

The Huguenots and the Netherlanders

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The second and larger wave of refugees came from France and the Low Countries in the second half of the sixteenth century. The Wars of Religion in France, which began in 1562, drove thousands of Huguenots into exile, before the Massacre of St Bartholomew in August 1572 caused a mass flight. The Huguenots went mainly to Geneva, which became their principal refuge, but also to Basel, Bern, Lausanne, Strasbourg, the Palatinate and England. In the Low Countries, the repression of the Protestants by the Spanish authorities after 1567 and the reconquest of the southern provinces, culminating in the fall of Antwerp in 1585, drove tens of thousands of Protestants to the northern provinces, to England and to Germany and Switzerland.¹

The fall of Antwerp in 1585 was a turning point in the economic history of Europe. Antwerp had been the leading commercial and financial centre of northern Europe, which is why its merchants were among the most experienced in international trade and finance. Their emigration transferred capital, skills and networks to Amsterdam, which became the new centre of European trade and finance, and to many other cities, among them Frankfurt, Hamburg, Cologne, London and Basel. The Antwerp diaspora was one of the great transfers of human and financial capital in European history.

Several families that came to Basel from the Low Countries or from France, often after a stay in Frankfurt or another German city, became prominent in the following century. The Bernoulli family, which produced the mathematicians, came from Antwerp. The de Bary family came from Tournai. The Sarasin family came from Lorraine. The Battier family came from France. The Passavant family came from Burgundy. The Miville family came from the Franche-Comté.² These families brought experience of international trade, knowledge of French and Dutch, and connections with the Protestant merchant networks of Europe.

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The refugees from France and the Low Countries also introduced new branches of the textile industry. They brought techniques of silk weaving, of the production of ribbons, laces and trimmings, of dyeing and of the manufacture of stockings and other knitted goods. Basel, which had a traditional textile industry of wool and linen organised by the guilds, acquired through them the industries that would make its fortune in the following centuries.

1 Notes

1. On the Huguenot emigration after 1562 and 1572, and the emigration from the Southern Netherlands after 1567 and 1585, see the literature on the early modern Protestant diasporas. To be verified. ↩
2. On the origins of the Basel families of refugee origin (Bernoulli from Antwerp; de Bary from Tournai; Sarasin from Lorraine; Battier and Passavant from France/Burgundy; Miville from the Franche-Comté), see HLS, articles on the respective families. Origins and dates to be verified. ↩

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