

Frankfurt Trade Fairs

Frankfurt's city privileges and its rise to a European trade centre are closely connected with the development of the Frankfurt trade fairs, mentioned for the first time in 1160 in a Talmud commentary by Rabbi Eliezer ben Nathan from Mainz (ca. 1090-1170).

In 1240 the Emperor Frederick II issued a certificate warranting safe conduct for all those travelling to the Frankfurt trade fair. The certificate was written by the emperor in a military camp, during the siege of Ascoli. The significance of the trade fair was no more than regional at first, serving mainly as a transshipment centre for agricultural produce around Frankfurt and the lower Main. It therefore took place at the end of the harvest, in late summer or early autumn.

By the mid-13th century the centre of international trade in Europe was beginning to move from the region of Champagne towards the east. This was due to an increase in German settlements in the east and the growing economic development of Eastern Europe. The Champagne trade fairs became less significant, and the new hub of international trade was Frankfurt, with two trade fairs - the original Autumn Fair and a new Lenten or Spring Fair, sanctioned as such by Emperor Louis of Bavaria in 1330. The latter concentrated particularly on the marketing of wine, raw materials and commercial products. Frankfurt had become the "department store of the Germans".

To secure its trade fairs, Frankfurt acquired numerous privileges during the late middle ages. In 1337 the city obtained assurance from the emperor that neither Mainz nor any other town or city would obtain trade fair rights that might be detrimental to Frankfurt. In 1385 the city council concluded a contract with the Archbishop of Mainz concerning the safeguarding of roads around Frankfurt. In 1360, 1376 and 1465 imperial privileges were granted, providing royal protection for visitors to the trade fair. In 1478, against the payment of a fee, Pope Sixtus IV granted the citizens of Frankfurt and visitors to the trade fair some relaxation of the Church's Lenten fasting regulations.

The Frankfurt Book Fair became a permanent feature in 1485. By about 1500 the city was already regarded as a centre of German and European letterpress printing. In 1596, 90 printers and booksellers were represented at the trade fair.

Shortly after 1500 Frankfurt was faced with competition from Leipzig. The three Leipzig fairs that received privileges from Emperor Maximilian in 1497 and 1507 became more and more important under increasing eastern colonization. Nevertheless, despite major losses, Frankfurt continued to maintain its superior position as a trade fair venue until the end of the 17th century, when it was finally overtaken by Leipzig, particularly in the book trade.

The first Frankfurt stock exchange was in evidence in 1585, at the Autumn Fair, when merchants from Germany and neighbouring countries decided to compare the values of various coins and asked for official, authoritative confirmation.

About 460 stands were counted at the 1604 Autumn Fair. Traders and visitors came from a large number of countries. Apart from books, the most popular goods were above all cloth, leather, silk, jewellery, precious metal and handcrafted articles. There were performances by professional English theatre companies, and more entertainment was provided by itinerant comedians, minstrels and dancers.

Around 1750 the city recorded an increase in imported British handcrafted articles and products from the British colonies, while the Italian and French silk trade significantly receded in favour of Swiss linen. .

During the Napoleonic period the annexation of the region to the left of the Rhine and the French Continental System led to a rapid demise of the trade fair. At the end of October 1810 the French occupants confiscated all British goods and had them burnt.

From about 1830, with the foundation of the German Customs Union, the emergence of commercial travellers and increasing industrialization, Frankfurt's trade fairs were gradually reduced to mere fun fairs (called Dippemess in Frankfurt).

By the end of the 19th century, trade fairs and exhibitions were experiencing a revival. The International Electrical Engineering Exhibition in 1891 attracted ten thousands of visitors, and the first automobile

exhibitions in Frankfurt in 1900 and 1904 caused considerable sensations. This increase in trade fair business made it necessary to build a permanent exhibition hall. In 1908 a festive hall was therefore opened. Designed by Friedrich von Thiersch, the hall had been built within a record one year - an iron structure with enough space for 18,000 people. The construction of the festive hall was closely associated with the foundation of Frankfurt's trade fair and exhibition company in 1907.

The International Airship Exhibition in 1909 was the last major technical trade fair before the First World War. Hundreds of thousands of visitors came to view zeppelins, balloons and aeroplanes. During the war all trade fairs were suspended.

After the war the business was relaunched as International Frankfurt Trade Fairs, concentrating on the exhibition of specimens. The first fair of this kind was opened by the German President, Friedrich Ebert, on October 1, 1919. However, the world economic crisis made it necessary to discontinue these fairs again in 1930. Until the Second World War only specialized trade fairs were held, for specific sectors of industry.

The first post-war trade fair took place in tents, huts and provisional halls in the autumn of 1948. Since then there have been spring and autumn fairs in Frankfurt on a regular basis. The first book fair after the war was held at the Paulskirche (St. Paul's Church) in 1949. Later it moved to the premises of the Frankfurt Exhibition Centre, where it became the most important annual meeting point for the world of international literature.

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