

French Merchants' Complaints against Dutch Competition, 1645

Introduction: The French merchants from Nantes sent a complaint to Louis XIV and the King's Council in 1645 in an effort to ban the Dutch from settling in France to conduct trade. The French had been allies of the Dutch in their conflict with Spain, but after the Dutch won its independence from Spain with the Treaty of Munster in 1648, France began a systematic mercantilist effort to protect France from Dutch competition, which in 1672 progressed to a French invasion of the Republic. The following excerpt from the 1645 complaints from the merchants of Nantes who sought government protection from Dutch competition was edited and published by Henri Sée in 1926 on *Economisch-Historisch Jaarboek*, XII (1926) and translated by Herbert Rowen, in *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times: A Documentary History* (New York, 1972), pp. 158-162.

. . . Despite all these excellent ordinances and the efforts which have been made to re-establish commerce in France and restore it to its original luster, we cannot help but see that it grows weaker every day. The best seaports do not have the large number of ships which ought to be in them, and most French sailors, pilots, and bargemen, for lack of employment, are compelled, either to quit the sea and take jobs on land or to work for foreigners to earn their bread. What we see in France today in the best ports and havens are only foreign ships and foreign factors. Good, true-born Frenchmen can suffer such a sight only with great shame and distress.

The main cause of France's weakness in commerce is that it is held in scorn, so that those who are in a position to engage in trade take very little interest in it while foreigners freely violate the ordinances of the realm and the privileges of the cities in which they reside.

Among the cities of this kingdom, Nantes has always had a reputation as one of the most eminent and best fitted to engage in commerce and shipping because of its location near the sea upon one of the finest rivers in France, so that it can easily export and import commodities of all kinds from and into the realm. This is why it was given for its coat of arms a ship under full sail running before the wind, in recognition of the importance always placed by its inhabitants upon commerce and shipping. By skillful practice, they had made these into the main source of their wealth and their city's honor and greatness. Until recently navigation was widely engaged in here with its inhabitants owning more than one hundred and fifty ships. But now it is hard to find even ten or a dozen, so low and shameful is the state to which it has fallen. Our ships no longer sail because foreigners have run them aground and wrecked them, leaving them without sails or

rigging. Merchants and sailors no longer sail the sea routes because they have no employment. We no longer see any ships or faces but those of foreigners, mainly Dutch, English, Scots, Irish, and Portuguese; families, factors, and agents from these nations have now resided here as long as fifteen or twenty years, and new ones arrive every day. They have taken away all the business, the agencies, and dealings which the natives had' had with the foreigners who came frequently to our ports to purchase our fruits and goods and to sell us their merchandise.

Formerly everything ran in the good order that honest merchants desire, for there was abundance in the country and the merchants were prosperous. But since these factors and agents set themselves up here, they have drawn all business to themselves. By a sworn league among themselves they have tied the hands of our merchants and plotted the ruin of our country. They have brought all business into their own hands and revealed to their fellow countrymen when we were in difficulties, because they could see what we did with their own eyes. They take advantage of the weather to delay or advance the price and sale of our fruits and goods as they please, in this way causing substantial damage to the interests of every Frenchman, particularly to the Nantese who used to carry on this trade.

These usurpations have come about because most of those who come from Holland to France, especially to the city of Nantes, are factors. On their arrival they enter into a league with their fellow countrymen which has the force of national law among them; by it they promise to help each other and to permit no Frenchman to share in the profits which can be made in business. It has now come to the point where all profitable business will pass through their hands, thanks to their league and secret understandings, while the scraps they leave will be the most honorable employment that the native residents will be able to find. They will use this power in order to make their fortunes, not directly as did some of their countrymen...but indirectly, by means of big bankruptcies, such as happened during the past twelve or fifteen years... Frenchmen lost more than eight or nine thousand livres in these bankruptcies so that it is we who run the risks for their fortunes. They pay us if they prosper, and if it is not to their advantage to pay they take off with our wealth, knowing full well that we will not dare to sue them in the courts of their own country because they carry their appeals to their Provincial courts, where cases involving foreigners last forever and not a single Frenchman has won a case

because they stick so closely together.

In order to maintain this league they meet in clubs and assemblies twice a week, conferring over their orders and noting the quantity and quality of the merchandise which they need according to their inclinations and the orders of their principals. They can, therefore, set whatever price they want upon our fruits, goods, and products, knowing full well that the French will not dare to pursue and track down these meetings, for fear that they will cause their own ruin rather than gain any advantage. This has happened several times. Thus, they make themselves the masters of the revenues and commerce of France by this dangerous conspiracy. But in order to avoid being caught in these monopolistic practices and to pass as people necessary to the public welfare, they have agreed among themselves to pay more for their fruits and goods to a few influential persons in order to gain their support and backing, and they treat with great contempt the others who come to them to ask that they buy their wares which they find they can no longer afford to hold in their own hands. But when the Dutch see themselves courted in this way, they put up a cold front, pretending that they have no use for these wares until they have brought them down to the price agreed upon in their assemblies and arguing that they are under strict obligations in their purchases. Not satisfied with tricking us and taking advantage of us by force, they invite other foreigners to form similar leagues. What is worst of all is they laugh at us among themselves. "De Grieken en verstaen de negotie niet" (The Greeks do not understand business), they say, meaning us Frenchmen, for "Greek" is used among them as a kind of code name and so they pass us off as ignorant, with little knowledge of business, people who let themselves be fleeced easily. Furthermore, they have become so greedy that they engage the poor artisans and craftsmen of the city of Nantes to make brandy and vinegar for them, which they supply and sell to foreigners and their own countrymen. When these poor folk, finding themselves oppressed and deprived of their bread and with their privileges infringed, took their case to court, the Chamber of the Edict in the Parliament of Paris, to which they had had recourse, found their complaint so justified that they were given an injunction as they requested.

The Dutch also have barrel-makers of their own nation who work for them in their houses and shops. Although they do a large business in wine, brandy, and vinegar, they very seldom give jobs to French coopers and these poor workmen are reduced to utter and pitiable poverty.

Besides the fact that this is very detrimental to the country since they are at present the most important exporters of wine, they compel the landowners to buy the casks which they have had made at a high price, often as much as half the value of the wine; if this privilege were taken away from them and permitted only to Frenchmen, as is done in all the other big cities of this realm, French winegrowers and coopers would earn what the Dutchmen now get.

They act in the same way toward the keepers of the inns and taverns where most of them take their board and lodging in Nantes. They are so numerous and so watchful lest the natives make any profit from them, that if anyone shows the least sign of resisting their oppression, they meet him with threats. They assert that they have the same privileges as the native residents of the city and that if anyone puts a hand on them, they will complain to their own States and will call the public powers to their assistance. They lodge their appeals directly with the Council and call upon their agents and ambassadors to intercede for them on every occasion. Their envoys are themselves all merchants and make the least quarrel into matters of state, and in order to maintain themselves more effectively impose a levy of several pennies upon the fruits and wares which we sell them, on the pretext that this goes to support the poor of their own nation, but they sometimes use this money themselves and thus oppress poor Frenchmen. . . .

They make an absolute mockery of France when they say that they permit us to trade and-do business freely in Holland and Zeeland. It is a small and infertile country which produces no goods of its own and consumes only a little, but which, by the practices and policies of their trade aimed at their own subsistence, is made to serve as a way station and storehouse for the goods and merchandise which they bring from outside to distribute and sell to other nations. Add to this that they are all merchants who have the powers of the courts and government in their hands, and that they do not allow foreigners to do anything except what is useful and profitable to themselves, and that they always act both as judges and parties in cases before the courts and it will be seen why it is impossible for Frenchmen to live and make a profit there.

Furthermore, they are not satisfied to deceive us and mistreat us on the land. They do so at sea as well. Their ingratitude toward Frenchmen is so great that after having permitted them to extract whale oil on Greenland, as they still permit the English to do, they now compel the poor Frenchmen to do this on the high seas, at the peril of fire or death in the ice.

These are the tricks and deceits which the Dutch play on Frenchmen on every occasion. They offer us their own country to do business in when they know that there is nothing that we can do there, and prevent us from making a profit wherever they themselves have a chance to get rich. Yet they are now so presumptuous that they claim that they are dispensed from the laws and ordinances of the French state and may infringe the statutes and privileges of the cities in which they reside, and that their usurpations may not be repressed, on the pretext that they must be treated more favorably in this kingdom than any other nation, as appears in this case which we plead before the Council, as disinterested parties, as shall be shown hereafter.

A French Defense of Dutch Traders Abroad, 1661

Introduction: In 1661, at a time when Jean-Baptiste Colbert, was beginning his career as the architect of French mercantilism under Louise XIV, The Dutch special ambassador in Paris, Coenraad van Beuningen, submitted a declaration from Paris businessmen to the French government in support of continuing the French policy of allowing Dutch businessmen relatively free access to the French market. The document below is from the Dutch National Archives in The Hague and was translated by Herbert H Rowen, *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times: A Documentary History* (New York, 1972), pp. 163-64

It should be observed that there is a very substantial difference in the kind, quantity, and cost of all the commodities which are exported from France to England and Holland. They are manufactured in various towns and provinces of this kingdom, including Lyons, Tours, Forez, Auvergne, Brittany, Normandy, Picardy, Champagne, and others... This memoir has been drawn up to demonstrate that the maintenance of this trade with our neighbors is not only important to the State but is also very useful to the King's subjects, for there are employed in the manufacture and preparation of these wares and articles an almost infinite number of handicraftsmen, laborers, and others. They earn a livelihood in this work and are able as a result to pay the *taille* and other taxes to the State; but they would never be able to do so if this trade were not maintained and protected, for then they would be reduced to the shameful necessity of begging for their bread. There is reason to fear that this would happen if the English and the Dutch forbade the importation of the goods and merchandise from France. They pay an enormous sum

for these imports for they are not satisfied to meet their own country's needs but transship large quantities to distant lands, including the Indies and other foreign parts. There can be no doubt that such a ban upon trade would be imposed if they were prevented from selling the cloth and other wares which the French import from England and Holland, yet these are not large in quantity and cannot be compared with what we send to the English and Dutch. A few days ago a memoir was published by persons whose private interests were clearly visible in their attempt to show that the importation of foreign cloth was harmful to France, but we shall not linger over it because it contains more assertion than fact. The truth, as can be shown, is that the entire supply of cloth imported from England and Holland amounts to no more than 2,500,000 *livres*, or at the most 3,000,000 *livres* a year, while the imports of these countries from France amount to more than ten times as much... Furthermore, not one *louis d'or* or *ecu* is shipped out for the payment of these commodities, because, besides the explicit ban on export of coin in the ordinances, which provide a penalty of imprisonment and confiscation of property, *the louis d'or* is worth only seven pounds four shillings in England and eight guilders ten stivers in Holland. Payment is therefore made by letters of exchange or is covered by the goods which the English and Dutch import from France. This is justification for making mutual trade possible and convenient. There is no point in saying that even if foreign cloth is barred from France, the foreigners will nonetheless continue to buy the goods they are in the habit of importing from France because these are absolutely necessary to them and they cannot do without them. This is especially untrue because everyone knows that these foreigners are able to attract French workers and artisans to their countries and in that way establish in their country the manufacture of these goods, cloths, and products which they import from France; this has already happened with a number of articles. If this happens, there cannot help but result great harm to France and all the subjects of the King, and a great decline in the revenues from customs duties, which are very large. To these we can add that if the import of these goods from England and Holland is forbidden, the English and the Dutch will forbid the use of their ports as *entrepôt* for goods shipped to Spain, as is now done, and trade between France and Spain would therefore collapse completely, for the goods which go to Spain can be sent only by way of these ports in England and Holland. This ban would also be very harmful to France, for in return for the goods which are going to Spain a

large quantity of golden and silver *reals* as well as silver in barrels come in as can be proved.