

From the Kaufhaus to the border office

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The continuity is worth stating at the outset because it explains much of the present. Basel has always been a place where goods were counted, weighed and taxed on their way between the Upper Rhine and the Alpine passes. The medieval *Kaufhaus* served as warehouse, customs house and market supervisor in one building whose officials knew the merchants personally. When the federal state took over customs in 1848, the city lost the revenue but kept the function, since the railway stations and later the Rhine port became the principal entry points for Swiss imports from the north. The forwarding houses of Basel, which Part C described as agents for distant merchants, turned into customs brokers whose expertise in tariff classification and procedure remained a local speciality throughout the twentieth century.¹

The smuggling of the Napoleonic period belongs to the same story. During the Continental System, when Napoleon prohibited British goods in the territories under French control, Basel became a centre of contraband trade across the French border. Even the French customs officers who confiscated and burned seized goods in 1810 could not stop a traffic that was too profitable to suppress. Part C drew the general lesson that sanctions create price differences, which in turn make circumvention profitable and turn border cities into natural centres of evasion. The modern sanctions regimes against Russia face exactly this problem. Their enforcement is a matter for customs officers who stand, in a sense, in the place of the *douaniers* of 1810, equipped with risk-analysis software instead of muskets.²

The First World War added a further layer. The supervisory bodies that the belligerents imposed on Swiss trade, the *Société Suisse de Surveillance Économique* for the Allied side and the *Schweizerische Treuhandstelle* for the Central Powers, required Swiss importers to guarantee that goods would not be re-exported to the enemy. Part D described these institutions as early forms of end-use control. Their modern successors are the end-use

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certificates demanded by SECO for dual-use goods and the "no re-export to Russia" clauses that the European Union has made compulsory in certain contracts since 2024. The idea that a neutral trading hub must prove to its larger neighbours that it is not a channel for circumvention is therefore more than a century old in Basel.³

1 Notes

1. On the Kaufhaus and the cantonal customs, see Part A; on the commission and forwarding business, see Part C, chapter III; on Basel as a federal customs station, see HLS, article "Zölle". To be verified. ↩
2. On the Continental System (Berlin Decree of 21 November 1806, Milan Decree of 17 December 1807), the Trianon tariff of 1810 and smuggling through Basel, see HLS, article "Kontinentalsperre", and Part C, chapter I. To be verified. ↩
3. On the SSS (1915) and the Treuhandstelle, see HLS, articles "Société Suisse de Surveillance Economique" and "Treuhandstelle", and Part D, chapter I. On the contractual "no re-export to Russia" clause, see Article 12g of Council Regulation (EU) No 833/2014 as amended. To be verified. ↩

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