40 and 53.

<sup>19</sup>Keller, “Politischer Bericht No. 11,” May 11, 1966, SFA E2300–01#1973/156#54\*.

<sup>20</sup>Beverly Hooper, “Living in Mao’s China: The European Experience 1949–1969,” in *Roads to Reconciliation*, 58.

Arnold Hugentobler (1930–2014), described the concerted effort of foreign diplomats in May 1966 to embarrass the Chinese during one of the diplomatic trips arranged by the Foreign Ministry. During these tours, foreign diplomats were granted very restricted glimpses into a highly orchestrated model version of everyday life in China. In May 1966, the diplomats were shown various locations in Shandong province to showcase the results of Chinese industrialization. Chinese guides led the diplomats on a hike of 10,000 steps to the top of Mount Tai (Tai Shan 泰山), which Hugentobler described as “only 1,500 meters high and of comparable difficulty to the ascent of the Hohen Kasten of Brülisau,” a small mountain of minor importance in Switzerland. One can imagine Hugentobler, as a “proper” Swiss, snorting derisively at the Chinese audacity of trying to impress foreigners with a mountain of a measly 1,500 meters. In any case, the Chinese guides told the diplomats that the climb would take six to seven hours:

We looked at the small mountain and wrinkled our noses: between six and seven hours! We tackled the mountain with a single thought: to outclass the Chinese at any price. Along the [hiking] path are ancient temples full of history. Nobody, however, took the time to look at them. The diplomatic corps ... charged up the mountain like a group of scared ibexes. Red-faced, sweating, the representatives of the Eastern bloc naked to the belt and flaunting huge torsos. Now and then one of our [Chinese] companions threw themselves in our path, trying to stop the wild drive with wild and desperate cries of food, beer, rest, but almost no one took time to respond. The diplomatic corps was out of bounds. We reached the top in record time to the poorly veiled annoyance of our Chinese companions. They were forced to hang around and join in as never before in their lives so as not to be beaten by the physical resilience of representatives of degenerate and dying social classes!<sup>21</sup>

Hugentobler’s anecdote shows the lack of respect that the foreign diplomats had for the ideological slogans of the Chinese government, and the absence of fear for their own safety. Moreover, it demonstrates that the diplomats bonded across the Cold War’s ideological chasm (Swiss diplomats, for example, were notoriously anticommunist)<sup>22</sup> and acted as one group. It seemed perfectly good fun to ridicule the Chinese. No further repercussions had to be feared. This would soon change.

Even though Mao had not yet unleashed the Red Guards as the harbingers of the Cultural Revolution, during the trip for foreign diplomats, Hugentobler noticed many facets of what was to become typical of the Cultural Revolution on the trip. This included military exercises in factories, where the workers used bayonets and guns for drills, children practiced shooting and throwing hand-grenades, and even pre-schoolers did bayonet exercises. Hugentobler was also appalled by the omnipresence of the Mao Cult and noted that the Chinese guides seemed incapable of personal thoughts or opinions, constantly spewing Mao slogans instead. Mocking this deification of Mao, Hugentobler stated:

‘Armed with Mao Tse-tung’s thoughts,’ all problems can be solved that life throws at you. One builds steel works or cooks rice with the same elegance. If the rice is

<sup>21</sup>Hugentobler, “Diplomatenreise durch die Provinz Shantung, Mai 1966,” June 13, 1966, SFA E2001E#1978/84#2384\*.

<sup>22</sup>See Knüsel, *China’s European Headquarters*.

overcooked or the steel's coal content too high, it can be easily solved with more philosophy; after all, the quintessence of all human wisdom lies in the thoughts of Mao Tse-tung.<sup>23</sup>

Despite ridiculing the Mao Cult, Hugentobler was apprehensive about its effects on Chinese society. The Chinese media had begun openly calling for a Cultural Revolution in April 1966. Publications like *Hongqi* (红旗 Red Flag), which spread the views of the CCP's Central Committee, disseminated revolutionary slogans, defined revolutionary targets, and claimed that so-called counterrevolutionaries, rightists, and revisionists were enemies of the revolution.<sup>24</sup> Hugentobler compared the situation in China to Nazi Germany: "Propaganda covered our ears like a rain of ash. Mao Tse-tung was the object of almost religious adoration to such a degree as has probably never been directed towards another ruler, including Adolf Hitler and the Egyptian Pharaohs."<sup>25</sup> The choice of Hitler as a frame of reference by Hugentobler is interesting. The following pages will show that over and over the Swiss diplomats in Beijing resorted to Nazi Germany to describe their experiences of the Red Guards. As a neighboring country of Germany that was surrounded by axis powers and occupied France, Switzerland had been witness to the Nazi's personality cult of Hitler and feared a Nazi invasion throughout the Second World War. Hitler and Nazi Germany were the most horrific frame of reference that the Swiss had for violent mass movements. However, as Hugentobler's remark demonstrates, in some aspects, the situation in Beijing seemed to be even worse for the Swiss diplomats than Hitler's rule.

### Observing the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution

On 29 May 1966, the first Red Guard organization was created at a middle school attached to Tsinghua University (清华大学) and big-character posters (dazibao 大字报) appeared. After Mao gave the students his full support and encouraged them to rebel against reactionaries with his famous slogan "to rebel is justified" (zaofan you li 造饭有理), more Red Guard organizations were founded, and posters criticizing their institutions' authorities flooded the schools. On June 13, all Chinese universities, colleges, and senior and middle schools were ordered to suspend their classes. This gave millions of students the opportunity to dedicate themselves to the Cultural Revolution.<sup>26</sup> On 8 August 1966, the Central Committee's plenum adopted the "Decision of the CCP CC concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" as a program for the Cultural Revolution. Also known as "Sixteen Points" (shiliu tiao 十六条) the program focused on the necessity of

<sup>23</sup>Hugentobler, "Diplomatenreise durch die Provinz Shantung, Mai 1966," June 13, 1966, SFA E2001E#1978/84#2384\*.

<sup>24</sup>"Wir müssen zu den Massen Vertrauen haben und uns auf sie stützen," *Hongqi*, No. 9, 1966, in *Die grosse sozialistische Kulturrevolution in China*, vol. 6 (Peking: Verlag für fremdsprachige Literatur, 1967), 21–30. Gao presents a different view on destruction during the Cultural Revolution: Gao, "Debating the Cultural Revolution."

<sup>25</sup>Hugentobler, "Diplomatenreise durch die Provinz Shantung, Mai 1966," June 13, 1966, SFA E2001E#1978/84#2384\*.

<sup>26</sup>Central Committee and State Council Decision on Suspension of Higher Education, 13 June 1966," in *Government and Politics in Revolutionary China: Selected Documents, 1949–1979*, edited by Harold C. Hinton (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1982), 231–32. See also MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, 60–78 and 87–88; Walder, *Fractured Rebellion*; Barnouin and Yu, *Ten Years of Turbulence*, 94–95.

purging senior party officials and gave the masses free reign in deciding who was a genuine revolutionary, thus paving the way for Red Guard terror.<sup>27</sup> When the leaders in Beijing decided to allow the students to travel to and from Beijing for free, millions of students began arriving in the capital in September and October. Eight rallies took place between August and November on Tiananmen Square in which approximately twelve million jubilant Red Guards were addressed by Mao. Soon after their arrival, the Red Guards began their terror in Beijing.<sup>28</sup>

After the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, the foreign diplomats were busy gathering information and writing reports, both of which are central to their role. Hugentobler wrote a report in which he described how the Red Guards used the slogan of “smashing the four olds” (po si jiu 破四旧) to target what were perceived as old ideas, customs, habits, and culture: “foreign and old books, western clothing, elegant haircuts, owning a house ... traditional inscriptions that are supposed to bring luck in and on houses, old businesses and street names [all became targets of] despicable scenes of sadistic juvenile crime,” ranging from plundering shops, changing street and shop names, and closing shops to destroying private property. Even religious sites were attacked: Hugentobler was appalled that a church altar was replaced by a Mao statue with a Red Guard armband.<sup>29</sup>

Hugentobler’s portrayal of the Red Guards as “children” in the report contrasted starkly with his description of their brutality and violence. He was horrified and sickened at how the Red Guards beat, abused, and humiliated people in public. For him, it was inconceivable how young people could behave in such a cruel and ruthless way: “Unforgettable are from this period in Beijing the voices of children: Children, who fanatically told revolutionary speeches to the masses through megaphones; children who are abusing and arresting people; children, who accuse, who denounce their parents.”<sup>30</sup>

Yet, for Hugentobler, the Red Guards’ control of the city was not wholly bad. For example, he noted that, thanks to the “little boys,” all cyclists began using a light during the night. Beijing’s police had tried to get cyclists to do this for years, but it was only the Red Guards who succeeded because “nobody dares to be caught by the children keeping watch on the street without a light on their bike.”<sup>31</sup> These positive aspects, however, soon became completely overshadowed by the Red Guards’ terror.

Freely interpreting Mao’s statement, “there is no construction without destruction” (bupo buli 不破不立),<sup>32</sup> the Red Guards unleashed a reign of terror in August and September 1966, destroying cultural sites, artefacts, and books, and plundering and trashing houses. Constant propaganda portrayed the revolution as a class struggle of apocalyptic proportions and turned Beijing into a site of Red Guard anarchy.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup>“Decision du Comité central du Parti communiste chinois sur la grande révolution Culturelle prolétarienne,” *Pekin Information* 33 (August 15, 1966), 6–11.

<sup>28</sup>MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao’s Last Revolution*; Leese, *Mao Cult*, 138–40; Barnouin and Yu, *Ten Years of Turbulence*, 99–100.

<sup>29</sup>Hugentobler, “Mao verschreibt Terror zum Bruch mit der Vergangenheit,” August 31, 1966, SFA E2001–05#1979/137#36\*.

<sup>30</sup>Hugentobler, “Mao verschreibt Terror zum Bruch mit der Vergangenheit.”

<sup>31</sup>Hugentobler, “Mao verschreibt Terror zum Bruch mit der Vergangenheit.”

<sup>32</sup>“The Maoist Faction Launches Its Public Attack on P’eng Chen, 16 May 1966,” in *Government and Politics in Revolutionary China*, 228.

<sup>33</sup>Keller, “Wetterleuchten am Tien An Men,” October 4, 1966, SFA E2001–05#1979/137#36\*; “Es lebe die grosse Proletarische Kulturrevolution,” *Hongqi*, No. 8, 1966, in *Die grosse sozialistische Kulturrevolution in China*, vol. 4 (Peking: Verlag für fremdsprachige Literatur, 1967), 1–37; “Beschluss



While the actions of the Red Guards have been covered in detail in various historical studies and memoirs, the Swiss diplomats' portrayals of the Red Guards are unique in the way they compared them to the Nazis. In August 1966, Hugentobler described the Red Guard terror in Beijing and other Chinese cities as "Kristallnacht," after the Nazi's infamous "Night of broken glass" on 9/10 November 1938, during which over 1,000 synagogues and 7,000 Jewish businesses were destroyed, ninety-one Jews killed, and Jewish homes, schools, cemeteries, and hospitals vandalized.<sup>34</sup> A Swiss diplomatic report from Kristallnacht in the German city of Frankfurt, for example, described the following scene: "Hordes of adolescent boys, armed with axes and crowbars, roamed the city and broke the windows of Jewish stores, forced their way into them, and smashed everything to pieces."<sup>35</sup> While it is, obviously, very problematic to ignore the antisemitic nature of Kristallnacht and its part in the lead up to the Holocaust, it is telling that this event was chosen by Hugentobler to express his horror and his worry about what the Cultural Revolution might become.

Jérémie Cornut has described diplomats as "primarily knowledge producers, using their craft to understand and represent a situation as well as possible."<sup>36</sup> Although diplomatic reports are supposed to be objective, it was quite common for the Swiss diplomats' anticommunism to influence their discussions of Chinese policies or portrayals of official events.<sup>37</sup> When Ambassador Keller returned to Beijing from his vacation in Switzerland in September 1966, he was shocked by how much the city had changed. Beijing's train station was filled with tens of thousands of Red Guards, and Keller was disgusted by the smell and noise they caused using the train station as a campground. Keller also noted that since the Red Guards mostly came from abroad and were ignorant of traffic rules, it became impossible for diplomatic cars to drive quickly, since the Red Guards "loitered everywhere en masse like vermin."<sup>38</sup> Like Hugentobler, Keller was appalled and repulsed by the Red Guards' destruction and violence in Beijing. He reported to Bern that they "flood[ed] the inner city like locusts,"<sup>39</sup> and noted how the shops along Beijing's major shopping street, Wangfujing (王府井), had been destroyed or plundered. Keller was also horrified by the way the Red Guards beat and abused defenseless people for owning foreign clothes, books or instruments, or for having contact with foreigners, and even for thinking wrong thoughts. He described the appalling spectacle of people being forced to parade through the street with posters on their back or around their neck detailing their "crimes," while being humiliated and beaten by Red Guards. Keller wrote to Bern: "I had to turn away several times in order to abstain from beating the youth rabble with the next-best instrument and free the victims." It was such a traumatic experience that Keller began suffering from insomnia.<sup>40</sup>

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des Zentralkomitees der Kommunistischen Partei Chinas," May 16, 1966, in *Wichtige Dokumente Grossen Proletarischen Kulturrevolution* (Peking: Verlag für fremdsprachige Literatur, 1970), 146–175.

<sup>34</sup>Hugentobler, "Mao verschreibt Terror zum Bruch mit der Vergangenheit," August 31, 1966, SFA E2001-05#1979/137#36\*. See also Michael Berenbaum, *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust as told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, second edition (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2006), 49.

<sup>35</sup>Dasen to Swiss Mission in Berlin, November 11, 1938, <http://dodis.ch/46704>.

<sup>36</sup>Jérémie Cornut, "To Be a Diplomat Abroad: Diplomatic Practice at Embassies," *Cooperation and Conflict*, 50.3 (2015), 388.

<sup>37</sup>Knüsel, *China's European Headquarters*.

<sup>38</sup>Keller, "Traurige Rückkehr nach Peking," September 16, 1966, SFA E2300-01#1973/156#54\*.

<sup>39</sup>Keller to EPD, October 31, 1966, SFA E2001E# 1978/84#2384\*.

<sup>40</sup>Keller, "Traurige Rückkehr nach Peking," September, 16, 1966, SFA E2300-01#1973/156#54\*.

According to Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, 1,772 people were murdered in Beijing in August and September 1966.<sup>41</sup> The Swiss Embassy's staff was horrified to witness how people were beaten, tortured, pilloried, and killed, many choosing suicide to end their suffering.<sup>42</sup> Keller wrote that the Red Guards' actions amounted to "a cleansing campaign that reminded [him] of similar acts of violence by the Hitler Youth."<sup>43</sup> Keller's use of Nazi and Holocaust references not only expressed his sympathy and heartache for the victims, but also his utter horror and condemnation of the Red Guards' actions. In a report from September 1966, he wrote about his long career as a diplomat:

I witnessed Nazi terror in Vienna in 1938–39, later antisemitism in Slovakia and the conquest of Bratislava by the Red Army that was out of control, then the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans, then the terror methods of the Soviet concentration camps in the Caucasus, and probably experienced more dangerous days than in China. I have never, however, felt such disgust as I have towards the actions of the Red Guards.<sup>44</sup>

Ironically, Keller's frequent description of the Red Guards as vermin was a dehumanization technique used by the Nazis against the Jews. While the Nazis used dehumanization to spread hatred against the Jews and legitimize genocide,<sup>45</sup> Keller himself dehumanized the Red Guards in his reports to Bern in order to express his belief that these students had truly lost their human qualities and had become fanatic, bloodthirsty monsters.

Since the Red Guards singled out people who had contact with Westerners for abuse, their victims included Chinese employees of Swiss companies. The Chinese administrator of the Swiss chemical company Geigy's account in China, for example, was no longer able to work by late 1966 as a result of the Red Guards but the diplomats could not help him. The Swiss Embassy eventually advised Geigy to abstain from contacting him in order to spare him further Red Guard reprisals.<sup>46</sup> In his reports to Bern, Keller described how people became victims of Red Guard abuse because of their contacts with foreigners: A Chinese doctor who had treated foreign patients had his office destroyed and his legs broken with bamboo rods. His injuries were so severe that Keller feared he would not survive. Keller also wrote about a dentist who had lived abroad and committed suicide after he had been attacked, and about doctors in Beijing's largest hospital, which had been built by Americans, who were harassed and abused by Red Guards to such an extent that many of them also committed suicide. Red Guards also targeted the Swiss Embassy's Chinese employees, causing an alarmed Keller to write to Bern about how the Embassy's employees looked increasingly distressed and troubled, their hair going grey in a matter of weeks.<sup>47</sup> Naville's warning,

<sup>41</sup>MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, 124.

<sup>42</sup>Hugentobler, "Mao verschreibt Terror zum Bruch mit der Vergangenheit," August 31, 1966, SFA E2001-05#1979/137#36\*; Keller, "Traurige Rückkehr nach Peking," September 16, 1966, SFA E2300-01#1973/156#54\*.

<sup>43</sup>Keller, "Traurige Rückkehr nach Peking," September 16, 1966, SFA E2300-01#1973/156#54\*.

<sup>44</sup>Keller, "Traurige Rückkehr nach Peking."

<sup>45</sup>Johannes Steizinger, "The Significance of Dehumanization: Nazi Ideology and Its Psychological Consequences," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 19.2 (2018), 139–57. They were, of course, not the only ones to dehumanize an enemy.

<sup>46</sup>Martin to J.R. Geigy A.G., December 29, 1966, SFA E2001E#1980/83#1784\*.

<sup>47</sup>Keller, "Traurige Rückkehr nach Peking," September 16, 1966, SFA E2300-01#1973/156#54\*.

in his report of March 1961, that the fanatical masses might not be controlled once they had been summoned by Mao's magic, seemed to have become reality by September 1966, when Keller invoked Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's "Sorcerer's Apprentice" to convey the horror and shock he felt at the scenes he had to witness: "It is very likely that the spirits that Beijing has summoned will not calm down any time soon."<sup>48</sup>

The inability to stop the Red Guards' brutality and cruelty affected the Swiss diplomats a great deal.<sup>49</sup> Keller described how scores of people living near the Swiss Embassy were abused and humiliated, had their houses plundered, and then had to cart away the few things that they still possessed on their trek out of Beijing in what Keller called "Elendstransporte" (literally: "misery transports"), comparing the people to "human cattle." Those who tried to prevent their houses from being plundered were savagely beaten and tortured. Keller even suspected that some of his neighbors had been tortured to death.<sup>50</sup> Keller's choice of the term "Elendstransporte" is another example of the diplomats' fairly frequent use of Holocaust vocabulary during the Cultural Revolution. The term refers to the death marches that took place in 1944 and 1945 as part of the Nazis' forced evacuation of concentration camps ahead of the advancing Allied forces. Some of these marches lasted several weeks, with an estimated 250,000 people dying along the way from exhaustion, exposure or because they were shot by Schutzstaffel guards.<sup>51</sup>

A less violent aspect of the Cultural Revolution was the ubiquity of images of a God-like Mao and Mao Zedong Thought (Mao Zedong sixiang 毛泽东思想), both of which were mentioned in countless reports by Swiss diplomatic staff. Mao pictures and quotes from the little red book of Mao's quotations were used to increase personal loyalty and party unity, and silence critics. Although Alex Zukas has criticized the use of the term "Mao Bible" for the book due to its religious connotation,<sup>52</sup> personality cults are based on a worship of leaders,<sup>53</sup> and thus contain an element of religious adoration, which seems to justify such a term. In fact, the Swiss diplomats themselves resorted to religious vocabulary in their descriptions of Mao's little red book. Hugentobler, for instance, described it as "catechism of the whole youth" to Bern.<sup>54</sup> Numerous reports by the Swiss diplomats described how Mao slogans were written on banners and

<sup>48</sup>Keller, "Traurige Rückkehr nach Peking."

<sup>49</sup>Keller to Abteilung für Verwaltungsangelegenheiten, September 26, 1966, SFA E2001E#1980/83#1778\*; Keller to EPD, September 19, 1966, SFA E2001E#1978/84#2384\*; Keller "Persönlicher Situationsbericht aus Peking," October 6, 1966, SFA E2001E#1978/84#2322\*; Keller to EPD, October 31, 1966, SFA E2001E#1978/84#2384\*.

<sup>50</sup>Keller, "Traurige Rückkehr nach Peking," September 16, 1966, SFA E2300-01#1973/156#54\*.

<sup>51</sup>For death marches see Martin Clemens Winter, "Evacuating the Camps: The Last Collective Crime of Nazi Society," *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 29.3 (2015), 138–53; Daniel Blatman, *The Death Marches: The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011); Katrin Greiser, *Die Todesmärsche von Buchenwald: Räumung, Befreiung und Spuren der Erinnerung* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2008); Eliezer Schwartz, "The Death Marches from the Dachau Camps to the Alps during the Final Days of World War II in Europe," *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 25.1 (2011), 129–60; Yehuda Bauer, "The Death-Marches, January–May, 1945," *Modern Judaism* 3.1 (1983), 1–21.

<sup>52</sup>Alex Zukas, "Review of Cook, Alexander, ed., *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History*," H-Socialisms, H-Net Reviews, November 2014, [www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42276](http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42276) (accessed on May 29, 2019).

<sup>53</sup>Xavier Márquez, "Two Models of Political Leader Cults: Propaganda and Ritual," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 19.3 (2018), 265–84.

<sup>54</sup>Hugentobler, "Das China Mao Tse-tungs," July 1967, SFA E2001E#1978/84#2384\* (quote); Keller, "Wetterleuchten am Tien An Men," October 4, 1966, SFA E2001-05#1979/137#36\*; Hugentobler, "Mao verschreibt Terror zum Bruch mit der Vergangenheit," August 31, 1966, SFA E2001-05#1979/137#36\*.

walls, shouted by parading Red Guards, and played through loudspeakers. Bicycles and pedicabs had to display Mao quotations, and trains hung his portraits and quotations in their carriages. On buses, passengers were inundated with Mao quotes which Red Guards read from the Mao Bible. The Red Guards even set up inspection stations and roadblocks to quiz pedestrians on Mao quotations.<sup>55</sup>

According to Xavier Márquez, personality cults of political leaders are based on positive propaganda about the leader and/or ritualistic leader worship.<sup>56</sup> The Red Guards' Mao Cult contained both elements, with its focus on Mao's image and writings as well as the huge rallies in Tiananmen Square. In mid-October, Keller filed a report on a journey from Beijing to Hong Kong where the whole country had been drowning in Mao pictures, statues, and quotes at the airport, on the plane, in the train station, on the train, and even in the hotel rooms. Mao quotes were not only played through loudspeakers but also read out loud on the plane by flight attendants. Chinese passengers on planes and trains had to wear Mao pins and sing Mao songs under the watchful direction of flight attendants and train staff. Although foreigners were not forced to sing Mao songs, they were educated in the main features of the Cultural Revolution and inundated with Mao brochures and texts. For Keller, China was submerged in propaganda: "everything is red."<sup>57</sup>

Two weeks later, Keller informed Bern that a "wave of Mao adoration [was] flooding the country," requiring anybody who wanted to be in power to support Mao. Keller continued: "Neither in Hitler's Germany nor in Stalin's Russia would a personality cult have been conceivable like that which is engulfing China."<sup>58</sup> Keller, who had been stationed as a diplomat in Moscow under Stalin, knew what he was writing about when he discussed Stalin's personality cult. Yet, like Hugentobler, Keller also referred to Adolf Hitler to express the totalitarian dimensions that the Mao Cult had taken on and indicate the deep unease that they felt about the Mao Cult.<sup>59</sup> It is noteworthy that both diplomats judged the situation in Beijing to be even more extreme than that in Nazi Germany.

Although the Cultural Revolution caused a deterioration of China's foreign relations, the Swiss still received preferential treatment, even if it was not as cordial as it had been previously. In 1966, the EPD noted that the Chinese government's congratulatory message to the Federal Council on the Swiss national holiday had been formulated in a "cooler" tone than in previous years.<sup>60</sup> When Keller went to the Chinese Foreign Ministry in September, he also noticed that the atmosphere was "frostier than during

<sup>55</sup>Hugentobler, "Mao verschreibt Terror zum Bruch mit der Vergangenheit," August 31, 1966, SFA E2001-05#1979/137#36\*; Keller, "Traurige Rückkehr nach Peking," September 16, 1966, SFA E2300-01#1973/156#54\*; *Jiefangjun Bao*, "Mao Tse-Tung's Thought is the Telescope and Microscope of our Revolutionary Cause," June 7, 1966, in *The Great Socialist Cultural Revolution in China*, vol. 3 (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1966), 19-31. See also Leese, *Mao Cult*, 129-35.

<sup>56</sup>Márquez, "Two Models," 265-84.

<sup>57</sup>Keller, "Das singende Volk ist eine Kanone," October 17, 1966, SFA E2001-05#1979/137#36\*.

<sup>58</sup>Keller to EPD, October 31, 1966, SFA E2001E# 1978/84#2384\*.

<sup>59</sup>Stalin was, of course, also a totalitarian leader but Ian Kershaw has convincingly argued that Hitler's leadership and regime differed from that of Stalin not least due to Hitler's charismatic power: Ian Kershaw, "Working Towards the Führer: Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship," *Contemporary European History* 2.2 (1993), 103-18; Ian Kershaw, "Hitler and the Uniqueness of Nazism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 39.2 (2004), 239-54.

<sup>60</sup>Wetterwald, Note, undated, SFA E2001E#1978/84#2322\*.

previous visits” although not unfriendly.<sup>61</sup> Yet, while the Chinese translators of the British and French missions stopped working, those of the Swiss Embassy continued although they were scared and feared Red Guard retribution. One of them even asked Hugentobler to please not attempt to find him if he suddenly stopped showing up to work, while others refused presents the diplomats had brought them from Switzerland.<sup>62</sup>

By October, Keller informed Bern that the foreign missions in Beijing had lost more than forty Chinese interpreters because they had been attacked by Red Guards, were too scared to come to work, or had been sent to the countryside or to labor camps. Some of them were so seriously injured that they had to be hospitalized and had their apartments destroyed. They were accused of working for foreigners or living a bourgeois lifestyle. According to Keller, the Chinese interpreters from the British, French, Finnish, and Danish missions were missing, but those working for the Swiss Embassy continued to show up to work. Keller was worried that this would not be the case for much longer, but the Swiss Embassy actually never reported losing any interpreters during the Cultural Revolution. The measures against Chinese translators were part of an overall effort to make the lives of the foreign diplomats in Beijing harder, as all communication with Chinese officials was in Chinese, and the translators usually also summarized Chinese press and radio news as well as the ubiquitous posters for the diplomatic staff. Without the help of Chinese interpreters, most missions were at their limit, even if some of them managed to find (less educated and skilled) replacements.<sup>63</sup>

### The Swiss diplomats and the Red Guard terror

The mental health of several members of the Swiss diplomatic staff suffered during the Cultural Revolution. In the thousands of reports that were written by Swiss diplomats in Beijing during the Cold War, the mental health of diplomatic staff was only discussed openly and in detail in the years surrounding the Cultural Revolution. In August 1966, foreigners were still fairly safe from Red Guard measures. The Swiss diplomats complained about being stared at, but neither they nor their property were harmed, probably also because official orders had been issued to leave foreigners alone, and that their buildings and cars were only to be entered with permission.<sup>64</sup> Travelling, however, became more difficult. Throughout the Cold War period, diplomats in China could not travel freely but had to obtain permission from the Chinese authorities to travel outside of Beijing.<sup>65</sup> Once the Great Leap Forward began, the Chinese government wanted to prevent foreigners from seeing the devastating effects of the agricultural

<sup>61</sup>Keller, “Akttenotiz,” September 19, 1966, SFA E2001E# 1978/84#2384\*.

<sup>62</sup>Hugentobler to EPD, August 25, 1966, SFA E2001-05#1979/137#36\*; Keller, “Traurige Rückkehr nach Peking,” September 16, 1966, SFA E2300-01#1973/156#54\*; Keller, “Akttenotiz,” September 19, 1966, SFA E2001E# 1978/84#2384\*; Keller to Abteilung für Verwaltungsangelegenheiten, September 26, 1966, SFA E2001E#1980/83#1778\*; Keller “Persönlicher Situationsbericht aus Peking,” October 6, 1966, SFA E2001E#1978/84#2322\*.

<sup>63</sup>Keller to Abteilung für politische Angelegenheiten, October 10, 1966, SFA E2001E# 1978/84#2384\*; Thévenaz to Eidgenössisches Personalamt, August 12, 1966, SFA E2024-02A#1999/137#390\*.

<sup>64</sup>Hugentobler, “Mao verschreibt Terror zum Bruch mit der Vergangenheit,” August 31, 1966, SFA E2001-05#1979/137#36\*.

<sup>65</sup>Stiner, “Rapport de gestion de la Legation de Suisse en Chine pour l’année 1952,” February 11, 1953, SFA E2400#1000/717#763\*; Keller to Abteilung für Verwaltungsangelegenheiten, June 3, 1964, SFA E2001E#1980/83#1778\*. See also Hooper, *Foreigners*, 5.

mismanagement and the famine. Jean-François Revilliod, who had joined the Swiss Embassy in Beijing as First Secretary in 1955, noted in 1959 that diplomats were only allowed to travel less than twenty miles outside of Beijing. For all other journeys they had to get official permission, which was difficult to obtain. Even trips from Beijing to Tianjin were often refused, while regions like Suzhou or Kunming were completely impossible to visit unless diplomats joined an official group.<sup>66</sup> Although travel restrictions were lifted somewhat in the early 1960s, by late September 1966, the situation had deteriorated so much that it had become difficult for foreign diplomats to go anywhere, even in Beijing. Travel outside of Beijing was only possible with the permission of the authorities, which was seldom given and had to be received forty-eight hours in advance. One of the few roads they were still allowed to travel on without permission was the one leading to the Great Wall, but, even there, they were not allowed to leave the car and had to eat their lunch inside. As a result, Keller repeatedly likened Beijing to a Nazi concentration camp in his letters to Bern, claiming that the status of diplomats in Beijing had changed from being “distinguished prisoners” to “concentration camp inmates.”<sup>67</sup> While it is absolutely inappropriate, let alone realistic, to compare a foreign diplomat in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution to an inmate of a Nazi concentration camp, the metaphor shows the toll that the few weeks back in Beijing under Red Guard rule had taken on Keller’s mental health.

Without belittling Keller’s suffering, on paper, he still fared better than many, if not most, other diplomats. It seems that the Chinese treated foreign diplomats differently according to their nationality: While the members of the Dutch Embassy were not given permission to leave Beijing at all, a Soviet diplomat had to wait three days to receive a train ticket to return to Beijing from Tianjin.<sup>68</sup> The singling out of Dutch and Soviet diplomatic staff can be explained by deteriorating bilateral relations between both of these countries and China during this period. In the Netherlands, a diplomatic crisis began in July 1966 after the attempted defection of a Chinese scientist that ended in the death of the defector and a Chinese diplomat being declared *persona non grata*. The Sino-Soviet Split in turn had triggered Chinese portrayals of the Soviet Union as China’s enemy.<sup>69</sup> The Swiss by contrast, tended to be grouped together with the Scandinavian countries, which also received a fairly neutral treatment by the Chinese press.<sup>70</sup>

Nevertheless, some Swiss diplomatic staff felt the effects of the Cultural Revolution. Already in August 1966, the EPD in Bern noted that all Swiss “diplomats, particularly

<sup>66</sup>In her study on foreigners in China, Hooper claims that, until 1976, foreigners were only allowed free movement within 20 km of Beijing’s city center. Revilliod’s report contradicts this: Revilliod, “Jahresbericht der Schweizerischen Botschaft fuer das Jahr 1958,” March 10, 1959, SFA E2400#1000/717#764\*. Hooper’s source is Cradock, who arrived in China in 1962: Hooper, *Foreigners*, 91; Cradock, *Experiences*.

<sup>67</sup>Keller to Abteilung für Verwaltungsangelegenheiten, September 26, 1966, SFA E2001E#1980/83#1778\* (quote); Keller to Protokolldienst, October 25, 1966, SFA E2001E# 1978/84#2384\*; Keller to EPD, October 31, 1966, SFA E2001E#1978/84#2384\*.

<sup>68</sup>Keller to Protokolldienst, October 25, 1966, SFA E2001E# 1978/84#2384\*.

<sup>69</sup>Dirk Engelen, *Geschiedenis van de Binnenlande Veiligheidsdienst* (Den Haag: Uitgeverij Koninkinnegracht, 1995), 333–35; Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962–1967* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2009), 177–95; Danhui Li and Yafeng Xia, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1959–1973: A New History* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), 238–41; Lorenz M. Lüthi, “The Origins of Proletarian Diplomacy: The Chinese Attack on the American Embassy in the Soviet Union, 4 March 1965,” *Cold War History* 9.3 (2009), 411–26.

<sup>70</sup>Keller to Service d’information et de presse, December 15, 1965, SFA E2001E#1978/84#2313\*.

the women” in Beijing suffered from feeling depressed as a result of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>71</sup> Whenever foreigners were in public, they were stared at, pointed at, even sworn at. People jostled them and also spat demonstratively on the floor in front of them, causing most foreign women and children to remain indoors. The International Club with its swimming pool and tennis lawn was closed along with the restaurants that the foreigners had frequented. By late September, Keller complained that the only restaurants still operating were “the dirtiest,” which required “a good stomach,” and that the only possible movement for the Swiss staff was the drive from their apartments to the embassy “through a miserable population dressed in blue mechanic suits and a forest of red flags.” As a result, he demanded that the minimum stay in China for diplomatic staff be reduced from thirty-six months to twenty-four months, and that Beijing should count as a post with difficult living circumstances, pointing out that all other Western governments had already adopted this policy.<sup>72</sup> Swiss diplomats were moved to a new post every four years but after Keller’s letters, it was agreed that Beijing should count as a difficult location and that, in special circumstances, diplomats could request to be moved from Beijing to a new post after twenty-four months. In reality, however, this was hardly ever granted.<sup>73</sup>

Keller continued to inform Bern that Swiss diplomatic staff had to endure threats, abuse, and harassment. Clearly fed up, Keller professed that he had not wanted to return to Beijing in the first place after his vacation in Switzerland in September 1966 because he had already been stationed there for three and a half years, but that he was forced to do so. He was also frustrated that Chinese officials often did not reply to his messages, and when he spoke to them about visits of business delegations or a planned official visits, they refused to agree to any specific details. Keller declared: “My patience is nearing its limit.”<sup>74</sup>

Keller frequently warned Bern of potential Red Guard attacks, but in 1966 the Swiss Embassy remained unscathed by Red Guard violence. Loudspeakers were blaring in front of the Swiss Embassy every day from six am to one am the following morning,<sup>75</sup> but there were no demonstrations in front of the Swiss Embassy as there were at the British and Soviet missions. Although Red Guards plastered posters on the police’s guardhouse in front of the Swiss Embassy with anti-foreign slogans denouncing imperialists, enemies of the revolution, and reactionaries, this was typical for foreign missions. When Keller complained to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, an official told him that the slogans did not describe the Swiss in particular, but he admitted that the Ministry was not “informed about everything currently going on,” and the posters remained there, much to Keller’s chagrin.<sup>76</sup>

Ironically enough, posters like the ones in front of the Swiss Embassy were an important source of information for the foreign diplomats, as different revolutionary factions

<sup>71</sup>Thévenaz, “Note de dossier,” August 17, 1966, SFA E2024-02A#1999/137#390\*.

<sup>72</sup>Keller to Abteilung für Verwaltungsangelegenheiten, September 26, 1966, SFA E2001E#1980/83#1778\*.

<sup>73</sup>Janner to Bieri, October 6, 1966, SFA E2001E#1980/83#1778\*.

<sup>74</sup>Keller, “Persönlicher Situationsbericht aus Peking,” October 6, 1966, SFA E2001E#1978/84#2322\*.

<sup>75</sup>Keller to Abteilung für Verwaltungsangelegenheiten, September 26, 1966, SFA E2001E#1980/83#1778\* (quote); Hugentobler, “Der neue Stil der chinesischen Diplomatie,” February 6, 1967, SFA E2001-05#1979/137#36\*.

<sup>76</sup>Keller, “Aktentnotiz,” September 19, 1966, SFA E2001E# 1978/84#2384\* (quote); Keller to EPD, October 31, 1966, SFA E2001E# 1978/84#2384\*; Keller, “Persönlicher Situationsbericht aus Peking,” October 31, 1966, SFA E2001E#1978/84#2322\*.

used them to denounce people in power as well as other factions. Although foreigners were not supposed to read the posters, by the mid-1960s, Western missions tended to have at least one diplomat capable of reading Chinese. These diplomats were crucial for keeping track of the current situation in Beijing by reading as many posters as possible, since the only available Chinese news source in English was the *People's Daily*.<sup>77</sup>

During the Cultural Revolution, Hedwig Brüngger (b. 1921) was the only Swiss who could speak and read Chinese among the Swiss diplomatic staff. She had first been stationed as a diplomatic aide in Nanjing in 1946, before she was promoted to chancellery staff in Beijing. In 1961 she took three years of unpaid leave to study Chinese in Paris, before returning to the Embassy as Secretary.<sup>78</sup> The EPD supported Brüngger's decision to study Chinese, not least because Ambassador Naville had already mentioned in 1960 that it would be useful for the Swiss Embassy to have a Sinologist among its Swiss staff, like some of the other Western missions.<sup>79</sup>

While Brüngger was analyzing posters,<sup>80</sup> Erika Moos, another member of the Swiss Embassy, photographed them. Since it was illegal for foreigners to have posters or send them abroad, Keller mailed slides of Moos's pictures to Bern and asked the EPD to pass them on to her family. The EPD complied, but it notified the Moos family that the slides were "confidential" and not to be shared. Moreover, it advised the family to not to say that they had received the slides from the EPD.<sup>81</sup>

In 1967, more and more posters were plastered on the walls of foreign missions, increasingly attacking foreign diplomats and heads of state in crude ways. The Swiss were not mentioned in these posters, but Hugentobler was shocked to see Russians described as "dirty pigs" and "bastards," and a French diplomatic couple as "bastard and bitch." Red Guards had even broken into the French mission to put the posters up. Both the Soviet Union and France were regarded as having committed anti-Chinese actions (the Soviet Union was regarded as China's main enemy, while demonstrating Chinese students had been arrested in France).<sup>82</sup> Red Guards and rebels also camped in front of diplomatic legations, sometimes damaging their vehicles, and harassing or even attacking them, their staff, or their families. Several embassies were attacked by mobs. Mao refused to criticize their behavior until the Central Committee finally stopped the extremists in the Foreign Ministry in August 1967, dramatically improving the situation for the foreign diplomats in Beijing.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>77</sup>Keller to Abteilung für politische Angelegenheiten, October 10, 1966, SFA E2001E# 1978/84#2384\*; Thévenaz to Eidgenössisches Personalamt, August 12, 1966, SFA E2024-02A#1999/137#390\*; Keller, "Schriftplakate (Tazibaos) in Peking," November 1, 1966, SFA E2001-05#1979/137#36\*; Cradock, *Experiences of China*.

<sup>78</sup>Brüngger, "Personalblatt," undated, SFA E2024-02A#1999/137#390\*.

<sup>79</sup>Frochoux to Office fédéral du personnel, January 23, 1961, SFA E2024-02A#1999/137#390\*; "Brüngger Hedwig, 1921," June 18, 1960, SFA E2024-02A#1999/137#390\*.

<sup>80</sup>Brüngger, "Der Dazibao: Ausbruch der 'öffentlichen Meinung' im Diktaturstaat," February 21, 1967, SFA E2300-01#1973/156#143\*.

<sup>81</sup>Keller to EPD, November 22, 1966, SFA E2001E# 1978/84#2384\*; Keller, "Schriftplakate (Tazibaos) in Peking," November 1, 1966, SFA E2001-05#1979/137#36\*; Zimmermann to Familie Sals-Moos, November 30, 1966, SFA E2001E# 1978/84#2384\*.

<sup>82</sup>Hugentobler, "Der neue Stil der chinesischen Diplomatie," February 6, 1967, SFA E2001-05#1979/137#36\* (quote); Hugentobler, "Diplomatic Brinkmanship," February 15, 1967, SFA E2001-05#1979/137#36\*; Hugentobler, "Das China Mao Tse-tungs," July 1967, SFA E2001E#1978/84#2384\*.

<sup>83</sup>Campiche to Micheli, August 22, 1967, SFA E2001E#1978/84#2384\*; Hugentobler, "Diplomatic Brinkmanship," February 15, 1967, SFA E2001-05#1979/137#36\*; Hugentobler, "Der neue Stil der chinesischen Diplomatie," February 6, 1967, SFA E2001-05#1979/137#36\*; Cradock, *Experiences of China*,



It is remarkable the Red Guards' actions against other diplomats and missions did not automatically cause Swiss diplomats to fear that something similar would happen to them, simply because they were also foreign diplomats. Arnold Hugentobler, for example, was convinced that the Red Guards did not act without the consent of the Foreign Ministry.<sup>84</sup> He informed Bern in February 1967 that some Eastern bloc missions had sent their wives and children home, but he neither suggested similar measures for the families of Swiss diplomats nor did he express fear that the Swiss Embassy could be the next target of the Red Guards' wrath. Instead, he claimed that there was no xenophobic atmosphere, and he pointed out that the police officers who were standing guard in front of the uninvolved embassies—including the Swiss Embassy—and the diplomatic staff's houses were "friendlier than before." Hugentobler was sure that the Chinese actions had been caused by incidents in the respective countries or other bilateral issues, and even argued that the Eastern Bloc diplomats had provoked their harassment by the Red Guards.<sup>85</sup> This view seemed to be confirmed a few days later in a conversation Hugentobler had with a Foreign Ministry official, in which he was told that relations between China and Switzerland were going well, unlike those with the Soviet Union, where visa restrictions had sabotaged bilateral relations.<sup>86</sup>

Nevertheless, relations between Switzerland and China also deteriorated during the Cultural Revolution. Among the issues China criticized was the presence of a large Tibetan refugee community in Switzerland, which led to the construction of a Tibetan Institute and the arrival of five Tibetan lamas in Switzerland in 1967. Other points of contention were Swiss press reports that criticized Mao or the Cultural Revolution, and the presence of diplomats from the Republic of China in Switzerland, whenever they travelled to Switzerland to participate in meetings of one of the international organizations in Geneva.<sup>87</sup>

Diplomats sometimes face the dilemma that they do not wholly support the orders that have been formulated by their foreign ministries, yet they have to follow them nonetheless. This can be particularly jarring when they feel that the orders are morally dubious or threaten the maintaining or securing of peace.<sup>88</sup> In the 1950s and early 1960s, Swiss diplomats had objected to various suggested (primarily commercial) China policies formulated in Bern but during the Cultural Revolution, they became even more outspoken. In August 1967, Red Guards attacked the British Mission, and Chinese officials became more critical of Swiss government policies. All of a sudden, it did not seem so outlandish to think that Swiss diplomats and their Embassy could be next on the list of the Red Guards. For some diplomats, this called for drastic measures. In August, the Swiss public's pro-Tibetan sentiment and the planned Tibetan

53–71. See also Mark, *The Everyday Cold War*, 111–34; Radchenko, *Two Suns*, 177–95; Hooper, *Foreigners*, 113–18; Chi-Kwan Mark, *China and the World since 1945: An International History* (London: Routledge, 2012), 64–67; Ma, *The Cultural Revolution*, 178–88; Barnouin and Yu, *Chinese Foreign Policy*, 63 and 69–71; Anne-Marie Brady, "Red and Expert: China's Foreign Friends in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, 1966–1969," in *China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution: Master Narratives and Post-Mao Counternarratives*, edited by Woei Lien Chong (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 119–20.

<sup>84</sup>Hugentobler to Janner, February 20, 1967, SFA E2001E-01#1982/58#2441\*.

<sup>85</sup>Hugentobler, "Diplomatic Brinkmanship," February 15, 1967, SFA E2001-05#1979/137#36\*.

<sup>86</sup>Hugentobler, "Aktennotiz," February 18, 1967, SFA E2001E-01#1982/58#2441\*.

<sup>87</sup>See Knüsel, *China's European Headquarters*.

<sup>88</sup>See, for example, Sasson Sofer, "Guardians of the Practitioners' Virtue: Diplomats at the Warrior's Den," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 16.1 (2005), 6.

Institute were condemned by Chinese diplomats, causing Ambassador Oscar Rossetti (1912–1996) to ask Bern outright whether Tibet really needed to be given such a media platform in Switzerland, particularly since “viewed rationally, the Dalai Lama’s theocratic feudal system ha[d] not exactly been paradise on earth.” Rossetti also stressed that China had to “be given the opportunity to save face. If we do not give the Chinese the chance to ... retreat, we have to expect that—according to current practice—the embassy will be smashed to pieces.”<sup>89</sup> Rossetti’s warnings were eventually heeded by Bern, and relations between China and Switzerland did not deteriorate further than a diplomatic standoff that lasted until October.<sup>90</sup> Rossetti’s view also explains why the Swiss diplomats hesitated about interfering when Red Guards attacked British or French diplomats and missions even though Switzerland had taken on good offices in China for many countries,<sup>91</sup> and the Swiss government supported joint diplomatic action in Beijing.<sup>92</sup>

The Cultural Revolution in Beijing also forced the EPD to change its policies for diplomats in China. During the radical phase of the Cultural Revolution, Swiss diplomats remained unharmed; Red Guards camped outside the Embassy but they did not attack it. However, as has already been mentioned, the Red Guards’ constant deluge of revolutionary slogans affected the mental health of the diplomatic staff. The EPD was worried about the safety of the Swiss staff in Beijing, which included four diplomats, two secretaries, and three wives. Although they continued to be treated correctly by Chinese officials, the EPD was aware that the Swiss Embassy’s location in a cul-de-sac would have made it very difficult for the Swiss to escape a mob. As a result, in August 1967, at the height of the Sino-Swiss tensions, the EPD suggested to Ambassador Rossetti that Hedwig Brünger (the only female Swiss diplomat in Beijing) be transferred back to Bern immediately, that all wives could return to Switzerland should the situation become unbearable for them, and that female diplomatic staff could be evacuated to Hong Kong if it were deemed necessary. Rossetti was even authorized to make these decisions without consulting Bern in case communication between the Embassy in Beijing and Bern was interrupted.<sup>93</sup>

Hedwig Brünger’s case is quite peculiar. She had already requested to be transferred in October 1966, citing her mental health. A medical report confirmed that Brünger’s mental health had suffered tremendously under the limited freedom of movement caused by the political situation in Beijing. Yet, as she was the only Swiss diplomat who could speak and read Chinese, the EPD was reluctant to let her return to Switzerland, and it was only when the Sino-Swiss diplomatic crisis reached its nadir that the EPD agreed to her request. In her request to leave Beijing, Brünger had stated that she would return to Beijing after two or three years, but she ended up working in Bern for nine years before returning to Beijing. Clearly, she could not face returning to

<sup>89</sup>Rossetti to Spühler, August 16, 1967, SFA E2200.174#1988/78#53\*.

<sup>90</sup>Knüsel, *China’s European Headquarters*, 160–67.

<sup>91</sup>Rezzonico, “Rapport de gestion de la légation de Suisse en Chine pour l’année 1951,” February 11, 1952, SFA E2400#1000/717#763\*; Bernoulli, “Jahresbericht der Schweizerischen Gesandtschaft in China fuer das Jahr 1955,” February 10, 1956, SFA E2400#1000/717#764\*.

<sup>92</sup>Bern to Foreign Office, Telegram 18, September 1, 1967, The National Archives of the UK (TNA) FCO 21/31. I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for sharing this file.

<sup>93</sup>EPD to Swiss embassy in Beijing, August 24, 1967, SFA E2001E#1978/84#2322\*; Blankart, “Nationalrätliche Kommission für auswärtige Angelegenheiten: Protokoll der Sitzung vom 13. September 1967,” October 30, 1967, SFA E2001E#1978/84#2322\*.

Beijing sooner.<sup>94</sup> Another diplomat who could not wait to leave Beijing was Ambassador Keller, who had ended up staying in Beijing for almost four years before he was allowed to leave in early 1967. His successor, Oscar Rossetti, only accepted the post of Ambassador to China because he was promised that he would be allowed to return to a European post after two or three years. After being forced to remain in Beijing for four years, he complained to Bern that his and his wife's health had deteriorated since their arrival in Beijing.<sup>95</sup>

Unfortunately, the Swiss Federal Archives do not contain information about how the diplomats dealt with their experiences in China once they returned from Beijing. It seems unlikely that they were offered professional help even though the EPD was aware of the heavy toll the Cultural Revolution had taken on their mental health. It is possible that Brüngger was only allowed to leave Beijing because she was a woman. The EPD's dossier about Brüngger contains various medical reports but nothing indicating that there were guidelines or even a program to assist diplomats who had mental scars from their posts abroad.

Compared to the British and French diplomats, the Swiss got off lightly. As the British Office of the Chargé d'Affaires in Beijing was attacked by a mob and set on fire, one might expect British diplomats to have been even more traumatized by this experience than the Swiss. However, there is not much evidence that this was the case. The period from mid-1966 to mid-1967, which many Swiss diplomats found hard to bear, did not seem to have had the same effect on the British diplomats. In an interview given decades later, John Boyd, described the months before the attack as a busy period in which he was out and about in Beijing, reading as many wall posters as possible to stay abreast of happenings.<sup>96</sup> Percy Cradock (1923–2010), then Counsellor, described the period as “violent” but “fascinating”: “We were in a marvelously privileged position ... Writing despatches about the revolution was fascinating work.”<sup>97</sup> Cradock's memoir contains a detailed description of the Red Guards' attack on the British Mission, but even this account is devoid of references to mental suffering. Of course, memoirs are by nature also heavily redacted.<sup>98</sup> Cradock's matter-of-fact tone seems typical of senior British diplomats. In 2011, a witness seminar on the role of the British Embassy in Beijing was sponsored by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The attack on the British Mission in August 1967 was also discussed. Roger Garside, who joined the British Mission in Beijing in 1968, was asked to describe how the attack and the subsequent house arrest had affected the diplomatic staff in Beijing, but he refused to do so, simply stating:

I have to pay tribute to those who had been held [in Beijing] for so many months, not knowing when [the house arrest] would end. They were amazingly stoic and

<sup>94</sup>Divison des affaires administratives, “Proposition de transfert,” October 3, 1967, SFA E2024–02A#1999/137#390\*; Ärztlicher Dienst to Thévenaz, October 11, 1966, SFA E2024–02A#1999/137#390\*; Brüngger, “Personalblatt,” undated, SFA E2024–02A#1999/137#390\*.

<sup>95</sup>Rossetti to Graber, May 6, 1970, SFA E2024–02A#1999/137#2040\*.

<sup>96</sup>John Boyd, interview by Malcolm McBain, February 17, 1999, British Diplomatic Oral History Programme, [www.chu.cam.ac.uk/media/uploads/files/Boyd\\_NaH9fKH.pdf](http://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/media/uploads/files/Boyd_NaH9fKH.pdf) (accessed on February 8, 2022).

<sup>97</sup>Percy Cradock, interview by Malcolm McBain, November 4, 1997, British Diplomatic Oral History Programme, <https://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/media/uploads/files/Cradock.pdf> (accessed on February 8, 2022).

<sup>98</sup>Cradock, *Experiences of China*, 42–59. It is also possible that Cradock did not feel traumatized because he had been on leave for several weeks in 1967, which caused him to miss some of the run-up to the attack of the British mission.

self-disciplined, and one was very proud to be their colleagues. I do not think there is a lot more to add beyond that, really. After they left, we were one Mission among others. I feel I should leave it there.<sup>99</sup>

Garside's remarks give the impression that a discussion of mental health issues among British diplomats was taboo, at least with respect to the public.

The British Diplomatic Oral History Programme contains only one interview that hints at the physical and mental toll of the experience in Beijing among the British. John Weston (b. 1938) was Second Secretary and inside the British Office when it was attacked. Weston's mental health suffered after the attack, when the stand-off between Britain and China resulted in a house arrest of the British diplomats in Beijing lasting almost a year. Weston recalled: "The pressures on people were difficult. We had diplomatic wives, for example, who became pregnant who were unable to get proper medical attention or to leave the country, and that induced its own kind of stress. It was quite hard." In fact, Weston's own wife had suffered a miscarriage during this period, caused by incorrectly administered medicine by Chinese doctors in Beijing. Weston and his wife were only able to leave Beijing in 1968, when she had become pregnant again. However, Weston stressed in the interview: "I don't think that we bore any more scars from that first experience in Peking than anybody else did. It certainly had not destroyed my interest in things Chinese or indeed my liking for the Chinese as people."<sup>100</sup>

Weston's experience was obviously unique among the British staff. It is possible that the British diplomats managed to deal with the harrowing experience of Red Guard violence so much better than some of the Swiss diplomats because they had been specifically trained for the post in Beijing. After all, most British diplomats had studied Chinese and lived in Hong Kong for years before they assumed their posts in Beijing. They spoke Chinese fluently and knew Chinese society and culture.<sup>101</sup> Swiss diplomats in the 1960s, in contrast, were career diplomats who were posted to a different country every four years. Moreover, while the British diplomats were able to move around in public and read posters and newspapers, with the exception of Hedwig Brüngger, Swiss diplomats could not read Chinese or understand what happened around them. In fact, in May 1966, Keller wrote a letter to Bern, in which he criticized the fact that British, French, and Swedish diplomatic staff (and the diplomats' wives) in Beijing received two Chinese lessons a week, paid for by their governments, but that the Swiss government did not allow the same its diplomats.<sup>102</sup> It is, therefore, possible that the lack of cultural and linguistic knowledge made the experience more harrowing for some of the Swiss diplomats.

It should also be noted that not every Swiss diplomat felt like Keller and Brüngger. Arnold Hugentobler, who had been at the Embassy in Beijing as a Secretary from 1964 and became Chargé d'Affaires after Keller left in 1967 seemed to cope fairly well with the situation in China after his initial shock in 1966. Although he was horrified by the

<sup>99</sup>Roger Garside quoted in Kandiah, *Witness Seminar: The Role and Functions of the British Embassy in Beijing*.

<sup>100</sup>John Weston, interview by Liz Cox, June 13, 2001, British Diplomatic Oral History Programme, [www.chu.cam.ac.uk/media/uploads/files/Weston\\_18PHksY.pdf](http://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/media/uploads/files/Weston_18PHksY.pdf) (accessed on February 8, 2022).

<sup>101</sup>Weston, interview; Boyd, interview; Cradock, interview.

<sup>102</sup>Keller to Spühler, May 12, 1966, [dodis.ch/53377](http://dodis.ch/53377).

language used in some of the posters and described the demonstrations and loudspeakers in front of the embassies as “demoralizing,”<sup>103</sup> his reports contain no further discussion of mental suffering. In fact, his reports from 1967 tend to point out that the situation in Beijing was not as dire as it was described in the Western press.<sup>104</sup> After the attacks of Soviet and French diplomats, for example, he informed Bern that the situation was “not as dramatic” as it had been portrayed by some journalists.<sup>105</sup>

Hugentobler was not the only one among Swiss diplomats who felt this way. Ambassador Rossetti arrived in Beijing in March 1967 and was there when the British Mission was attacked and when relations between China and Switzerland reached their nadir. Nevertheless, in September—at the height of the diplomatic crisis between Switzerland and China—he wrote a report on whether China truly was in a state of civil war, as Western media had been claiming for months. While he did not come to a definitive answer, Rossetti noted: “The foreigner living in Beijing notices little of the immediate drama of the events, apart from the storming of some embassies, the on-and-off tension in the air, and occasional neighborhood brawls.”<sup>106</sup> Such a borderline casual discussion of Red Guard violence against diplomats and their missions must have raised eyebrows in Bern, particularly since, just a few weeks earlier, Rossetti had warned Bern that the Swiss Embassy could become a target of Red Guard violence. It also hints at the difficulties historians are facing today when they are using diplomatic reports as sources: Some diplomats changed their minds. Their interpretation of events (and their potential danger) might change over time; their mental health might have fluctuated, affecting how they perceived a situation, or they might have had simply a bad day (or week) when they wrote a report, causing them to focus on issues that might have not bothered them (as much) a week later.

## Conclusion

What, then, do the Swiss diplomats’ reports add to our understanding of the Cultural Revolution? Studies on the global history of the Cultural Revolution tend to focus on Maoists, communist sympathizers, and foreigners in China who worked as teachers or interpreters. This article has shown that diplomats are also actors whose experiences of and contribution to the Cultural Revolution should not be neglected. As physical representatives of their respective countries in China, diplomats took on the brunt of the Red Guards’ and/or the government’s radicalized foreign policy measures in the Cultural Revolution. Yet, as the men and women on the spot, diplomats also had the potential to effectively steer bilateral relations in a certain way, as we have seen with the Swiss diplomats in Beijing who interfered in the formulation of the Swiss government’s China policies.

At the most basic level, the reports corroborate existing literature on the Red Guards’ terror, and on the role of propaganda during the Cultural Revolution. Their Western perspective also provides us with a few (minor) insights into everyday life during the radical phase of the Cultural Revolution that do not figure prominently in Chinese

<sup>103</sup>Hugentobler, “Der neue Stil der chinesischen Diplomatie,” February 6, 1967, SFA E2001-05#1979/137#36\*.

<sup>104</sup>See for example Hugentobler, “Der Alltag in Peking: trügerische Ruhe?,” March 13, 1967, SFA E2300-01#1973/156#143\*.

<sup>105</sup>Hugentobler, “Diplomatic Brinkmanship,” February 15, 1967, SFA E2001-05#1979/137#36\*;

<sup>106</sup>Hugentobler, “Bürgerkrieg in China?,” September 13, 1967, SFA E2300-01#1973/156#143\*.

accounts because the Swiss noted things that were interesting for Westerners but not necessarily for Chinese eyewitnesses. The reports are particularly informative about the Red Guards' violence against Chinese employees of diplomatic missions or Chinese civilians who had other connections to foreign diplomats. It would be very interesting to see how other diplomatic missions reported the treatment of their Chinese employees by the Red Guards and how they were affected by the Cultural Revolution. After all, the Swiss reports seem to indicate that not all employees were treated the same way, and that employees of the Swiss Embassy were treated (marginally) better; for example, interpreters continued to work at the Swiss Embassy when many interpreters had stopped showing up at other missions.

The reports also describe the Red Guards' harassment of diplomatic missions that were not attacked, and they demonstrate that this harassment was actually very effective, even when no violence was used. More importantly, the reports show that China treated countries and their diplomats very differently during the Cultural Revolution. In 1966 and 1967, the formulation of foreign relations had been forced into an ideological strait-jacket and the Foreign Ministry hijacked by radicals. Nevertheless, the Swiss reports show that Western diplomats and their missions still received individual treatment, indicating that the Foreign Ministry did indeed exert some form of control over the Red Guards, and that Red Guard violence was not driven by indiscriminate xenophobia. Switzerland's importance for China's presence in Western Europe seems to have been too great to risk a breakdown of bilateral relations between the two countries. This must have protected Swiss diplomats when bilateral tensions arose that were of a similar nature to those of China and other countries whose diplomats or missions were attacked.

Finally, the Swiss reports demonstrate that, even though Swiss diplomats were not physically attacked by the Red Guards, there were several diplomats whose mental health suffered a great deal during the radical phase of the Cultural Revolution. Not every diplomat was affected the same way, and it is possible that a lack of linguistic skills and cultural knowledge made the experience of the Cultural Revolution more harrowing for some of the Swiss diplomats. In any case, even seasoned diplomats like Hans Keller, who had been witness to Nazi Germany, the Red Army's occupation of Eastern Europe, and Stalin's terror, were overwhelmed by their experiences in China and their mental health suffered tremendously. As a result, the diplomats' mental scars are an important aspect that historiography on China's foreign relations during the Cultural Revolution should analyze in more detail.