

Napoleon, the Continental System and the border trade

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The wars of the French Revolution and of Napoleon had profound effects on the trade of Basel. From 1798, Switzerland was occupied by French troops and transformed into the Helvetic Republic, a satellite of France. In 1803, Napoleon's Act of Mediation restored a federal structure, but Switzerland remained under French influence until 1813. Basel, on the border of France, was drawn into the economic policies of the French Empire, above all the Continental System.

The Continental System, proclaimed by Napoleon in the Berlin Decree of 1806 and extended by the Milan Decree of 1807, prohibited the import of British goods into the territories under French control and allied with France. Its purpose was to ruin British trade and industry. Its effect was to create scarcity and high prices for colonial goods, cotton and manufactured products on the Continent, and to encourage smuggling on a massive scale.¹

Basel, located at the junction of France, the German states and Switzerland, became a centre of the smuggling trade. British goods and colonial products, cotton, sugar, coffee, tobacco and indigo, which reached the Continent through neutral or poorly controlled ports, were transported to Basel and smuggled across the French border. The profits were enormous, allowing several Basel merchant houses to make their fortunes in this trade. The French authorities attempted to control it, imposing inspections, confiscations and, in 1810, the Trianon tariff and the burning of seized British goods, but the smuggling continued until the collapse of the Continental System in 1813.

The fortunes made in the Napoleonic period contributed to the capital of the Basel merchant houses and banks of the nineteenth century. The merchant Christoph Merian-Forcart, whose son Christoph Merian would leave his fortune to the city of Basel, is said to have built a large part of his

wealth through trade in colonial goods during this period.² Chapter IV returns to the colonial dimension of this trade.

The border trade of the Napoleonic period illustrates a pattern that recurs in the history of Basel: the profitability of trade across borders that are closed or restricted by political decisions. Sanctions, embargoes and blockades create price differences that make circumvention profitable, which turns border cities into natural centres of circumvention. The modern sanctions regimes, which Switzerland applies under the Embargo Act, and the controls on the export of dual-use goods, which Part H examines, face the same problem that the French customs officers faced at the border of Basel in 1810.³

1 Notes

1. On the Continental System (Berlin Decree of 21 November 1806, Milan Decree of 17 December 1807) and its effects on Switzerland, including smuggling through Basel, see HLS, article "Kontinentalsperre". To be verified. ↩
2. On the fortune of the Merian-Forcart trading house and its origins in the trade in colonial goods during the Napoleonic period, see HLS, articles "Merian, Christoph" and "Merian"; the history of the Christoph Merian Stiftung. To be verified. ↩
3. Federal Act of 22 March 2002 on the Implementation of International Sanctions (Embargo Act, EmbA, SR 946.231); Goods Control Act of 13 December 1996 (GCA, SR 946.202). See Part H. To be verified. ↩

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