

The war at the border of Basel

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The war came close to Basel. When the German army conquered France in 1940, Basel was surrounded by German-controlled territory on all sides except the Swiss. The city prepared for a possible invasion. The Swiss army's strategy of the national redoubt, which concentrated the defence in the Alps, meant that Basel, on the northern border, would not be defended in depth in case of a German attack. Some wealthy families moved their valuables and documents to safer places in central Switzerland. Companies, for their part, prepared contingency plans.¹

The chemical companies of Basel, in particular, prepared for the possibility of an invasion. Some of them transferred assets, patents and management functions to their subsidiaries in the United States and Britain, so that they could continue to operate if Switzerland were occupied. Roche transferred the management of its business outside Europe to its subsidiary in the United States in 1940. These arrangements, which allowed the companies to protect their assets against the risk of occupation, anticipated the modern practices of business continuity planning and of the structuring of multinational groups to protect against political risk.²

In March 1945, American bombers bombed Basel by mistake, along with Zurich, killing several people and damaging the freight railway station.³ The bombing was one of several incidents in which Allied aircraft bombed Swiss territory by mistake during the war, incidents for which the United States paid compensation. Two months later, the war in Europe ended, and Basel emerged intact, its industries, banks and institutions unharmed.

1 Notes

1. On the situation of Basel during the Second World War, including the strategy of the national redoubt and the preparations of companies

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and families for a possible invasion, see HLS, article "Zweiter Weltkrieg", and the local literature. To be verified. ↩

2. On the measures taken by the Basel chemical companies in 1940 to protect their foreign assets and continue operations in case of an occupation of Switzerland, including the transfer of management functions to US subsidiaries (e.g. Roche), see the histories of the companies and the study of the Independent Commission of Experts on the chemical industry (2001). To be verified. ↩
3. On the mistaken bombing of Basel and Zurich by American aircraft on 4 March 1945, see HLS, article "Bombardierungen". To be verified. ↩

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