

## A contested oligarchy

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At the beginning of the eighteenth century, real power belonged to a small number of families that dominated the Petit Conseil (Small Council) and the Conseil des Deux-Cents (Council of Two Hundred). These councils were largely recruited by co-option, and the Conseil général (General Council) of citizens and bourgeois saw its prerogatives reduced. The citizens and bourgeois excluded from government contested this development and demanded the restoration of the rights of the Conseil général.

A first crisis broke out in 1707. A member of the Conseil des Deux-Cents, Pierre Fatio, took up the demands of the citizens and called in particular for the publication of the edicts and for the secret ballot. The movement was suppressed, and Fatio was executed.<sup>1</sup> The episode showed the determination of the oligarchy to retain power, and it gave the opposition a martyr.

A second crisis arose in the 1730s, concerning in particular the financing of the fortifications and the levying of taxes without the consent of the Conseil général. The tensions degenerated into armed clashes. France and the cantons of Zurich and Bern intervened as mediators, and their mediation led in 1738 to a settlement that organised the powers of the councils and granted certain guarantees to the citizens and bourgeois.<sup>2</sup> This settlement restored peace for a generation, but it placed the Genevan constitution under the guarantee of foreign powers, which would be able to invoke that title in order to intervene.

The Archives d'État de Genève devote a page to the political troubles of the eighteenth century, which retraces these episodes.<sup>3</sup> These crises had political causes, but also economic and fiscal ones. The financing of the fortifications, indirect taxation and access to the trades were concrete issues for artisans and merchants. The question of taxation, decided without the consent of the taxpayers, lay at the heart of the demands.

**Key point.** The Genevan political crises of the eighteenth century pitted the oligarchy of the councils against the citizens and bourgeois, and then against the natifs. Their stakes were at once political, fiscal and economic. The mediation of 1738 placed the constitution of the Republic under the guarantee of foreign powers, which opened the way to later interventions.

## 1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS; Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. “Fatio, Pierre”: born 7 November 1662 in Geneva, spokesman of the bourgeoisie in 1707, calling in particular for “the annual meeting of a deliberating Conseil général”; sentenced to death by the Petit Conseil and “shot in the courtyard of the prison of the Evêché” on 6 September 1707; Archives d’État de Genève, “Genève 1707-1738”. ↩
2. Archives d’État de Genève, “Genève 1707-1738” (archives-etat-ge.ch): troubles arising from the financing of the fortifications and the competence of the Conseil général in matters of taxation, support of Jacques-Barthélemy Micheli du Crest for the bourgeois, a day in August 1737 “of genuine civil war, which left ten dead”; mediation by France, Bern and Zurich; the Règlement de la Médiation adopted in May 1738 restored fiscal powers to the Conseil général, opened all trades to the natifs and secured “twenty-five years of peace”; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Révolutions genevoises” (“affaire du Tamponnement of 1734 to 1738”). ↩
3. Archives d’État de Genève, page “Troubles politiques à Genève au XVIIIe siècle”, archives-etat-ge.ch (accessed September 2026). ↩

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