

1789–1794: the Genevan revolution

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The French Revolution once again upended the situation in Geneva. The regime imposed in 1782 could not withstand the spread of revolutionary ideas. Unrest broke out in 1789, and the government had to make concessions. Revolutionary France, which had abolished the monarchy in 1792, was no longer willing to guarantee the Genevan oligarchy. At the end of 1792 a revolution overthrew the Genevan ancien régime and proclaimed the political equality of all Genevans, whether citizens, bourgeois, natifs or habitants.¹

The new regime adopted a democratic constitution and embarked on reforms. The situation, however, became radicalised under the influence of events in France. In 1794 a revolutionary tribunal tried members of the former elite and pronounced several death sentences, which were carried out.² Property was confiscated, and extraordinary levies fell upon the wealthy. Many patrician families emigrated or took refuge on their estates outside the city.

This period marked a profound rupture for Genevan society. The oligarchy that had dominated the Republic for generations lost its power, and some of its members lost their lives or their property. The natifs and habitants gained political rights. The institutions were recast. Yet the revolutionary radicalisation left lasting traces, and the violence of 1794 would mark Genevan memory.

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Révolutions genevoises”: “the Genevan revolution broke out in December 1792”; DHS, art. “Natifs”: the demands of the natifs “were fully met only at the time of the Genevan revolution of 12 December 1792”; Archives d’État

de Genève, “Genève au XVIIIe siècle”: democratic revolution of 1792 establishing full citizenship. ↩

2. Wikipédia (fr), art. “Histoire de Genève”: the government of the Ancien Régime was overthrown on 28 December 1792 and political equality proclaimed; in summer 1794 a revolutionary tribunal pronounced 37 death sentences, of which eleven were carried out. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Genève (canton)”: two revolutionary tribunals sat in summer 1794 to judge the “enemies of the people”. ↩

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