

Crises and competition

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The history of the Basel ribbon industry was punctuated by crises. The wars of the French Revolution and of Napoleon disrupted trade with France and the rest of Europe. The Continental System, the blockade that Napoleon imposed on British trade from 1806, closed some markets and opened opportunities for smuggling. The post-war depression of the late 1810s, the protectionism of France and the German states, and the competition of Saint-Étienne, Krefeld and Coventry exposed the Basel industry to recurrent difficulties.¹

The Zollverein, the German customs union founded in 1834, created a large protected market that favoured German producers and imposed duties on Swiss goods. The French tariffs remained high. The American market, which had absorbed much of Basel's production, fluctuated with the American economy and its tariff policy, and the American Civil War of 1861 to 1865 caused a severe crisis. In the late nineteenth century, the changes in fashion, which reduced the use of ribbons, and the competition of cheaper producers led to a long decline.

The Basel ribbon industry responded to these challenges in several ways. It shifted from home weaving to factory production, building mechanised mills in the city and the countryside from the mid-nineteenth century. It specialised in high-quality and novelty ribbons, in which design and quality counted more than price. It diversified into other products. And some of its capital moved into other industries, above all chemistry and banking. By the early twentieth century, ribbon weaving had become a minor industry in Basel. The last home weavers in the villages of Basel-Landschaft gave up their looms in the decades after the First World War.

1 Notes

1. On the crises of the Basel ribbon industry during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars and in the nineteenth century, see HLS, article "Posamenterei"; the literature on the history of the industry. To be verified. ↩

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