

The Rhine as a resource and a sewer

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The chemical industry of Basel used the Rhine in two ways. It drew large quantities of water from the river for its production processes, for cooling and for washing, before discharging its waste water, containing residues of chemicals, back into the river. For most of its history, the industry treated the Rhine as a free resource and a free sewer. The waste of the Basel factories flowed downstream to Alsace, Baden, the Palatinate, Hesse, the Rhineland and the Netherlands, where it mixed with the waste of the German and French industries along the river.¹

The pollution of the Rhine became a problem of international concern in the twentieth century, when the river became one of the most polluted in Europe. Its salmon, once abundant, disappeared. Its water, used for drinking by millions of people in the Netherlands and Germany, required increasingly costly treatment. In 1950, the riparian states founded the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine to coordinate their efforts. In 1963 they concluded the Bern Convention on the commission.² The Rhine chemicals convention of 1976 required the reduction of discharges of certain dangerous substances.

The Basel chemical companies built waste water treatment plants in the 1970s and 1980s, under the pressure of Swiss and international regulation. The fire at Schweizerhalle in 1986, which Part G examines, led to the Rhine Action Programme and a radical improvement in the protection of the river. By the early twenty-first century, the water quality of the Rhine had improved considerably. Salmon were then reintroduced into the river. The history of the Rhine and the Basel chemical industry shows how an industry's environmental costs, borne for a long time by others, were gradually internalised through regulation, liability and public pressure.

For the financial centre, environmental liabilities became a factor in the valuation of companies, the assessment of credit risk and the pricing of insurance. The contaminated sites that the chemical industry left in Basel

and the region, among them landfills of chemical waste in Alsace and Baden, required costly remediation, for which the companies made provisions in their accounts. The question of who bears the costs of historical pollution, the companies, their insurers, the public or the owners of the land, has been the subject of negotiations and litigation in Switzerland, France and Germany.³

1 Notes

1. On the discharge of industrial waste water by the Basel chemical industry into the Rhine and the pollution of the river in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see the literature on the environmental history of the Rhine. To be verified. ↩
2. On the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine (ICPR), founded in 1950, and the Convention of Bern of 29 April 1963, replaced by the Convention on the Protection of the Rhine of 12 April 1999 (SR 0.814.284), see the publications of the ICPR. To be verified. ↩
3. On the chemical waste landfills of the Basel chemical industry in the trinational region (e.g. Bonfol in the canton of Jura, landfills in Alsace and Baden) and their remediation financed by the companies, see the reports of the companies and the cantonal authorities. To be verified. ↩

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