

The modern city of immigrants

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Basel has remained a city of immigrants. In the nineteenth century, workers from the Black Forest, Alsace and the Swiss countryside came to work in its factories, while entrepreneurs from Germany and France founded several of its chemical companies. In the twentieth century, workers from Italy, Spain, Portugal, Yugoslavia and Turkey came to work in its industries. Scientists, managers and specialists from all over the world came to work in its pharmaceutical companies and at the Bank for International Settlements. Today, more than a third of the population of the canton of Basel-Stadt holds a foreign nationality, with many more having a migrant background.¹

The pharmaceutical industry of Basel depends on the recruitment of highly qualified specialists from abroad, which is why the free movement of persons with the European Union, in force since 2002, has been essential to its growth. The Swiss debate on immigration, which led to the popular initiative against mass immigration adopted in 2014 and to the rejection of the initiative to terminate the free movement of persons in 2020, has been followed closely by the Basel companies, which have argued that their competitiveness depends on access to talent.² Part K examines the relationship between Switzerland and the European Union and its significance for the Basel economy.

The history of the refugees of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is thus part of a continuous history of immigration that has shaped Basel. Although the city has always needed newcomers, it has always been ambivalent about them, welcoming them when they brought capital and skills, restricting their admission when they threatened established interests. This ambivalence, which the policy of the council towards the refugees and the conflict over the engine loom illustrate, remains characteristic of the Swiss attitude to immigration.

1 Notes

1. On the share of foreign nationals in the population of the canton of Basel-Stadt (more than one third), see the statistics of the Statistisches Amt Basel-Stadt. Figure to be verified for the current year. ↩
2. Popular initiative "Against mass immigration", adopted on 9 February 2014 (Art. 121a Federal Constitution); popular initiative "For moderate immigration (Limitation initiative)", rejected on 27 September 2020. To be verified. ↩

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