

Economic life under the French administration

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

The French period transformed the daily economic life of the Genevans. The city was integrated into the fiscal and customs system of the Empire. Indirect taxes, requisitions and war levies weighed on the inhabitants.¹ Conscription took young men away from their families and their workshops. British goods were banned, and smuggling developed along the borders of the département.

The Fabrique sought to adapt. It benefited from access to the vast French market, protected by high customs duties, but it lost part of its foreign outlets, closed by war and the blockade. Some manufacturers redirected their production towards French customers, while others cut back their activity. Merchants had to contend with customs regulations, licences and the uncertainties of war.

The French period was not uniformly bleak. The administration introduced modern institutions, a unified body of law and a rational judicial organisation. Genevans enjoyed internal peace and a measure of legal certainty. Some entrepreneurs profited from the imperial markets. The overall balance nevertheless remained negative, as the Archives d'État stress in referring to the economic decline of the city.²

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. "Genève (canton)": compelled to request its union with France on 15 April 1798, Geneva formed part of the département du Léman from 1798 to 1813; these years were "characterised by an economic recession due to the conflicts and the international political upheavals", the population falling from 27,400 to 24,500 inhabitants around 1800; the territorial questions were settled by lengthy negotiations at the Congress of Vienna. ←

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2. Archives d'État de Genève, page "Économie", archives-etat-ge.ch (accessed September 2026). ↩

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