

Indiennes: Swiss textiles and the African trade

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The slave trade depended on trade goods that were exchanged for enslaved people on the coast of West Africa. The most important of these goods were textiles, in particular printed cotton fabrics known as *indiennes*, which imitated the printed cottons of India and were highly valued in Africa. The *indiennes* used in the slave trade were produced in France, England, the Netherlands and Switzerland. The Swiss production centres, above all Neuchâtel, Mulhouse, which was then an ally of the Swiss Confederation, and several places in eastern Switzerland, supplied large quantities to the slave-trading ports.¹

The *indiennes* industry of Neuchâtel was one of the largest in Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century. Its principal company, owned by the Pourtalès family, was one of the largest industrial enterprises of its time. The Mulhouse manufacturers, many of them from Protestant families connected with Basel, produced *indiennes* for the French market and for export. The Basel merchants traded in these goods and financed their production and sale.

The connection between the Swiss textile industry and the slave trade shows that Switzerland's involvement in the colonial economy extended beyond a few merchants who invested in slave ships, to the manufacturers who produced the goods used to buy enslaved people, the workers who produced them, the merchants who sold them and the bankers who financed them. The colonial economy was woven into the economic fabric of Switzerland, as it was into that of all the European countries that participated in the Atlantic trade.

1 Notes

1. On the production of printed cottons (indiennes) in Neuchâtel, Mulhouse and eastern Switzerland and their use as trade goods in the Atlantic slave trade, see David/Etemad/Schaufelbuehl, *La Suisse et l'esclavage des Noirs*, 2005. To be verified. ↩

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