

Eidguenots and Mammelus: the battle of the alliances

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The two parties received nicknames that convey the intensity of the conflict. The supporters of the Swiss alliance were called “Eidguenots”, after the German word *Eidgenossen*, which designates the confederates bound by an oath. Their opponents, the supporters of Savoy, were labelled “Mammelus”, an allusion to the Mamluks, former military slaves who had become the masters of Egypt, and a way of suggesting their servility towards the duke.¹ An old tradition links the word “Huguenot”, which would later designate French Protestants, to the Genevan term “eidguenot”, but this etymology remains disputed.²

In 1519, a first treaty of *combourgeoisie* (a treaty of mutual citizenship) was concluded with Fribourg.³ The Duke of Savoy reacted vigorously. He secured the abandonment of the alliance, and one of the leaders of the Swiss party, Philibert Berthelier, was arrested and executed the same year.⁴ Genevan memory has made Berthelier one of the martyrs of the city’s liberty. Another defender of its autonomy, François Bonivard, prior of Saint-Victor, would be imprisoned by the duke in the castle of Chillon for several years before being freed by the Bernese in 1536.⁵ His story would inspire Byron’s nineteenth-century poem *The Prisoner of Chillon*.⁶

Repression did not extinguish the movement. Under the leadership of Besançon Hugues, one of the leading figures of the Eidguenot party, the supporters of the Swiss alliance regained the initiative.⁷ In 1526, Geneva concluded a treaty of *combourgeoisie* with Bern and Fribourg.⁸ This treaty committed the two Swiss cities to defend Geneva and opened rights for its citizens in the allied cities, and vice versa. It marked a turning point: Geneva ceased to be an isolated city facing Savoy alone. It now had militarily powerful protectors whose commercial and strategic interests coincided with its own.

The *combourgeoisie* of 1526 displays features that recur in Genevan policy over the following centuries. It rested on an exchange: military protection in return for commercial openness and political alignment. It created a dependence on the allies, who would be able to demand something in return. And it transformed the relationship with Savoy, which could no longer act against Geneva without risking a conflict with the cantons. For Genevan merchants, it offered a new form of security, since their routes to the Swiss Plateau and southern Germany were protected and their claims in the allied cities were better guaranteed.

Key point. The *combourgeoisie* of 1526 with Bern and Fribourg was Geneva's first great choice of alliance. It rested on a convergence of commercial and strategic interests, offered military protection to the city and its merchants, and created a dependence on the allies. This pattern, in which a small centre leans on more powerful partners whose interests it serves, recurs throughout Genevan history.

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS) (Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. "Eidguenots": Frenchified form of Eidgenosse (confederate) given, from 1519 to 1535, to the Genevan citizens who supported the Swiss alliance, of which Philibert Berthelier was the initiator and Besançon Hugues and Étienne de la Mar the negotiators; their opponents, supporters of Savoy, were called "Mammelus"; first treaty with Fribourg ratified by the Conseil général on 6 February 1519 and revoked on 11 April 1519 under pressure from Duke Charles III; second treaty of *combourgeoisie* with Fribourg and Bern sealed on 8 February 1526. ↩
2. Wikipédia (fr), art. "Huguenot": dominant hypothesis of a derivation from the Swiss German Eidgenossen ("comrades bound by an oath"), through "the corruption of this word in Geneva into Eidgnots", the Eidguenots being "the name given to the supporters of the Swiss cantons"; competing hypotheses (King Hugon of Tours, Hugues Capet, the Hugon gate) rejected by modern scholarship ("This hypothesis is no longer accepted"); a nickname that was at first pejorative, given by French Catholics and later claimed by the Protestants; used by Théodore de Bèze in a letter written from Geneva on the Amboise tumult. ↩
3. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. "Berthelier, Philibert": having taken refuge in Fribourg in 1517 after false accusations, Berthelier "negotiated a *combourgeoisie* between the two cities". ↩

4. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Berthelier, Philibert”: born around 1465 at Virieu-le-Grand, captain of the archers (1505), member of the Council of Fifty, captain general of the Enfants de Genève; arrested by the vidomne, sentenced to death “contrary to the rights of citizens” and executed “in front of the Château de l’Île” on 23 August 1519. ↩
5. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Bonivard, François”: born in 1493 at Seyssel, died in 1570 in Geneva, prior of Saint-Victor from 1514; “In 1530, on his way to Bern where he hoped to obtain support, he was captured by the men of Charles III and imprisoned in the castle of Chillon”; “B. was freed in 1536 by the Bernese troops and returned with them to a Geneva that had become a Reformed republic”; author of the Chroniques de Genève (1542–1551). ↩
6. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Bonivard, François”: “Byron would make him a Romantic hero in 1816 in The Prisoner of Chillon”. ↩
7. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Hugues, Besançon”: born around 1482, died at the end of 1532; “took the lead of the Eidguenot party (1517)”; syndic in 1518 and 1528, captain general of Geneva in 1522; “In 1519, he had the Conseil général vote the treaty of combourgeoisie with Fribourg” and “In 1526, H. was the principal architect of the combourgeoisie with Fribourg and Bern”. ↩
8. Archives d’État de Genève (archives-etat-ge.ch), “De la combourgeoisie au blocus, 1526-1534”: treaty concluded in February 1526 “despite the intrigues and threats of the Duke of Savoy”, “sworn by the Councils of the three cities despite the opposition of the Bishop of Geneva Pierre de La Baume and the Duke of Savoy”. ↩

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