

The admission of refugees: a selective policy

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The city of Basel did not admit refugees without conditions. Its policy combined humanitarian and religious motives, the duty to help persecuted fellow believers, with economic calculation and the protection of the interests of the established citizens. The council distinguished between refugees who passed through the city and received temporary assistance, refugees who were allowed to reside in the city as inhabitants without citizenship, the *Hintersassen*, and refugees who were admitted to citizenship.¹

Admission to citizenship was a privilege that had to be bought. Besides joining a guild, the applicant paid a fee, which varied according to his wealth and the needs of the city. Since the fees were high enough to exclude poor applicants, the council in effect favoured wealthy merchants and skilled craftsmen who could bring capital and new industries. The guilds, which feared competition, often opposed the admission of newcomers who wanted to practise their trades, leaving the council to balance the interests of the guilds against the benefits of new industries.

In the course of the seventeenth century, the policy became more restrictive. The established families, many of them of refugee origin themselves, sought to protect their position by limiting the admission of new citizens. The fees were raised, the conditions tightened, and in the eighteenth century admission to citizenship became extremely rare. As the citizenry of Basel became a closed body, the political and economic privileges of citizenship were reserved for the descendants of the families admitted in earlier centuries.²

The policy of Basel towards refugees has a modern parallel in the policy of Switzerland towards foreign nationals who wish to settle in the country, in particular wealthy individuals and qualified professionals. Switzerland has long pursued a selective immigration policy that favours those who bring capital, skills or employment. The taxation according to expenditure, the

so-called lump-sum taxation, which allows wealthy foreign nationals who do not work in Switzerland to be taxed on the basis of their living expenses, has been used by several cantons to attract wealthy residents. Both Basel cantons abolished it by popular vote in the years from 2012, while other cantons retain it.³ The admission of qualified professionals from outside the European Union is subject to quotas and to proof of the need for their skills. The historical policy of Basel, which admitted refugees who brought capital and industries and excluded those who might compete with established interests, is a distant ancestor of these modern policies.

1 Notes

1. On the admission policy of Basel towards refugees (temporary assistance, residence as Hintersassen, admission to citizenship against fees), see HLS, articles "Hintersassen" and "Bürgerrecht". To be verified. ↩
2. On the closing of the Basel citizenship in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see HLS, article "Bürgerrecht", section on Basel; Burckhardt, 1942. To be verified. ↩
3. On taxation according to expenditure (Besteuerung nach dem Aufwand, Art. 14 DBG, SR 642.11) and its abolition in the canton of Basel-Stadt (popular vote of 2012, effective from 2014), see the cantonal legislation; other cantons, notably Zurich, abolished it earlier (2009). To be verified. ↩

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