

Post-war expansion and the one-company strategy (1946–2000)

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The Second World War ended with a Europe divided and many markets closed to private reinsurers. Haueter notes that after 1945 a large part of the world was closed for business, as socialist and communist regimes took power and many countries nationalised reinsurance or created state reinsurers with compulsory cessions. Swiss Re nevertheless recovered quickly. The HLS emphasises the speed of the post-war recovery despite the political uncertainty of the period. Because the German competitors had lost much of their foreign business for the second time in a generation, the Zurich company emerged in a strong relative position.¹

The United States became the focus of expansion. In 1948 Swiss Re established the Swiss Reinsurance Company Corporation in New York, the base of a global service network. During the 1950s the company extended its office network to South Africa, Canada, Australia and Asia. Technology followed the business. In 1960 the company put an IBM 650 computer into service. In the same year the company founded the Swiss Insurance Training Centre, whose courses attracted participants from more than eighty countries during its first twenty-five years. The HLS describes the institution as a foundation that provided free training for insurance professionals. Such training served commercial as well as idealistic purposes: an insurer in Lagos or Manila whose staff had been trained on the shores of Lake Zurich was likely to look to Swiss Re for its reinsurance.²

The year 1968 brought two important changes. Swiss Re separated from its British associate, which continued as Mercantile & General Reinsurance. In the same year the company established an economics department, whose research publication *sigma* has since become a reference for the entire industry. In 1979 Swiss Re published research on ecological perils, an early sign of the attention the company would later devote to climate change.

During the 1980s it expanded into risk management services and acquired specialised firms in captive management and risk engineering.³

At the same time Swiss Re built up a portfolio of direct insurance holdings. In 1988 it acquired the Union Rückversicherungs-Gesellschaft of Zurich together with a majority stake in the Italian insurer Lloyd Adriatico.⁴ The combination of reinsurance with direct insurance was a strategy that several large reinsurers pursued in these years, with the argument that the group would benefit from diversification and from knowledge of the primary markets. It carried the risk of a conflict of interest, since a reinsurer that competed with its own clients in their home markets might lose their confidence.

Hurricane Andrew, which struck Florida in August 1992, marked the beginning of a new phase. The storm caused property claims of 15.5 billion dollars and led to the failure of thirteen American insurers in 1992 and 1993. It revealed that the industry had underestimated the potential size of catastrophe losses in heavily built-up coastal areas. Swiss Re responded by developing catastrophe bonds and other insurance-linked securities and by investing in the new Bermuda reinsurer PartnerRe.⁵

In 1994 the company decided on a strategic reorientation. It would concentrate on reinsurance, grow by acquiring medium-sized competitors and sell its direct insurance holdings. Swiss Re's own history speaks of a global "one-company" approach, in which group companies such as Union Re were integrated into a single organisation. In 1995 the company began a systematic expansion of its life and health reinsurance in Europe and the United States. In 1996 it reacquired the Mercantile & General Re Group, the British business from which it had separated almost thirty years earlier. In 1998 Swiss Re bought the American Life Re Corporation for 1.8 billion dollars. The HLS records the change of name to Swiss Re in 1999, which reflected the brand under which the company had long been known internationally. By the end of the century the company had become a pure reinsurer with global reach, a strong life and health franchise and a growing capital markets business.⁶

1 Notes

1. Haueter, A History of Insurance, https://www.swissre.com/dam/jcr:33dbf3af-5be9-468d-a624-ed86ceda7ef8/150_history_of_insurance.2025-06-26-15-17-35.pdf. Feldmann, "Schweizerische Rückversicherungs-Gesellschaft", HLS, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/articles/041818/2025-09-23/>. ↩

2. Feldmann, “Schweizerische Rückversicherungs-Gesellschaft”, HLS, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/articles/041818/2025-09-23/>. Swiss Re, “The Swiss Re Journey”, <https://www.swissre.com/about-us/history.html>. ↩
3. Reference for Business, “Swiss Reinsurance Company”, <https://www.referenceforbusiness.com/history2/0/Swiss-Reinsurance-Company-Schweizerische-R-ckversicherungs-Gesellschaft.html>. Swiss Re, “The Swiss Re Journey”, <https://www.swissre.com/about-us/history.html>. ↩
4. Reference for Business, “Swiss Reinsurance Company”, <https://www.referenceforbusiness.com/history2/0/Swiss-Reinsurance-Company-Schweizerische-R-ckversicherungs-Gesellschaft.html>. ↩
5. Association of Bermuda Insurers and Reinsurers (ABIR), “World’s climate risk capital: a natural progression for Bermuda”, 22 June 2020, <https://business.abir.bm/news/Details/world-s-climate-risk-capital-a-natural-progression-for-bermuda-26274>. Swiss Re, “The Swiss Re Journey”, <https://www.swissre.com/about-us/history.html>. Insurance-linked securities are treated in Chapter V of this Part. ↩
6. Swiss Re, “The Swiss Re Journey”, <https://www.swissre.com/about-us/history.html>. Reference for Business, “Swiss Reinsurance Company”, <https://www.referenceforbusiness.com/history2/0/Swiss-Reinsurance-Company-Schweizerische-R-ckversicherungs-Gesellschaft.html>. The same source records Walter Kielholz as chief executive from 1997. Feldmann, “Schweizerische Rückversicherungs-Gesellschaft”, HLS, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/articles/041818/2025-09-23/>. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/zurich-post-war-expansion-and-the-one-company-strategy-19462000