

1945-1960: the return of the institutions

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

The creation of the United Nations in 1945 raised the question of a seat once again. According to a researcher at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva was for a time considered as the possible seat of the United Nations at the end of the Second World War, which shows how fully the city had come to embody, from the twentieth century onwards, an ideal of global governance.¹ The choice finally fell on New York. The United Nations nevertheless decided to establish its European Office in Geneva, housed in the Palais des Nations, and several specialised agencies settled there.²

The International Labour Organization remained in Geneva. The World Health Organization established its headquarters there in 1948.³ The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was created there in 1950.⁴ The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, concluded in 1947, set up its secretariat in Geneva, where it was replaced in 1995 by the World Trade Organization.⁵ The European Organization for Nuclear Research, CERN, was founded in 1954 on the city's doorstep.⁶ The International Telecommunication Union moved to Geneva, as did other technical organisations.⁷

Switzerland, which did not join the United Nations until 2002, concluded headquarters agreements with these organisations conferring legal personality on them and defining their privileges and immunities.⁸ The Confederation's host state policy, supported by the canton and the city, became an instrument of Swiss foreign policy.⁹

This second wave of arrivals differed from the first in its scale and in its nature. The League of Nations was a political organisation, whereas the United Nations institutions established in Geneva are above all technical, humanitarian, health-related and economic. This orientation, which contrasts with the political vocation of New York, defines the profile of contemporary International Geneva: a capital of global governance in the

fields of health, labour, refugees, trade, telecommunications, intellectual property, human rights and humanitarian action.

Date	Establishment in Geneva
1946	European Office of the United Nations
1947	secretariat of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
1948	World Health Organization; International Telecommunication Union
1950	High Commissioner for Refugees
1954	CERN
1995	World Trade Organization

1 Notes

1. “L’avenir incertain de la Genève internationale”, Genève attractive, 24 June 2025, quoting Pierre-Étienne Bourneuf. ↩
2. swissinfo.ch, “Suisse-ONU : une longue histoire”: in 1946, “the Palais des Nations came back to life under the name of the European Office of the United Nations” after the dissolution of the League on 18 April. ↩
3. WHO, “History of WHO” (who.int): Constitution signed on 22 July 1946 by the representatives of 51 UN members and ten other states, entered into force on 7 April 1948 (World Health Day); first World Health Assembly convened in Geneva on 24 June 1948 with delegations from 53 of the 55 member states. ↩
4. Wikipedia (fr), “Haut Commissariat des Nations unies pour les réfugiés”: “UNHCR was created on 14 December 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly”; “Since its foundation, UNHCR has had its headquarters in Geneva”; Convention of 28 July 1951 relating to the Status of Refugees. ↩
5. Wikipedia (en), “World Trade Organization”: “Established on 1 January 1995, pursuant to the 1994 Marrakesh Agreement” (final act signed on 15 April 1994), succeeding the GATT of 1947-1948, headquartered at the Centre William Rappard in Geneva, 166 members; Wikipedia (en), “Centre William Rappard”: GATT secretariat housed in the building from 1977. ↩
6. CERN, “Les dates clés – 1954” (public-archive.web.cern.ch): “On 29 September 1954, after ratification by France and Germany, the European Organization for Nuclear Research officially came into being”; Geneva site chosen in October 1952 by the provisional Council

and confirmed by cantonal referendum in June 1953; twelve founding states: Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Norway, the Netherlands, the Federal Republic of Germany, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Switzerland and Yugoslavia. ↩

7. ITU, “ITU’s History” (itu.int): “In 1948, the headquarters of ITU were moved from Berne to Geneva”. ↩
8. Office cantonal de la statistique, Informations statistiques no. 12, November 2025, which describes the content of the headquarters agreements and tax agreements concluded between the Federal Council and the international organisations. ↩
9. swissinfo.ch, “Suisse-ONU : une longue histoire”: rejection of 16 March 1986 (75 per cent against); initiative accepted on 3 March 2002 by 54.6 per cent of voters and 11 cantons and 2 half-cantons; admission of Switzerland on 10 September 2002 at the 57th session of the General Assembly; FDFA, “Loi sur l’État hôte” (eda.admin.ch): Host State Act of 22 June 2007 (HSA; SR 192.12) “entered into force on 1 January 2008”, implementing ordinance (HSO) of 7 December 2007. ↩

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