

The federal customs and the border economy

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The Federal Constitution of 1848 transferred customs to the Confederation. The cantons lost the tolls and duties that they had levied for centuries on goods crossing their borders. In return, they received compensation from the federal treasury for a transitional period. For Basel, which had derived significant revenue from the duties on goods passing through the city, the change was considerable. The *Kaufhaus*, whose origins Part A traced to the fourteenth century, lost its function as a cantonal customs house. In its place, the federal customs administration established its offices at the border crossings and railway stations of the city.¹

The federal customs created a single Swiss market without internal duties. Basel merchants could now sell their goods throughout the country without paying cantonal tolls, while foreign goods entering Switzerland paid a single federal duty at the border. The customs tariff of the Confederation was moderate in the nineteenth century, reflecting the liberal convictions of the federal elite and the export interests of Swiss industry. Since Switzerland had few raw materials and a small domestic market, its industries depended on imports of raw materials and on exports of finished goods, both of which favoured low tariffs.

Basel became the most important customs station of Switzerland. A large share of Swiss imports from Germany, France, the Netherlands and Belgium, and of Swiss exports to these countries, passed through its railway stations and, later, its Rhine port. The customs officials of Basel processed declarations, collected duties, inspected goods and combated smuggling. The forwarding companies of the city acted as customs agents for importers and exporters. Among the Basel business community, knowledge of customs law and procedures became a speciality.

The modern Swiss customs administration, renamed the Federal Office for Customs and Border Security in 2022, remains a major presence in Basel.²

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Its tasks have expanded beyond the collection of duties to include the enforcement of export controls, sanctions, the control of cultural property, the protection of intellectual property at the border and the fight against smuggling and money laundering through the cross-border transport of cash. Part H examines these tasks in the trinational context.

1 Notes

1. On the transfer of customs to the Confederation by the Federal Constitution of 1848 and the compensation paid to the cantons for their lost customs revenues, see HLS, article "Zölle". To be verified. ↩
2. On the reorganisation of the Federal Customs Administration into the Federal Office for Customs and Border Security (FOCBS, BAZG) as of 1 January 2022, see the publications of the FOCBS. To be verified. ↩

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