

Lyon against Geneva: Louis XI's measures of 1462–1463 and the decline of the Geneva fairs

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In 1462 and 1463 Louis XI combined trade bans, fines and generous privileges to draw the commerce of Geneva's medieval fairs towards Lyon. The episode ranks among the earliest documented cases of a state waging economic war on a foreign marketplace. Its instruments have recognisable counterparts in the sanctions practice that Geneva's banks and traders handle today.

1 Geneva's fairs before the conflict

The Historical Dictionary of Switzerland (Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse, DHS) records that they are mentioned from the middle of the thirteenth century and reached their peak around 1450. They were held four times a year, at Epiphany, Easter, St Peter in Chains on 1 August and All Saints, and lasted seven, then ten and finally fifteen days each. Italian merchants, many of them bankers, dominated the fairs in the fifteenth century. The French-language Wikipedia article on the history of Geneva dates the opening of a Medici branch in the city to 1424.

Lyon was a royal project designed to capture flows that passed through foreign cities. In 1420 the dauphin Charles, the future Charles VII, granted the city two free fairs a year and extended to their visitors the privileges once enjoyed at the fairs of Champagne and Brie, as the French-language Wikipedia article on the fairs of Lyon reports. The Archives municipales de Lyon record that Charles VII granted three two-day fairs in 1444. Privileges alone could not shift established flows, since merchants kept their hosts, correspondents and settlement dates in Geneva while its fairs worked well.

2 The ordinance of 1462

Louis XI acceded in 1461 and treated the economy as an instrument of power. The Association pour l'histoire de l'administration des douanes notes that he made wide use of customs measures and waged economic conflicts against Geneva, Venice and Antwerp. When he confirmed the Lyon fairs in 1462, he attached provisions aimed directly at the competing city. According to the Archives municipales de Lyon, French merchants were forbidden to attend the Geneva fairs, while foreign merchants were forbidden to cross French territory to reach them, on pain of confiscation and an arbitrary fine.

According to the same source, Bernese merchants passing through the kingdom could neither buy nor sell there, while Genoese merchants who broke the orders had to pay a fine of 10,000 livres. Because the transit ban cut the roads linking Geneva with the Iberian Peninsula and south-western France, the ordinance struck at the geography of the fairs as much as at their clientele.

3 The letters patent of 8 March 1463

The second half of the policy took the form of attraction. By letters patent of 8 March 1463, as the Archives municipales de Lyon describe them, Louis XI raised the number of Lyon fairs to four and extended each from three to fifteen days, which gave the city sixty fair days a year. Merchants attending them were placed under royal safeguard and exempted from the droit d'aubaine. The seneschal became keeper and conservator of the fairs, with jurisdiction over all commercial disputes. The archives state that the new arrangement was intended to counter Genevan influence.

The exemption from the droit d'aubaine matters to anyone who advises private clients. Under this rule the French king could take the property of foreigners who died on his territory. For a foreign merchant staying in Lyon with goods and receivables, death during a fair could therefore deprive heirs and partners of much of the estate. The exemption guaranteed orderly succession, an early form of the inheritance security that financial centres still hold out to an international clientele.

Justice was reorganised as well. According to the French-language Wikipedia article on the fairs of Lyon, the burghers, unhappy that a royal officer held fair jurisdiction, obtained the right to elect a judge of their own. Jean Grant, lieutenant of the seneschal and doctor of law, was the first to be elected prud'homme to judge commercial cases, which marks the origin of the tribunal de la Conservation.

4 Why Geneva lost its fairs

Geneva had neither an army to reopen the roads nor the sovereignty to match Lyon's privileges, so its response was diplomatic. The Archives d'État de Genève, which call this the first relationship between Geneva and the Swiss, note that the Swiss intervened on the city's behalf in 1462 because they had no interest in seeing the route abandoned. That support rested on the tolls the cantons levied along the route. Savoy's position was more ambiguous, since the DHS records that Louis XI had married Charlotte of Savoy, daughter of Duke Louis, in 1451.

The royal ordinance was the trigger of a longer decline. The DHS lists several causes: the privileges granted to Lyon from 1462, competition from other commercial centres, the retreat of the luxury trade in favour of everyday goods, the Burgundian Wars in which Geneva sided with the duke and the troubles of the Reformation. After the Swiss victories in the Burgundian Wars of 1474–1477, the Archives d'État de Genève report, the Confederates demanded a ransom of 26,000 Rhine florins. To complete the sum Geneva had to borrow 3,500 écus of the king of France from the Medici bank in Lyon.

That loan reflects a shift which Raymond de Roover's history of the Medici bank, published in 1963, places in the mid-1460s, when the Medici moved their branch from Geneva to Lyon. The DHS entry on the commune of Geneva adds that the great Florentine houses left the city after Louis XI favoured Lyon, while its entry on fairs states that the great fairs disappeared around 1550. The decline therefore stretched over decades, with the royal decision as its trigger.

5 The instruments then and now

The ban on the king's subjects resembles modern sanctions aimed at persons, sectors or countries. Its companion, the transit ban, resembles restrictions on access to payment, shipping and insurance infrastructure. The fine on Genoese merchants rested on a territorial nexus: foreigners who were not the king's subjects were punished because they had used his territory to reach Geneva. Contemporary secondary sanctions follow a comparable logic when a state reaches foreign banks whose transactions pass through a clearing system in its currency.

The United States Department of Justice announced on 30 June 2014 that BNP Paribas would plead guilty and pay penalties of 8.9736 billion dollars for transactions carried out between 2004 and 2012 on behalf of Sudanese, Iranian and Cuban entities. Switzerland applies United Nations sanctions

and, under the Embargo Act (EmbA) of 22 March 2002, may adopt those of its main trading partners, with the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO) in charge of enforcement. The comparison has limits, because modern sanctions rest on statutory bases, procedures and rights of appeal that a fifteenth-century royal ordinance never offered.

6 What to take from it

Coercion and attraction worked together. Louis XI paired bans and fines against Geneva with privileges for Lyon. Neither lever on its own would have moved trade flows as well established as those of the Geneva fairs.

Legal security was a selling point. Royal safeguard, protection against the droit d'aubaine and a specialised commercial court made Lyon attractive, much as legal certainty and succession planning remain arguments for a financial centre today.

A trigger is not the whole cause. The DHS attributes the end of the Geneva fairs to political, commercial, military and religious factors that accumulated over several decades after the ordinance of 1462.

7 Sources

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