

## 1536: independence and the choice of the Gospel

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The religious rupture provoked a Savoyard reaction. The duke tightened the blockade of the city, whose provisioning became difficult. Geneva called on Bern for help. At the beginning of 1536, a Bernese army conquered the Pays de Vaud, then a Savoyard possession, and freed Geneva from the threat.<sup>1</sup> This campaign altered the political map of the region: Bern became the dominant power north of Lake Geneva, and Savoy lost a large part of its territories north of the Alps.

The Bernese victory confronted Geneva with a new challenge. Its liberators were tempted to impose their sovereignty on it, as they were doing in the Pays de Vaud. The Genevans resisted. After difficult negotiations, a treaty recognised the independence of the city, which retained its institutions and its sovereignty while granting Bern certain advantages and maintaining the alliance.<sup>2</sup> Geneva had escaped Savoy without falling under Bernese domination. This double emancipation founded the Republic.

On 21 May 1536, the Conseil général, the assembly of the citizens, resolved to “live according to the Gospel” and to abandon the practices of the Roman Church.<sup>3</sup> This decision was at once religious and political. It consecrated the city’s adherence to the Reformation, and it asserted the sovereignty of the community of citizens, which decided its own religion for itself. It also committed the city to a path that would bind it, for several centuries, to European Protestantism.

The Republic of Geneva equipped itself with institutions that would last, with modifications, until the end of the eighteenth century. The Conseil général, which brought together the citizens and the bourgeois, elected the four syndics and approved the most important decisions. The Petit Conseil, composed of around twenty-five members, carried out the day-to-day government. The Council of Sixty and the Council of Two Hundred completed the edifice.<sup>4</sup> Over time, power would become concentrated in

the smaller councils, dominated by a few families, which would fuel the political conflicts of the eighteenth century that Part C will describe.

For merchants and creditors, independence brought both advantages and risks. The advantages lay in the clarification of authority: the city's authorities were now solely competent to legislate, adjudicate and tax, which reduced the uncertainty arising from the plurality of jurisdictions. The risks lay in the fragility of the young republic, surrounded by hostile neighbours, indebted and dependent on the Bernese alliance. The legal certainty the city could offer depended on its capacity to survive.

**Caution.** After independence in 1536, Geneva remained an ally of the Swiss cantons, bound by treaties, until it joined the Confederation in 1815. For nearly three centuries, the Republic of Geneva was a small sovereign state whose survival depended on its alliances and its diplomacy.

## 1 Notes

1. Archives d'État de Genève (archives-etat-ge.ch), "Les traités de 1536": the Bernese troops commanded by Hans Franz Nägeli freed Geneva in February 1536 from the Savoyard blockade imposed since the summer of 1534; Bonivard released from Chillon in the spring of 1536. ↩
2. Archives d'État de Genève (archives-etat-ge.ch), "Les traités de 1536": treaty of 7 August 1536 recognising Geneva's high jurisdiction over the city and the mandements of Peney, Jussy and Thiez, Geneva ceding the mandement of Gaillard to Bern, which extended the Genevan franchises towards Chêne and Petit-Saconnex. ↩
3. Archives d'État de Genève (archives-etat-ge.ch), "La Réforme": on 21 May 1536, the citizens assembled in the Conseil général unanimously adopted the Reformation, declaring "we wish to live in this holy evangelical law" and renouncing Masses, images and papal practices; Archives d'État de Genève (archives-etat-ge.ch), "1536, arrivée de Jean Calvin". ↩

4. Wikipedia (en), “Republic of Geneva”: “The Small Council (Petit Conseil), consisting of 25 members along with two secretaries of state”; “The Council of Sixty (Conseil des Soixante), originally the Council of Fifty”; “The Council of Two Hundred (Conseil des Deux-Cents) or Grand Council (Grand Conseil), established in 1527”; “The General Council (Conseil général), i.e. the electoral body, composed of all male citizens”. ↩

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