

A city of migrants at the turn of the century

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By 1900, Basel was a city of immigrants. A large share of its population had been born outside the canton, in other Swiss cantons or abroad. The proportion of foreign nationals, moreover, was among the highest in Switzerland. Germans from Baden and Württemberg formed the largest foreign group, followed by Alsatians and Italians.¹ The German immigrants, many of whom became Swiss citizens, worked in all sectors, from the chemical factories to the shops and the universities.

The high proportion of foreigners in Basel became a political issue before the First World War, when nationalist movements in Switzerland warned of the over-foreignisation, the *Überfremdung*, of the country. The concept would shape Swiss immigration policy for much of the twentieth century and return in the referendums on immigration of the 1970s and the twenty-first century. The First World War, during which many German residents returned home to serve in the army, and the restrictive immigration policy of the interwar period reduced the foreign population of Basel.

The history of immigration to Basel in the industrial age shows that the economic success of the city depended on foreign labour, foreign capital and foreign expertise. The chemical industry was founded in part by immigrants from France and Germany. Its workers came in large numbers from Baden and Alsace, while its scientists were trained in German universities. The modern pharmaceutical industry of Basel, which recruits researchers and managers from all over the world, continues this pattern.

1 Notes

1. On the share of foreign nationals and of persons born outside the canton in the population of Basel around 1900 (with Germans as the largest foreign group), see the historical statistics of the Statistisches Amt Basel-Stadt. To be verified. ↩

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