

# WAS THE LOSS OF THE HUGUENOTS THE ORIGIN OF THE DECLINE OF FRANCE?



In the years following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, the Huguenots were expelled en masse from the Kingdom.

**THE SERIOUS  
CONSEQUENCES ARE  
STILL TODAY  
POLITICAL AND  
SOCIOLOGICAL.**



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## Was the loss of the Huguenots the cause of France's decline?

The theme of France's economic decline following the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes has, after more than four centuries, transformed into a myth that continues to captivate the educated public—that is to say, you, dear readers. Why have so many authors, even non-Protestants, disseminated and perpetuated it so extensively? Could it be the masked face of regret, if not national remorse?

*#Huguenots #Protestants #EditNantes #RevocationEditNantes #Revolution #Centralisation #State*

### 0. Introduction

The revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 by Louis XIV abruptly ended nearly a century of relative religious coexistence between Catholics and Protestants in France. This edict, which had guaranteed freedom of worship to Protestants since 1598, was replaced by a policy of forced conversion, dragonnades, confiscations, and exile. Within a few years, tens of thousands of Huguenot families—estimated at between 150,000 and 200,000 people—left the kingdom, fleeing to the more tolerant lands of the Refuge: Holland, England, Switzerland, the German principalities, and Scandinavia.

This exodus did not involve just any group of people: skilled artisans, manufacturers, merchants, printers, scholars, soldiers, and bankers were all part of this diaspora. Hence a question that still haunts historiography: did this drain on an economic and intellectual elite cause France's decline? The moment does indeed coincide with the waning of French power, economic crises, and the ruinous wars of Louis XIV.

In truth, the loss, severe at the time, was compensated in the medium term. The serious consequences for the future of French society are to be found elsewhere.

"This cliché of a France economically punished for what it did to the Huguenots remains persistent. It was propagated far beyond Protestant circles, notably within 19th-century republican historiography."

**But what France truly lost with the exile of some of the Huguenots was rather the capacity to accept division, contradiction, and a plurality of viewpoints.**

**After 1685, the royal power became entrenched in the idea that unity could be imposed from above, through state violence. One might wonder what remained of this idea of decreeing a state-sanctioned happiness in the French political mindset, if only because of the Reign of Terror of 1793. (1)**

(1)Patrick Cabanel, <https://www.reforme.net/religion/histoire/une-religion-refuge-huguenot-histoires-dun-exil/>

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## **1. In the short term: a net loss**

Contemporary observers of the Revocation were not mistaken. As early as the 1680s, pamphlets and correspondence foretold an "economic punishment": Charles Ancillon, Courtiz de Sandras, Vauban, and even anonymous authors of the late 17th century spoke of the ruin of commerce and industry. Vauban, in his Memoir on the Recall of the Huguenots (1689), painted a harsh picture: France lost 80,000 to 100,000 workers, 30,000 soldiers, and thousands of artisans and manufacturers who "will enrich foreigners." He wrote: "This is the ruin of the most considerable part of commerce."

Comparisons with Spain after the expulsion of the Jews and Moriscos multiplied: the same "depopulation," the same moral destitution. Cities like Rouen, Nîmes, Alès, and Bordeaux lost entire sectors of their economy. The cloth, silk, and metalworking industries were losing their masters. Ambassador Bonrepaus, sent to London, noted that the balance of trade between France and England had reversed as early as 1685: French gold was flowing in abundance abroad.

This perception of immediate impoverishment persists through the centuries. Myriam Yardeni sees in it the "national remorse" of a France bereft of itself. Edgar Quinet would later speak of a moral failing, a collective sin that poisoned French history.

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## **2. In the medium term: the economy regulates**

However, modern economic history has largely nuanced this catastrophic view. As early as the mid-20th century, the American historian Warren C. Scoville demonstrated, with supporting data, that the losses due to the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes were quickly offset. Protestants represented 10% of the French population; they remained at 2% after the emigration. Their departure, massive in some regions, did not prevent Catholic factories from taking over the activities left vacant. In Elbeuf, for example, the disappearance of the Huguenot cloth merchants even stimulated a "new boom" in the textile industry.

In the medium term, the countries of refuge also did not derive lasting benefits from this influx of labor. In Switzerland, in Geneva and Vevey, many factories established by refugees failed after a few years, due to a lack of raw materials, markets, or adaptation to local markets. In the Netherlands, the Huguenots' contribution was considered "marginal," limited to a few luxury sectors.

In short, the European economy, through the circulation of capital, technology, and people, eventually absorbed the shock. Comparative advantages faded with each generation: know-how spread, and progress became widespread. The Huguenot exodus was a loss, but not a lasting disaster in the medium term.

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### **3. In the long term: the birth of a myth**

Over the centuries, the theme of "France's decline since the Revocation" has become a national myth. The idea of inherent justice—the punishment of an intolerant kingdom—appealed to 19th-century philosophers and historians. Montesquieu, Voltaire, and later Michelet and Quinet saw in it the sign of a moral inevitability: a people who expel their elites reap servitude and centralisation.

But French decline cannot be attributed to a single cause. The ruinous wars of Louis XIV, crushing taxation, and later the Napoleonic Wars weakened the economy permanently. Added to this were administrative centralism and distrust of private initiative: France gradually replaced its entrepreneurial bourgeoisie with a state bourgeoisie. Administration supplanted commerce, and public employment replaced risk-taking. The human capital that had fueled the prosperity of the Grand Siècle was transformed into a civil service.

The development of finance, on the one hand, and banking, on the other, into two distinct parts is particularly striking in this respect. Administrative centralism seized control of "Finance," subjecting it to the power of the Catholic monarchy, leaving individual banking enterprises, the "Bank," to private entrepreneurs, generally drawn from Jewish and Protestant minorities. This characteristic distinction is unique to France in Europe.

"Finance is the financial service of the king, and, by extension, of the princely houses and high royal society; banking is the financial service of international trade. One is on the domestic side, and the other on the side of the established regime; the other is foreign to it, and, from a physiocratic perspective, foreign to the constituted nation. Access to finance is gained through an office, which marks the solemn entry into the public sphere and the most prestigious means of advancement for the entire bourgeoisie of the Ancien Régime; this dignity cannot be bought without proof of Catholicism." The Bank, on the contrary, is a free profession open to all, and remains outside the entire corporate organisation of society: it is the open sphere that desires it [...]. This explains, alongside so many other factors, the attraction exerted by the Bank on French Protestants, as elsewhere on other legally disadvantaged minorities: this social elevator that the Catholic bourgeoisie found in the Royal Finance, and which was forbidden to them, they found the equivalent in the international Bank. (2)

**The real, long-term loss is therefore not so much economic as cultural: that of the spirit of enterprise and tolerance, replaced by the verticality of power and dependence on the State and its administration.**

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### **4. Revolution and violence as a legacy**

It is in the moral and political spheres that the Revocation left its deepest mark. Edgar Quinet saw in the revolutionary Terror the revenge of the ages: the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre and the Revocation had given birth to the French Revolution.

"In private life, it is not just that sons should atone for the sins of their fathers. [...] But in the life of nations, this philosophy fails; and it is certain that generations have punished the sins of previous generations. This is the only way to provide a moral explanation for the reign of Terror.

[...] It was an incomparable advantage for the Terrorists to have as precedents and models the declarations and ordinances of Louvois in the Revocation. Undoubtedly, the same spirit that desires that everything serve as an example in our history prepared these admirable precepts long ago, so that the path would be laid out for posterity. For the Terrorists, thanks to a magnificent

and entirely divine plan, a unique privilege of our race, were able to march with certainty along this path of bloodshed.”

[...] Truly, it is scarcely possible for a Frenchman to read the orders of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes; for us, they had too few consequences that still bleed. They instilled in our hearts a contempt for moral values when they are valued with soldierly force. An indelible disease remains for the love of the sword, an endless refinancing before the conscience dares to resist.

[...] The persecutions that Catholics inflicted on Protestants corrupted the former.” (2)

“For Quinet, it is in 1685 that we must trace this murderous modernism that claims to achieve unity through violence against bodies and souls, through lies in language, religion, and history. Is this the political side of the myth of French guilt through the Revocation?” The blows inflicted on a defenceless minority would have also wounded its executioners, wounded the soul of a nation guilty of rejoicing in or accommodating itself to them, and brutally accustomed to preferring unitary simplicity to pluralistic complexity. Some intellectuals perceived this immediately, albeit in a more or less confused manner.

Samuel Smiles also saw in it a deadly political and moral turn: “The emigrations and massacres of 1793 would have been the poisonous fruit of those of 1685.” The same mechanism of violent purification is repeated, but reversed: after the massacre of Protestants by the Catholic authorities, it is the people who, in 1789, turn against their elites with equal cruelty.

Religious intolerance has morphed into political intolerance. By suppressing a portion of its internal diversity, France paved the way for a culture of state violence and ideological confrontation. The imposed unity, celebrated as a national virtue, proved to be the seed of future divisions.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the universalist message of 1789 thus appear as an attempt at expiation: to erase, through an abstract ideal, the original sin of having persecuted its own people.

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## **Conclusion**

Thus, the flight of the Huguenots did not solely cause France's decline, but it symbolises its underlying logic: that of a country sacrificing diversity to unity, liberty to centralisation, and audacity to conformity.

"Perhaps this is where France truly paid the price, with the exile of some Huguenots, the definitive conversion of others, and the condemnation of countless others to silence and a form of social and cultural sterility for a century." This is not a demographic, financial, or economic assessment, the amount of which could be measured by foreign hands—such treasures, in a country as resource-rich as France, are quickly replenished—but rather an ability to accept and nurture division, contradiction, the plurality of viewpoints, the complexity of a diverse society, and to resist the vertigo of imposed unity in that mixture of utopia and anger which, following that of the 1680s, constituted the ambiguous glory of the years 1789–1793.

[...] Once the “Protestant question” was resolved by the “final solution” of the time, the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, there probably remained in the French political mind this bad habit of dreaming of and imposing unity from above, through state violence. [...] 1685 was supposedly the source of a “brutalisation” of France, raising (or lowering...) the country to a higher degree of accepted political and intellectual brutality, the effects of which can be seen in 1793, 1871, and perhaps even in the 1940s.” (2)

England, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, on the other hand, were able to integrate minorities, maintain a middle class, and foster local autonomy and economic freedom. France, however,

replaced its merchant elite with a state administration, heir to an absolutism that dislikes both commerce and independence.

The departure of the Huguenots marks less the loss of productive forces than the breakdown of a balance between the political and the economic, between the spirit of enterprise and the spirit of order. From this fracture emerged a brilliant but unstable France, moralistic and universalist to conceal its failings, yet intrinsically violent, faithful to its founding paradox: to desire unity at any cost, even at the expense of its own vitality.

“Must we go so far as to say that French history, since the 1560s–1570s and then 1685–1705, has carried within it, in oblivion, concealment, and denial—despite the initial reparation granted in 1790—a form of ‘hidden genocide,’ or its imagined counterpart? And that the nation inflicted upon itself an immaterial (but also, in part, material and physical) wound, the trace of which it still bears today without recognising it and therefore without ceasing to feel its effects?” (2)

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(1) <https://www.reforme.net/religion/histoire/une-religion-refuge-huguenot-histoires-dun-exil/>

(2) *Histoire des protestants en France : XVIe-XXIe siècle*, Patrick Cabanel, Fayard

