

The Basel Trading Company in the twentieth century

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The Basler Handelsgesellschaft continued to operate in West Africa through the twentieth century. The Union Trading Company became one of the principal trading and retail companies of Ghana, with stores in many towns. Later it diversified into manufacturing, the sale of vehicles and machinery and other activities. The company also operated in other West African countries and, in the second half of the century, expanded into other regions.¹

The independence of Ghana in 1957, the first sub-Saharan African colony to become independent, changed the conditions of business. The new state pursued policies of Africanisation and state control of the economy, and foreign trading companies faced increasing restrictions. The cocoa trade was placed under the control of a state marketing board. The Union Trading Company adapted to these conditions for several decades, but the economic crises of Ghana in the 1970s and 1980s and the transformation of the West African retail and trading sector reduced its role. The relationship between the company and the mission, which had been close in the nineteenth century, became looser as the company evolved into an ordinary commercial enterprise.

The history of the Basel Trading Company thus illustrates the trajectory of many European trading firms in Africa: from pioneering enterprises of the colonial period, closely connected with missions or colonial administrations, to commercial companies that had to adapt to independence, nationalisation, economic crises and the rise of African and Asian competitors. The companion volume on Geneva examines the modern commodity trading companies, many of them based in Geneva, which have replaced the old trading houses in the commerce of Africa.

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1 Notes

1. On the history of the Basler Handelsgesellschaft and the Union Trading Company in the twentieth century, see Wanner, 1959, and later company publications. To be verified. ↩

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