

1919-1920: the League of Nations chooses Geneva

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

The First World War overturned the international order. The Treaty of Versailles, signed in 1919, contained the Covenant of the League of Nations, the first international organisation with a universal vocation charged with maintaining peace.¹ The choice of the new organisation's seat was the subject of discussion among several cities. Geneva won, thanks to Swiss neutrality, to the reputation earned by the Red Cross, to the support of the American president Woodrow Wilson and to the efforts of Swiss diplomacy and the Geneva authorities.²

Switzerland then had to reconcile its neutrality with membership of the League of Nations. The Swiss people accepted membership in 1920, with a declaration recognising the country's differential neutrality, which exempted it from taking part in military sanctions.³ The first Assembly of the League of Nations met in Geneva in November 1920.⁴

The International Labour Organization, created by the Treaty of Versailles, also settled in Geneva, where it built its headquarters on the lakeshore in the 1920s.⁵ Dozens of organisations, associations and missions followed. Within a few years, Geneva became the capital of multilateral diplomacy.

The arrival of the League of Nations transformed the city. International civil servants, diplomats, journalists and experts settled there. Hotels, housing and services expanded. The construction of the Palais des Nations between 1929 and 1936 gave the city a monumental complex intended to house the organisation.⁶ The Geneva economy, still marked by the difficulties of the Fabrique and by the crisis of the 1930s, benefited from this presence.

Date	Stage in the building of International Geneva
1863	foundation of the International Committee for Relief to the Wounded, the future ICRC

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Date	Stage in the building of International Geneva
1864	first Geneva Convention
1872	<i>Alabama</i> arbitration
1919	Covenant of the League of Nations and creation of the International Labour Organization
1920	Swiss accession and first Assembly of the League of Nations in Geneva
1929-1936	construction of the Palais des Nations

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS; Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. "Société des Nations (SdN)": "the Covenant [...] incorporated into the Treaty of Versailles, signed on 28 June 1919". ↩
2. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. "Société des Nations (SdN)": Wilson backed Geneva against Brussels; Wikipedia (en), "William Rappard": Rappard "highly influential in persuading him [Wilson] to choose Geneva as headquarters of the League of Nations"; Ville de Genève, "La Société des Nations" (geneve.ch): the choice of Geneva championed by Gustave Ador and William E. Rappard. ↩
3. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. "Société des Nations (SdN)": "Declaration of London of 13 February 1920" establishing differential neutrality (exemption from participation in military sanctions); accession approved on 16 May 1920 by 416,870 voters and eleven and a half cantons against 323,719 citizens and ten and a half cantons, with a turnout of 77.5 per cent. ↩
4. Ville de Genève, "La Société des Nations" (geneve.ch): "the first assembly of the League of Nations, on 15 November 1920, in Geneva", in the Salle de la Réformation; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. "Société des Nations (SdN)" (first Assembly in November 1920). ↩
5. Wikipedia (en), "Centre William Rappard": building "built between 1923 and 1926 to house the International Labour Office (ILO)", inaugurated on 6 June 1926, "the first building in Geneva designed to house an international organization"; occupied by the GATT secretariat from 1977 and by the WTO since 1995; named in 1977 in honour of William Rappard (1883-1958). ↩

6. UN Geneva, “Palais des Nations” (ungeneva.org): “Construction of the League of Nations building: 1929-1938”, foundation stone laid in the Ariana park on 7 September 1929, architects Julien Flegenhaimer, Camille Lefèvre, Henri-Paul Nénnot, Carlo Broggi and József Vágó; Genève internationale, “Brève histoire du Palais” (geneve-int.ch): progressive occupation from 1933 and 1936. ↩

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