

Cotton and the Swiss textile industry

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The cotton industry, which became the leading industry of eastern Switzerland in the nineteenth century, depended on raw cotton produced in large part by enslaved labour in the southern United States. Before the American Civil War, the cotton plantations of the American South supplied the majority of the raw cotton used by the textile industries of Europe, including the spinning and weaving mills of Zurich, St Gallen, Glarus and Aargau. The Basel merchants traded in raw cotton, and the Basel textile industry, although dominated by silk, also processed cotton.¹

The American Civil War of 1861 to 1865 interrupted the supply of American cotton and caused a crisis in the European textile industries, the so-called cotton famine. Hard hit, the Swiss textile industry sought alternative sources in Egypt, India and Brazil. The abolition of slavery in the United States after the war changed the conditions of cotton production but did not end the dependence of the European textile industry on cotton produced under harsh conditions.

The dependence of the Swiss textile industry on slave-grown cotton illustrates a pattern that has become central to the modern debate on supply chains: a manufacturer or trader in one country depends on raw materials produced in another country under conditions that would be unlawful in his own. The question of the responsibility of the manufacturer and the trader for the conditions of production, which the abolitionists of the nineteenth century raised, is the question that modern supply chain legislation seeks to answer.

1 Notes

1. On the dependence of the Swiss cotton industry on raw cotton from the southern United States before 1861, and the cotton crisis during the American Civil War, see the literature on Swiss industrial history. To be verified. ↩

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