

The Swiss Government's Justification of Slavery (1864 und 2018)

Submitted by Franziska Ryser (Green Party of Switzerland) on 18th June 2021

Transatlantic slavery was one of the great crimes of humanity and laid the foundation for the wealth of Western countries.

The French Convention abolished slavery in 1794. European states declared in 1815 (Congress of Vienna) that the slave trade had «at all times been regarded by enlightened and just men as repugnant to the principles of humanity and universal morality.» Slavery was abolished by Haiti in 1804, by Chile in 1823, Britain in 1833, France in 1848, Argentina in 1853, Holland in 1863 and by the USA in 1864.

In 1863, the great Swiss lawyer J.C. Bluntschli declared: «Man is by nature a person, therefore he cannot be a thing, i.e. not a slave.» Slavery in North America was an «outrage on the spirit of humanity» and violated «the divine and human order in the deepest way».

The Swiss Federal Council (the all-party coalition government), however, justified and supported the crime of slavery in Brazil in 1864: Slavery was «an act which does not involve any crime»; to abolish it was to deprive Swiss slaveholders «of a part of their – after all — rightfully acquired property» and this, according to the Federal Council, was «contrary to our concepts of morality and justice».

The 2018 Federal Council claimed, «The response of the federal authorities [of 1864] was informed by the norms that prevailed in the 1860s.» This is contradicted by the abolitionist discourse in Europe and the Americas at the time, and contradicted by Member of Parliament Wilhelm Joos (SH) in 1865: «It is and remains true that the buying and selling of even a few slaves is to be counted as part of the slave trade, consequently as crimes against humanity according to current terms.»

I therefore ask the Federal Council of 2021 to answer the following questions:

1. Does the Federal Council recognise that slavery has been a crime against humanity at all times, including 1864?
2. Does the Federal Council share the opinion that in 1864 Parliament and the Federal Council were guilty of participating (justifying, legalising) in a «crime against humanity», as which slavery was declared by the UN (with Swiss signature) at Durban in 2001?
3. Does the Federal Council agree that the Federal Council's and Parliament's support of slavery in 1864 constitutes an argument for reparations by Switzerland to the descendants of the victims?