

Société Suisse de Surveillance Economique (SSS)

By [Florian Weber](#)

Summary

The privately organized SSS existed from October 1915 to July 1919 to prevent Swiss companies from forwarding goods and raw materials produced by the Entente to the Central Powers. The SSS grew from an international agreement between the governments of Switzerland, France, Great Britain, Italy, and the United States after December 1917. The surveillance of Swiss foreign trade stopped in July 1919.

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Origins

The outbreak of World War I directly led to an intense trade conflict between the belligerent nations. Both sides began to install bans on imports and exports to weaken the enemy's economy.¹ Although all belligerent nations respected [Swiss neutrality](#), the Entente tried to prevent Swiss traders from exporting goods to the Central Powers.

To achieve their ambition, the allied nations installed agents at their respective legations and consulates. These agents identified [Swiss companies](#) that transferred imported allied goods to [Germany](#) or [Austria-Hungary](#) and put them on an unofficial blacklist. They also acted preemptively, conceding the import of allied goods to [Switzerland](#) only if the company voluntarily abstained from trading with the Central Powers. But soon the Allied Powers wished to make the blockade system more effective and powerful and began pressing for a fully developed system to control Swiss foreign trade. The incomplete regime also led to discontent on the part of the Swiss mercantile community, which too pressed for a political agreement. The case of Holland served as a role model, where a privately organized trust, the [Nederlandsche Overzee Trust Maatschappij](#) (Netherlands Overseas Trust, or NOT), was set up already in late 1914. The trust controlled the import and export of all goods to [The](#)

[Netherlands](#), thereby preventing the re-export of Allied goods to the Central Powers. Similar control regimes had been established in [Denmark](#), [Sweden](#), and [Norway](#) in the first half of 1915. British diplomat Sir [Francis Oppenheimer \(1870-1961\)](#) led the negotiations with The Netherlands. Oppenheimer also worked as the representative of the Entente during the negotiations with Switzerland.

In April 1915, Oppenheimer started talks with [Alfred Frey \(1859-1924\)](#), a member of the Swiss business federation and a member of parliament, over a similar agreement between the Swiss federation and the Allies in Berne. After fruitless talks, negotiations were taken up again in summer 1915. Within three months an agreement could be arranged, which led to the establishment of the SSS as an inter-Ally control system for the import and export of Allied goods to Switzerland. For its interference with Swiss sovereignty it soon commonly became known as "*Souveraineté Suisse suspendue*".

Schweizerische Treuhandstelle (STS) conducted the control of imports from the Central Powers. The STS was a separate organization and less sophisticated than the SSS. Since the Central Powers lacked the vast resources of the Allies, it didn't develop such an elaborate blockade policy. Therefore, the *Treuhandstelle* was not as rigorous in its character and mainly prevented the export of German war products.

Purpose and Function

The statutes of the SSS describe the purpose of the organization as representing and favouring the national economic interests of Switzerland in a system of guaranteed supervision of allied exports.

The constituent meeting of the SSS was held in October 1915 and one month later it was officially enlisted in the Swiss commercial register. The SSS was legally constructed as a private company according to Swiss law, but a member of the Swiss government presided over it. Its directorate consisted of three members of parliament, who represented powerful financial, commercial, and industrial interests. In contrast with the Dutch NOT, which was genuinely private, the SSS was therefore rightly regarded as a semi-official organization. Finally, while the NOT supervised the import of both Allied and German goods, the SSS dealt only with Allied imports since the German authorities did not want to join an "English organization". The SSS monopolized the import of the Allied goods before they could pass the Swiss frontier. This applied to all goods that were on the Allies' import list of articles. This list was continually extended since the intensification of war led to new agreements between the Allied and Swiss governments. These treaties gradually limited free trade movements and brought about a controlling regime that brought more and more products and goods under the regime of the SSS.

After receiving the import goods, the SSS transferred them to so-called syndicates. These import organizations were organized by branch of trade or branch of industry. In this way the Swiss economy was divided into fifty-one import syndicates that had to guarantee to the SSS that they would not breach its rules of export prohibition. The SSS also reserved the right to punish any infringement with a fine. By 1918, about forty Swiss companies were convicted and fined for illegally exporting Allied goods to the Central Powers.

To complete its work, the SSS opened several offices within Switzerland and established agencies in Paris, London, and Rome. The SSS office in Washington D.C. began its operation in 1917 and was part of the Swiss legation. Furthermore, the SSS opened bureaus in the French ports of Sète, Marseille, Bordeaux, and Le Havre as well as in Italian Genova. To run its activities the SSS employed about 500 members of staff at its height in 1918. Even though Switzerland lost its "*Wirtschaftsfreiheit*", as Heinz Ochsenbein put it, the SSS allowed for a continued functioning of the Swiss economy. Although Switzerland's GDP sank drastically in the last two years of the war, the establishment of the SSS prevented it from totally breaking down.

Closure and Dissolution

The international trade conflict between the belligerents did not stop altogether with the end of the war. For this reason, the Allied control regime was not dissolved immediately. In February 1919, a new treaty between Switzerland and the [United States](#), and a month later with [France](#), brought some economic relief to the Swiss republic.

But it was not until the signing of the [Treaty of Versailles](#), that the Allied governments accepted an end to restrictions on Swiss trade. On 12 July 12 1919 the governments of [France](#), [Great Britain](#), and the United States declared in a joint statement that they would release all restrictions on Swiss trade connected to the blockade. The transition back to a peacetime economy was very slow and the cutback of many wartime governmental regulations and interventions proved to be difficult and continued well into the 1920s. By this time, the laissez- faire pre-war era was definitely over.

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Notes

1. For an overview on the Allied blockade policy, see: Kramer, Alan: Blockade and economic warfare, in: Winter, Jay (ed.): The Cambridge History of the First World War, Cambridge 2014, pp. 460-490. [↑](#)

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- [Le Délégué du Conseil fédéral pour les Questions économiques et industrielles, H. Heer, aux Délégués alliés de la Commission permanente interalliée des Contingents à Berne, 19 November 1918 \(Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv\) \(Primary Source\)](#)

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