

Earlier Basel names in world history

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The use of the city's name for events of international significance did not begin with the BIS. Part A described the Council of Basel, which met from 1431 to 1449 and for some years turned the city into the diplomatic and financial centre of Latin Christendom, bringing prelates, envoys, bankers and scribes from all over Europe to the Rhine.¹

Three and a half centuries later the city gave its name to a set of treaties that changed the map of Europe. The Peace of Basel of 1795 consisted of separate treaties concluded in the city by the French Republic with Prussia in April 1795, with Spain in July 1795 and with Hesse-Kassel in August 1795. Prussia left the First Coalition against revolutionary France and accepted a line of demarcation that neutralised northern Germany for about a decade. Spain ceded its part of the island of Hispaniola to France. The French negotiator, François Barthélemy, worked from the French embassy to the Swiss Confederation, while the Basel merchant and statesman Peter Ochs acted as intermediary and host. Historians have judged the Peace of Basel severely, because it weakened the Holy Roman Empire and isolated Austria. For the present argument, what matters is that the city already served as a neutral meeting place for powers at war.²

A different kind of internationalism appeared in 1815 with the founding of the Basel Mission, the Protestant missionary society described in Part C. For more than two centuries the Mission carried the name of the city to the Gold Coast, to southern India, to China and to Cameroon. Its trading company engaged in commerce on a substantial scale. Its schools, churches and archives made "Basel" a familiar word in places that otherwise had no connection with Switzerland. In Ghana and in Karnataka the name still designates churches, schools and buildings associated with the Mission. This is an early example of a Basel brand built through institutions operating far from the city.³

At the end of the nineteenth century the city again became the setting of an event of world-historical consequence. From 29 to 31 August 1897 the First Zionist Congress met in the concert hall of the Stadtcasino, convened by Theodor Herzl. The Congress adopted the Basel Programme, which formulated the aim of creating for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured under public law, and founded the Zionist Organization. Basel hosted the Zionist Congress on several further occasions in the following decades. The city commemorated the centenary in 1997 and the 125th anniversary in 2022. Basel was chosen in 1897 partly because the originally planned venue in Munich met with opposition from the local Jewish community, which left the liberal and accessible Swiss city as an alternative. The episode shows once more that Basel served as a neutral and practical location for international gatherings with far-reaching consequences.⁴

These earlier layers explain why the name could carry so much later meaning. By the time the BIS was founded, "Basel" already stood for a city in which councils deliberated, treaties were signed and international movements were launched. The BIS added a financial layer to this tradition. The Basel Convention and the governance institutions that followed added further layers that have nothing to do with banking, yet they draw on the same reputation of the city as a neutral, efficient and discreet place of international cooperation.

1 Notes

1. On the Council of Basel (1431–1449) as an event of European diplomacy and finance, see Part A, Chapter IV, and the literature cited there. To be verified. ↩
2. On the Peace of Basel of 1795 (treaties between France and Prussia of 5 April 1795, France and Spain of 22 July 1795, and France and Hesse-Kassel of 28 August 1795; role of François Barthélemy and of Peter Ochs), see the standard handbooks on the French Revolutionary Wars and the *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz*, entries "Basler Frieden" and "Ochs, Peter". Dates to be verified. ↩
3. On the Basel Mission (founded 1815) and the Basel Mission Trading Company, their activities in West Africa, India and China and their legacy, see Part C, Chapter V, and the literature cited there, in particular the publications of the archives of Mission 21 in Basel. To be verified. ↩

4. On the First Zionist Congress in the Stadtcasino Basel (29–31 August 1897), the Basel Programme, the founding of the Zionist Organization, the move of the venue from Munich to Basel, later congresses in Basel and the anniversary events of 1997 and 2022, see the standard histories of the Zionist movement and the Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz, entry "Zionistenkongresse". To be verified. ↩

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