

Swiss servants of the colonial powers

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Swiss citizens also served the colonial powers directly. Swiss officers and soldiers served in the armies of France, the Netherlands, Britain and other powers, some of them in the colonies. Swiss regiments in Dutch service were deployed in the Dutch colonies, including Suriname and the Cape, and Swiss soldiers participated in the suppression of slave revolts and resistance movements.¹

Swiss also served as administrators and officials of the colonial companies. The most prominent Basel example is Isaac Faesch, a member of a Basel patrician family, who served the Dutch West India Company and was governor of Curaçao in the mid-eighteenth century. Curaçao was a centre of the Dutch slave trade in the Caribbean, from which enslaved Africans were distributed to the Spanish and other colonies.² Faesch's career shows that members of the Basel elite could reach positions of responsibility in the colonial administrations of other powers, and that the colonial world offered opportunities to Swiss who could not find comparable positions at home.

In the nineteenth century, Swiss emigrants settled in the colonies and in the independent states of the Americas, where some of them became plantation owners. In Brazil, where slavery was abolished only in 1888, Swiss settlers in Bahia and other regions owned plantations worked by enslaved people. In 1864, the Swiss federal parliament debated the question of Swiss citizens who owned slaves abroad, after a member of the National Council raised the issue, but it decided not to prohibit the practice, on the grounds that the matter fell under the jurisdiction of the countries concerned.³

1 Notes

1. On Swiss mercenaries in colonial service (Dutch service in Suriname, the Cape, Ceylon and the East Indies; French service in the Caribbean), see HLS, article "Solddienst"; David/Etemad/Schaufelbuehl, 2005. To be verified. ↩
2. On Isaac Faesch (1687–1758), a member of the Basel Faesch family, governor of Sint Eustatius and later of Curaçao for the Dutch West India Company (1740–1758), see HLS, article "Faesch, Isaac". Dates to be verified. ↩
3. On Swiss plantation owners in Brazil (Bahia) and the debate in the Swiss federal parliament in 1864 on Swiss citizens owning slaves abroad (motion of National Councillor Wilhelm Joos), see David/Etemad/Schaufelbuehl, 2005; HLS, article "Sklaverei". To be verified. ↩

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