

1781–1782: revolution and foreign intervention

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In the early 1780s the crisis reached its climax. In 1781 the Représentants, allied with the natifs, secured the adoption of an edict granting the latter new rights.¹ The Négatifs, backed by the guarantor powers, challenged this reform. In April 1782 the Représentants seized power by force, arrested members of the government and formed a committee of public safety.²

The foreign reaction was swift. France, Berne and the Kingdom of Sardinia sent troops, which laid siege to the city at the beginning of summer 1782. The revolutionaries, isolated, capitulated. The leaders of the movement went into exile. The powers restored the former government and imposed a new edict, which restricted political rights, banned political clubs and strengthened the power of the councils. Its opponents nicknamed it the “Code noir” (the Black Code).³

The failure of the revolution of 1782 triggered a wave of emigration. Étienne Clavière, whose career was traced in Chapter III, went into exile together with other leaders of the Représentants, among them Jacques-Antoine Du Roveray and François d’Ivernois. Artisans and merchants also left the city. A plan to establish a Genevan colony in Ireland under the patronage of the British government was considered and then abandoned.⁴ These exiles would carry Genevan democratic ideas to England and to France, where some of them would play a part in the Revolution.

The intervention of 1782 illustrates the vulnerability of a small republic whose constitution was guaranteed by foreign powers. Geneva’s sovereignty proved to be limited: its neighbours could impose their will whenever their interests required it. The lesson echoes that of the fifteenth-century fairs and the ban imposed by Louis XI. For a centre of trade and capital, political dependence on powerful neighbours is a permanent risk.

Caution. The foreign intervention of 1782 shows that the political stability of a small financial centre may depend on the goodwill of its neighbours. Stability imposed from outside remains fragile, because it does not rest on an internal consensus. In the nineteenth century the Geneva financial centre would find a firmer anchor in membership of the Confederation.

1 Notes

1. Wikipedia (fr), “Révolution genevoise de 1782”: on 7 April 1782 the first syndic announced the refusal to ratify the édit de bienfaisance, which triggered the taking up of arms; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Natifs”: in 1781 the natifs represented “46 per cent of the population”, deprived “of political rights and of the economic privileges reserved to the bourgeois”. ↩
2. Wikipedia (fr), “Révolution genevoise de 1782”: taking up of arms in the night of 7 to 8 April 1782, arrest of eleven patricians on 8 April, new edict on the composition of the councils on 12 April, Commission de sûreté of eleven members created on 16 April. ↩
3. Wikipedia (fr), “Révolution genevoise de 1782”: convention of 6 June 1782 signed by Vergennes providing for the dispatch of 18,000 men, siege of Geneva by the French under the Marquis de Jaucourt, ultimatum of 29 June, entry of the troops of La Marmora, the Bernese and the French on 2 July 1782; édit de pacification ratified on 4 November and voted on 21 November 1782, known as the “code noir”, restricting public liberties and the powers of the Conseil général; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Révolutions genevoises”. ↩
4. Wikipedia (fr), “Révolution genevoise de 1782”: Du Roveray, Clavière and d'Ivernois “exiled in perpetuity”; attempt to found a “Nouvelle Genève” near Waterford in Ireland; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Ivernois, François d”: “Exiled from 1782 to 1789, he tried without success to create a Genevan colony in Ireland”. ↩

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