

Switzerland's gateway to the sea

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Switzerland is a landlocked country whose economy depends on imports of energy, raw materials and food and on exports of high-value goods. The Rhine gives it a navigable connection to the North Sea ports of Rotterdam, Antwerp and Amsterdam. Basel lies at the upper end of this waterway for large cargo vessels, since the High Rhine above Rheinfelden was never made navigable for them despite plans that were discussed for much of the twentieth century. Every Rhine vessel that brings goods to Switzerland therefore ends its voyage in the ports of Basel-Stadt and Basel-Landschaft, which explains why the city has been the Swiss port in a literal sense for more than a century.

Part D has described how the engineer Rudolf Gelpke and his supporters revived commercial navigation to Basel at the beginning of the twentieth century and how the ports of St. Johann, Kleinhüningen, Birsfelden and Au were built in the following decades.¹ The present chapter takes up the story where that account ended. It describes the ports as they operate today, the international law that governs navigation on the river, the financing of ships, the logistics companies that grew up around the port and the legal questions that arise when goods are stored, cleared and carried in the trinational region.

The economic importance of the Rhine for Switzerland is often underestimated because the river carries a modest share of total Swiss foreign trade when measured by value. The picture changes when the measure is weight and when the goods are considered in which the Rhine specialises. Mineral oil products, building materials, grain, animal feed, metals and containers make up the bulk of the cargo. For several of these goods the Rhine is a principal or even the cheapest route. With regard to the security of supply, the waterway remains an alternative to road and rail that the federal government continues to regard as strategic.²

1 Notes

1. See Part D, Chapter I, section "The Rhine port and the return of navigation", and HLS, article "Rheinschiffahrt". To be verified. ↩
2. On the significance of the Rhine for the national economic supply of Switzerland, see the reports of the Federal Office for National Economic Supply (FONES/BWL) and the Federal Act of 17 June 2016 on the National Economic Supply (National Economic Supply Act, NESA/LVG, SR 531). To be verified. ↩

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