

Swiss consuls and merchant networks overseas

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In the nineteenth century, the Swiss Confederation, which had no colonies and a very limited diplomatic service, relied on honorary consuls, usually Swiss merchants established abroad, to represent its interests in foreign ports and commercial centres. Swiss consuls were appointed in the principal ports of the Americas, Asia and Africa, where they protected Swiss citizens, promoted Swiss trade and reported on commercial conditions.¹

The Swiss merchant communities overseas formed networks that connected Switzerland with the global economy. Swiss trading houses operated in Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, the United States, the Levant, India, China, Japan and the Dutch East Indies. They exported Swiss textiles, watches and machinery and imported raw materials and colonial goods. Some of them became major enterprises: the Volkart brothers of Winterthur founded a trading house in India in 1851 that became one of the largest cotton traders in the world. The Diethelm and the Keller families founded trading houses in Southeast Asia that later merged into DKSH, which remains one of the principal distribution companies in Asia.² The author has seen, during his years in Singapore and Hong Kong, how the heirs of these Swiss trading houses still shape the commerce of the region.

The Swiss overseas merchants operated within the colonial systems of the European powers and profited from them. Their activities in colonial India, the Dutch East Indies or the plantation economies of the Americas placed them in the economic order of colonialism. Several historians have described the Swiss position as one of colonialism without colonies: participation in the benefits of the colonial economy without the political responsibility of a colonial power.³ This description has been debated, but it captures a characteristic feature of Switzerland's relationship with the colonial world.

1 Notes

1. On the Swiss consular network of the nineteenth century, largely composed of honorary consuls who were Swiss merchants established abroad, see HLS, article "Konsulate"; the literature on Swiss foreign trade policy. To be verified. ↩
2. On Swiss trading houses overseas in the nineteenth century, including Volkart Brothers (founded 1851 in Winterthur and Bombay) and the predecessors of DKSH (Diethelm, Keller, Siber Hegner), see HLS, articles "Volkart" and "DKSH"; the literature on Swiss merchants in Asia. To be verified. ↩
3. On the concept of "colonialism without colonies" applied to Switzerland, see Patricia Purtschert/Harald Fischer-Tiné (eds.), *Colonial Switzerland. Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins*, Basingstoke 2015. To be verified. ↩

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