

The Swiss flag at sea

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The Rhine connects Switzerland with the seaports, while the oceans beyond are the domain of the Swiss maritime fleet. Switzerland created a merchant fleet under its own flag during the Second World War, when the country needed ships to bring food and raw materials through the blockade. The legal basis was first an emergency ordinance of 1941 and later the Maritime Navigation Act of 1953, which allows ships under the Swiss flag to be registered in Basel, the port of registry for the Swiss high seas fleet.¹ The ships of the fleet have never seen Basel, since no seagoing vessel can reach the city, yet the register in Basel symbolises the link between the river port and the oceans.

To secure the existence of a fleet that could be requisitioned in a crisis, the Confederation supported Swiss shipowners with federal guarantees for ship loans. The guarantees allowed the owners to obtain bank financing on favourable terms, with the federal government standing behind the lenders. The system worked for decades without major losses. After the shipping crisis that followed 2008, several owners whose ships were financed with federal guarantees ran into difficulties. Between 2015 and 2017 the Confederation had to honour guarantees for a number of ships, incurring losses that were reported at well over two hundred million francs.²

The losses led to parliamentary investigations into the supervision of the guarantee programme and to the decision not to grant new guarantees. The reports of the oversight bodies criticised the risk management of the federal administration and the concentration of guaranteed loans on a small number of owners.³ The number of ships under the Swiss flag has since declined considerably. Meanwhile, the policy debate has shifted towards the question of whether a national fleet remains necessary for the security of supply when Swiss companies, among them one of the largest

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container lines of the world with its headquarters in Geneva, control large fleets under foreign flags.⁴

The Rhine fleet follows separate rules. Vessels owned by Swiss companies and registered in Switzerland navigate on the Rhine under the Swiss flag. Basel itself has been home to several Rhine shipping companies since the early twentieth century. Because many of these companies merged with or were acquired by international logistics groups over time, the number of Rhine vessels under the Swiss flag has fallen. The Swiss Rhine fleet nonetheless retains a role in the supply of the country, in particular for mineral oil and containers.⁵

1 Notes

1. On the creation of the Swiss maritime fleet under the emergency law of 1941 and the Federal Act of 23 September 1953 on Maritime Navigation under the Swiss Flag (SR 747.30), see HLS, article "Hochseeschifffahrt", and the publications of the Swiss Maritime Navigation Office. To be verified. ↩
2. On the losses of the Confederation from guarantees for ships under the Swiss flag, which according to the reports of the Federal Council and the Swiss Federal Audit Office amounted to roughly CHF 215 million by 2017, and on the inquiry of the Control Committees of the Federal Assembly, see the reports of the Federal Council, the SFAO and the parliamentary oversight committees. Figures to be verified. ↩
3. On the findings of the Control Committees of the Federal Assembly regarding the management of the ship guarantees by the Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research and the Federal Office for National Economic Supply, and the decision to discontinue the guarantee programme, see the reports of the Control Committees (around 2018/2019). Status to be verified. ↩
4. On the decline of the Swiss-flagged fleet and the debate on its strategic necessity, see the publications of FONES and the Swiss Maritime Navigation Office. Status to be verified. ↩

5. On the Swiss Rhine fleet and the Rhine shipping companies based in Basel, see the publications of the Swiss Rhine Ports, the industry association Schweizerische Vereinigung für Schifffahrt und Hafenwirtschaft (SVS) and HLS, article "Rheinschifffahrt". To be verified. ↩

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