



Stalin's daughter was hidden away from the media in Switzerland, while her stay in the US immediately began with a press conference. Wikimedia

Frau Staehelin, Stalin's daughter

In spring 1967, Stalin's daughter travelled to Switzerland. In the middle of the Cold War. The story of a diplomatic high-wire act.



Thomas Bürgisser → Thomas Bürgisser is a historian at the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland (Dodis) research centre.

Things had to move quickly. On 7 March 1967, John S. Hayes, the US Ambassador in Bern, "urgently" requested an audience with Federal Councillor and head of the *Federal Political Department* (FPD, now the *Federal Department of Foreign Affairs* FDFA) Willy Spühler. During their conversation, the American explained the situation: Svetlana Alliluyeva, Stalin's only daughter had used her visit to India on the occasion of her partner's funeral to apply for political asylum at the US embassy in New Delhi. What news this was: a high-profile "defection" that could hardly be any more embarrassing for Moscow. An insider, who was bound to have access to compromising information about what went on behind closed doors in the upper echelons of the Kremlin, was seeking protection from the United States. One might have thought this would have been seen as a major triumph for the "free world". Far from it...



Svetlana Alliluyeva's request for asylum in the United States... Dodis



... put Federal Councillor Willy Spühler under pressure. Swiss National Museum / ASI

Washington and Moscow had been pursuing a 'policy of détente' since 1963, in an attempt to ease tensions between them on issues such as disarmament. US diplomats were not thrilled at the sudden appearance on the scene of a defector, in the form of Alliluyeva, who could put the Kremlin in an awkward position. Especially given that Alliluyeva was carrying an explosive item in her luggage: a manuscript containing her memoirs, which she would go on to publish as "Twenty Letters to a Friend". The US State Department secretly assured Moscow that it would do everything to prevent this material and Alliluyeva herself from being "exploited in the interests of the Cold War". Washington, therefore, had no desire for Stalin's daughter to enter the United States. And that is where Switzerland stepped into the breach.



Stalin's only daughter Svetlana, seen here on a photo taken in 1935, left Western diplomats in a predicament. Wikimedia

Ambassador Hayes appealed to the Swiss Confederation's humanitarian tradition and asked Spühler, in light of the delicate situation, to provide Svetlana Alliluyeva with an – at least temporary – safe haven in Switzerland. Under time pressure, the Federal Councillor acceded to the American's request. However, he did so purely on condition that Alliluyeva enter Switzerland not as a refugee, but as a tourist with a visa allowing her to visit 'for rest and recuperation'. He also required her to give an undertaking in writing that she would refrain from involvement in any political activities or any form of publicity. For its part, the United States had to agree to organise her 'onward journey' within three months.

Visit for 'rest and recuperation'

Alliluyeva landed in Geneva aboard a chartered plane on 11 March 1967. The "discreet handover to the Federal Police" desired by the FPD was "made unnecessarily difficult" as the press had got wind of her arrival in advance and a horde of eager journalists had turned up at the airport. Alliluyeva was driven to the Bernese Oberland that same day and put up in the *Hotel Jungfrau* in Beatenberg under an assumed name.

The head of the Justice Department Ludwig von Moos held a press conference at which he emphasised that Ms Alliluyeva was in need of rest and recuperation and wished to be left in peace. The Federal Council assigned the task of looking after the 'holidaymaker' to a top official at the FPD, Basel-based lawyer Antonino Janner, head of the Department's 'Eastern Division'.

The first problem Janner had to face was the interest shown by the Swiss and international media. In no time, the Oberland region was swarming with roving reporters, publishers and, almost certainly, secret agents. The Federal Police had to spirit Stalin's daughter away from Beatenberg 'under cover'. They subsequently hid her away as 'Miss Carlen from Ireland', first among the nuns of the Order of Saint Clare in St. Antoni in the Sense district, then among the *Visitation Sisters* in Fribourg. The press was in uproar, especially the *Blick* tabloid, which railed against this "underhand action taken by the authorities in an attempt to mislead the general public". It believed that the sensational stories around Alliluyeva – a "ticking political timebomb" – belonged in its gossip columns and that the "arbitrary actions of the authorities" were the only thing preventing it from reporting on them. The powers-that-be in Bern refused this by citing protection of privacy and criticising the "intensive pursuit" launched by the "gangster" reporters in the strongest of terms.

The interests of the state versus individual freedom

The Swiss government was in a quandary, faced with the task of squaring the national interests with the civil liberties guaranteed to all individuals. In two secret notes written for the Federal Council meeting of 17 March, Janner wrote: "Svetlana's tragedy is that we are doing not only the United States a service at the present moment, we are also abetting the Soviet Union, but only by practically forcing Svetlana to remain silent and shutting her off from the outside world, even though she has agreed to this because she has no other choice." Janner, a strict anti-communist and Cold War supporter of the kind to be found in Switzerland, did not like what was "undoubtedly the most expedient position". He argued against a reason of state that forced Switzerland to aid and abet the superpowers in furthering their interests at Alliluyeva's expense. Instead, he proposed that Stalin's daughter be released from her "vow of silence". Bern should bear in mind the country's liberal tradition as "the moral victory for Switzerland would most likely be huge". If this entailed a snub by the USA and a rupture in relations with the USSR, Janner was willing to pay the price.

It was a step too far for the Federal Council. Since the beginning of the 'policy of détente,' Swiss foreign trade had become more and more interested in doing business with the East. Federal Councillor Nello Celio went on record as saying: "Our relations with the USSR count for more than Ms A's status." How, then, to proceed? Moscow approached Colonel-Brigadier Pierre Musy, the head of the Swiss intelligence service, directly through secret service channels with "the only sensible solution". High-ranking KGB officer Mikhail Rogov, an "old acquaintance" of Musy's, asked the Swiss authorities to work towards persuading Alliluyeva, who was "not entirely responsible for her own actions", to return to the Soviet Union – with an assurance that she could do so on the basis of the *status quo ante*. The Kremlin exerted increasing pressure through its diplomatic channels and warned the FPD that relations could deteriorate.



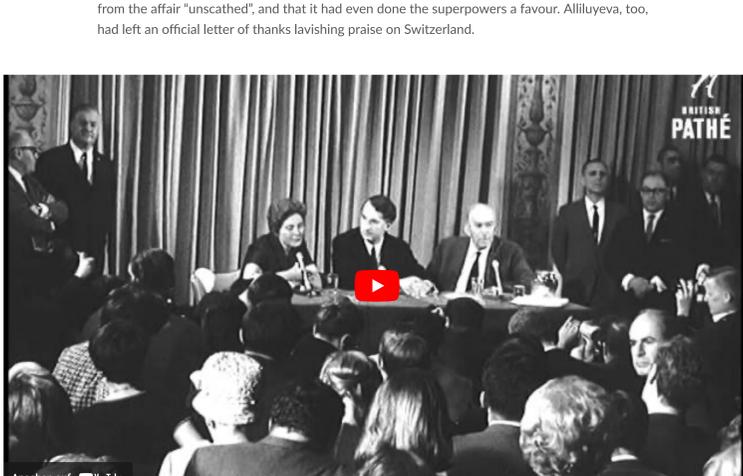
Svetlana Alliluyeva's fundamental rights as an individual... Wikimedia



... were not worth jeopardising relations with the USSR in Federal Councillor Nello Celio's eyes. Swiss National Museum / ASI

In the week before Easter, the US sent George F. Kennan, its foremost Russian expert, to Switzerland on a secret mission. He was to negotiate with the authorities and Alliluyeva, and arrange the 'handover'. Agreement was quickly reached regarding the key question of what to do about publishing her memoirs. Kennan argued that this was not so much a political document, but more a "work of literary importance and a highly valuable historical document" which could therefore be published in the United States. In return, the Swiss authorities permitted Alliluyeva to enter into advance negotiations with the publisher and start organising the translation of the work into English – Janner's minimal solution. Janner stated that the act of translation as such could in no way be seen as a political activity.

Switzerland's involvement in this diplomatic-secret service thriller came to an end after six weeks, when Alliluyeva boarded a *Swissair* plane for New York on 21 April 1967 under the cover name 'Frau Staehelin'. Once there, the US press got the scoop that had been denied to the Soviet media: Alliluyeva was happy to provide information about her getaway. While the *Blick* sulked, the Federal Council was pleased with itself. According to the head of the FPD Spühler, the whole matter had been dealt with in an exemplary fashion. He believed that Switzerland had emerged from the affair "unscathed", and that it had even done the superpowers a favour. Alliluyeva, too, had left an official letter of thanks lavishing praise on Switzerland.



Press conference given by Svetlana Alliluyeva on arriving in the United States in April 1967. YouTube / British Pathe

Nevertheless, despite its calculated actions, the Federal Council had failed to solve the "problem of human freedom", which Antonino Janner's note had identified as the key point in the Alliluyeva case. He wrote that, at times, Stalin's daughter had felt more trapped in the "free West" than she did in Moscow.

Svetlana Alliluyeva's book "Twenty Letters to a Friend" was published in autumn 1967 and became a bestseller. This gave Stalin's daughter financial independence, but she never found true happiness. Perhaps, in part, because her desire to return to Switzerland and settle there was unfulfilled. The Swiss authorities denied her permission. Alliluyeva briefly returned to the Soviet Union in 1984, only to move back to the United States a short time later. She died there in 2011, impoverished and alone, in a retirement home.

This article by Thomas Bürgisser was first published in the WOZ newspaper in December 2011. It is based on documents from the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland (Dodis) collection with additional material from another WOZ article of March 2017 and further Dodis documents.