

The Huguenots in Zurich and the protectionist reaction

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The second great wave of Protestant refugees reached Zurich after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. According to Keller, about 20,000 Huguenots passed through the city between 1683 and 1688, whose support cost the city more than 43,000 florins. Some of them introduced new branches, such as the knitting of stockings on frames, the printing of *indiennes* (printed cotton) and the production of taffeta, crêpon and damask. Salomon Negret from Nîmes became a major merchant with an estate of 300,000 francs, and the stocking business of the Bourguet brothers, also from Nîmes, grew from 41 hundredweight in 1690 to 170 hundredweight in 1694–1696.¹

The guilds reacted as they had a century earlier. After they had protested against the foreign competition in 1699, the council expelled the successful Huguenot entrepreneurs, giving them four months to liquidate their businesses. The grocers' guild declared that as long as trading refugees remained in the country, the citizens engaged in commerce would be plagued.² The Huguenot episode shows that the Zurich of 1700 still treated foreign entrepreneurs with the same mixture of welcome and protectionism that the Locarnese had experienced in 1555. The difference was that the descendants of the Locarnese now belonged to the protected citizenry.

1 Industrialization and the world market, 1820–1973

The industrial transformation of the silk industry began around 1820 to 1830, when Zurich entrepreneurs, who had long reserved their orders for urban weavers, set up factories around the city and in neighbouring cantons. Faced with protectionism in importing countries, the firms internationalized and established production in Germany, Italy, France, Russia and the United States. The Schwarzenbach of Thalwil employed

more than 10,000 people worldwide in 1904, and other houses such as the Gessner of Wädenswil, the Zwicky of Wallisellen and the Bodmer followed similar strategies. In 1866 the region exported silk fabrics worth 65 million francs to New York, Russia and the Orient, and production rose from 13.79 million metres in 1855 to 47.07 million metres in 1900.³

In the nineteenth century the silk industry became the most important industrial sector of the Canton of Zurich, and around 1900 the canton was one of the leading centres of European silk production, with sales offices in New York and St Petersburg.⁴ The industry declined after the world economic crisis of 1929 and definitively after the oil crisis of 1973. The last two silk factories in the canton closed in 2012.⁵ The silk industry had nevertheless done its historical work. It had accumulated the capital, created the commercial networks and trained the merchants who built Zurich's banks, insurance companies and industrial enterprises in the nineteenth century.

2 Notes

1. Keller, "Der Einfluss der Hugenotten" (above): about 20,000 Huguenots passing through Zurich in 1683–1688, more than 43,000 florins spent on their support; Salomon Negret and the Bourguet brothers of Nîmes. ↩
2. Keller, "Der Einfluss der Hugenotten" (above), quoting the grocers' guild: "so lang handlend refugierte im Land bleibend, so lang wird hiesigs negotirende burgerschaft geplagt sein." ↩
3. Mottu-Weber, "Soierie" (above), on the factories of 1820–1830, the internationalization of the firms, the Schwarzenbach (more than 10,000 employees in 1904), the exports of 1866 and the production figures of 1855 and 1900. ↩
4. Kanton Zürich, media release of 20 June 2013 (above); SRF, "Historischer Rückblick: Wie Zürich dank Seide Weltruhm erlangte", 12 December 2020, <https://www.srf.ch/news/schweiz/historischer-rueckblick-wie-zuerich-dank-seide-weltruhm-erlangte> (consulted 4 October 2026). ↩

5. Kanton Zürich, media release of 20 June 2013 (above), on the decline after 1929 and 1973; SRF (above), on the closure of the last two silk factories in 2012. ↩

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