

The First World War at the border

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The First World War placed Basel on the edge of a front line. From the autumn of 1914, the Western Front ran through the Sundgau, a few kilometres from the Swiss border near Basel. In the city itself, the sounds of artillery could be heard. The Swiss army mobilised to defend the neutrality of the country and guarded the border around Basel. As refugees, deserters and wounded soldiers crossed into Switzerland, the city became a place of exchange for prisoners of war and of humanitarian activity.¹

The war disrupted the economy of Basel. Imports of raw materials and exports of finished goods became difficult as the belligerents imposed blockades and controls. Inflation, meanwhile, eroded wages. The chemical industry, however, profited from the war. The German dye industry, which had dominated the world market before 1914, was cut off from its customers in the Allied and neutral countries. The Basel companies filled the gap by supplying dyes and pharmaceuticals to France, Britain, the United States and other markets, with profits that rose sharply.² Chapter II returns to this development.

The trade of a neutral country with belligerents raised questions that the belligerents resolved by imposing controls. The Allied powers, concerned that goods imported into Switzerland might be re-exported to Germany, required Switzerland to establish a supervisory body, the Société Suisse de Surveillance Économique, founded in 1915, which controlled imports from the Allied countries and guaranteed that they would not be re-exported to the Central Powers. Germany imposed similar requirements through another body, the Schweizerische Treuhandstelle.³

The SSS and the Treuhandstelle are early examples of the end-use control that modern export control and sanctions regimes require. A Swiss importer who received goods from France had to guarantee that they would be used in Switzerland and not passed on to Germany, with the supervisory body verifying compliance. The modern end-use certificates

required for the export of dual-use goods and the prohibition of circumvention in sanctions law pursue the same purpose. The practitioner who advises on export control today works within a tradition that began, for Switzerland, with the supervisory bodies imposed by the belligerents of the First World War. Part H examines the modern law.

1 Notes

1. On Basel during the First World War (front line in the Sundgau, mobilisation of the Swiss army, refugees, exchange of wounded prisoners), see HLS, article "Erster Weltkrieg". To be verified. ↩
2. On the effects of the First World War on the Basel chemical industry, which replaced German dyes in Allied and neutral markets, see the literature on the history of the Basel chemical industry. To be verified. ↩
3. On the Société Suisse de Surveillance Économique (SSS, 1915) and the Schweizerische Treuhandstelle (STS), which controlled the use of imports from the Allied and Central Powers respectively during the First World War, see HLS, articles "Société Suisse de Surveillance Economique" and "Treuhandstelle". To be verified. ↩

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