

The Swiss Central Railway

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The Swiss railway network was built in the 1850s by private companies under concessions granted by the cantons, under the Federal Railway Act of 1852, which left the construction and operation of railways to private enterprise.¹ One of the most important companies was the Swiss Central Railway, the *Schweizerische Centralbahn*, founded in Basel in 1852 with the support of Basel capital and the participation of French and other foreign investors. Its purpose was to connect Basel with the Swiss plateau through the Jura and to build a north–south axis through central Switzerland towards the Alps.²

The Central Railway opened its first line from Basel to Liestal in 1854. The decisive obstacle was the Jura. The company built the Hauenstein tunnel, more than two and a half kilometres long, between Läufelfingen and Trimbach, which was one of the longest railway tunnels of its time. During construction, in May 1857, a fire in a ventilation shaft caused a collapse that killed dozens of workers, one of the worst disasters in Swiss railway construction.³ The tunnel opened in 1858 and connected Basel with Olten, which became the hub of the Swiss railway network.

The Central Railway built its main station in Basel outside the old walls, on the site of today's main railway station, Basel SBB. Within a few decades, the railway transformed the city. Its walls were demolished in the second half of the nineteenth century to make room for new districts. Factories were built near the railway lines, in particular in the northern districts of the left bank and in Kleinbasel. The population grew rapidly, from about 25,000 at the time of the separation to more than 100,000 by the end of the century, as workers from the Swiss countryside, Baden and Alsace came to work in the new industries.⁴

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1 Notes

1. Federal Act of 28 July 1852 on the Construction and Operation of Railways in the Territory of the Confederation, which left railway construction to private companies under cantonal concessions. To be verified. ↩
2. On the Swiss Central Railway (Schweizerische Centralbahn, SCB), founded in Basel in 1852/1853, its financing and its network, see HLS, article "Schweizerische Centralbahn". To be verified. ↩
3. On the Hauenstein tunnel of the Swiss Central Railway (about 2.5 km, opened 1858) and the disaster of 28 May 1857, in which some 63 workers died, see HLS, article "Hauenstein". Figures to be verified. ↩
4. On the population growth of the city of Basel in the nineteenth century (from about 25,000 around 1835 to over 100,000 around 1900), see the historical statistics of the Statistisches Amt Basel-Stadt. Figures to be verified. ↩

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