

What consequences did religious intolerance against the Huguenots have in France?



The effect of migration is discussed at length in the media and on social networks. In many respects, historical episodes of mass-migration were not different and retained the attention of contemporaries who tried to identify the consequences of this phenomenon. About 200 years ago, France experienced the largest episode of out-migration in its history following the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes.

On 22 October 1685, the Edict of Fontainebleau ended religious toleration in France and led to the exile of hundreds of thousands of Huguenots, the socio-economic consequences of which have been discussed ever since its enforcement. Early on, several members of the royal administration worried that the departure of Huguenots would hamper the economic activity of their region. For instance, the famous French military engineer Vauban wrote a memorial in 1688 to deplore that the exile of Huguenots weakened France because they took with them millions of *livres tournois* (£) of capital and accelerated the ruin of French trade and industries.

While recent studies have documented how Huguenots fostered productivity and economic development in host countries (e.g. [Fourie and von Fintel, 2014](#); [Hornung, 2014](#)), the overall effect of the Revocation in France is still not clearly understood. After 1685, approximately 200,000 Huguenots, one per cent of the total population, refused to convert to Roman Catholicism and fled to neighbouring countries. There was, however, substantial local variations in the severity of population shocks. For instance, the city of Nîmes, Metz and Sedan lost respectively 12, 15 and 20 % of their population within a few years, whereas the population of Rouen and Lyon remained roughly stable.

In many cities and ports, Protestant merchants had carried out a large portion of the foreign trade and dominated the textile industry during the 17th century. In other regions, they represented a significant share of the population, sometimes up to 30%, including among agricultural labourers. Many contemporaries feared that the departure of Huguenots would disrupt trade networks, endanger industrial and agricultural production, and, in turn, reduce living standards.

To study this question, I gather new data from primary sources on the location of Protestant communities in the late 17th century, which I match with information on the diffusion of the textile industry in 1708, the level of wheat prices and the occurrence of food riots (HiSCoD database) before and after the Revocation. I then use data on the departure of Huguenots, derived from the [Huguenot refugee database](#), to analyse the effect of the Revocation's socio-economic outcomes. Finally, I assemble a new dataset on the literacy rates of males and females, covering about 800 localities, to study how Protestantism and its subsequent ban influenced the development of human capital in early modern France.

My preliminary findings reveal that, in 1708, there were significantly more localities with a textile industry in areas with a Protestant community, even after taking into account factors such as trade connectedness, urbanisation rate and various geographic characteristics. In addition, I find no significant effect of the departure of Huguenots on the presence of the textile industry. Whereas Huguenot refugees contributed substantially to the diffusion of technological knowledge and economic development of host countries after 1685, the vast majority remained in France and continued to carry out their economic activity during the 18th century.

In line with this finding, I show that there were no significant differences in grain prices before and after the Revocation between areas with a Protestant community and the rest of France. That suggests trade networks were well functioning and markets continued to be integrated after 1685 despite the exodus of some Protestant merchants. In Marseille, despite the ban, about 20% of the merchants during the 18th century were Protestant, a number reaching 50% in La Rochelle ([Martinetti, 2005](#)).

Comparing areas with a greater share of Protestants with the rest of France, I further document that they experienced relatively fewer food riots after 1685, while there was no difference before the Revocation. The dataset on food riots includes events such as the looting of public granaries, forcing sales at lower prices, or intercepting carts and barges loaded with grains, which can be used as a proxy for economic hardship and food insecurity in areas where they occurred. Interestingly, I show the relative decline in the occurrence of food riots is entirely driven by areas where a significant share of the Protestant population fled abroad. I interpret this evidence as supporting the hypothesis that areas mostly affected by Huguenot exodus were maybe better off in the short-run. While surprising and at odds with the views of many contemporaries, this result is consistent with other empirical findings showing that negative population shocks can have a positive effect on wages and output per capita (e.g. [Chaney and Hornbeck, 2016](#)).

At last, I analyse the effect of the Revocation along one more dimension: the diffusion of human capital. That the Reformation, and more broadly speaking Protestantism, required reading the Bible and was one of the leading drivers of the development of education is a well-accepted fact in the historiography. Its influence in a country where Protestants had always been a minority before being officially forbidden is less well understood. I show that if areas with a higher Protestant population share before 1685 had significantly higher literacy rates in both the late 17th and 18th centuries, the effect was smaller in areas where a significant share of the Protestant population fled abroad.

Overall, the results presented in this study help readers grasp the difficulty of analysing the effects of migration, which could vary along many dimensions. On the one hand, I document that the French Revocation and the subsequent exodus of Huguenots did not hamper the diffusion of the textile industry or impede market integration, and may have resulted in an improvement in living conditions in the short-run in areas which experienced a significant population loss. On the other hand, it may have also slowed the diffusion of human capital, an important factor of growth in the long run, in these areas, leaving the overall effect unclear.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on [SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF PROTESTANTISM IN EARLY MODERN FRANCE: New evidence](#), presented at the European Economic Association's Annual Congress, August 2020.
- The post expresses the views of its author(s), not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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