

Étienne Clavière: from the Genevan revolution to the Ministry of Finance

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Étienne Clavière was born in Geneva in 1735, into a family of merchants of French origin.¹ He made his career in trade and banking, and he entered Genevan political life on the side of the “Représentants”, the party that demanded an extension of the political rights of citizens and burghers against the oligarchy of the councils. Chapter V describes these struggles. In 1782, after the failure of a Genevan revolution suppressed by the intervention of France, Berne and Savoy, Clavière was forced into exile.²

Exile took Clavière to Ireland, where a plan to establish a Genevan colony came to nothing, then to England and finally to Paris.³ In Paris he threw himself into finance and financial journalism. He worked with Mirabeau, for whom he wrote or inspired writings on banking and public finance. He took part in speculative operations and in polemics against certain joint-stock companies. He also took an interest in life assurance, a field then in full development.⁴

The Revolution offered Clavière a political career. Close to the Girondins, he was appointed Minister of Public Contributions, that is of Finance, in 1792, and held the post twice.⁵ He had to manage the finances of a state in revolution and at war, whose currency, the assignats, was depreciating rapidly. He defended the issue of the assignats, secured on the national property confiscated from the Church and the émigrés.⁶

The fall of the Girondins in 1793 brought down Clavière with them. Arrested, he took his own life in prison at the end of the year to escape execution.⁷ His career, from the Genevan opposition to a French ministry and then to prison, sums up the hopes and the tragedies of the revolutionary era.

Other Genevans played a part in revolutionary France. Exiles of 1782 such as Étienne Dumont, the future editor of Jeremy Bentham, or François

d'Ivernois, who would become an influential publicist in England, took part in the intellectual and political debates of their time.⁸ The Genevan diaspora, scattered by the political crises of the Republic, thus contributed to the circulation of ideas in Europe.

Caution. Clavière's career is a reminder that the political engagement of financiers carries considerable personal risks in times of crisis. The bankers who served the successive regimes of the late eighteenth century were often held responsible for the financial difficulties of the state, with consequences that were sometimes tragic.

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS) [Historical Dictionary of Switzerland], article "Clavière, Etienne": born 27 January 1735 in Geneva, died 8 December 1793 in Paris, Protestant, son of Jean-Jacques Clavière, a cloth merchant from the Dauphiné; commercial apprenticeship in Bavaria, partner in the house of Cazenove, Clavière et fils; one of the leaders of the Représentants during the disturbances of 1766-1768, member of the Council of Two Hundred from 1770. ↩
2. Wikipedia (fr), "Révolution genevoise de 1782" [Genevan Revolution of 1782]: the Représentants took up arms on the night of 7 to 8 April 1782, a Commission of Safety was created on 16 April; convention of 6 June between France, Sardinia and Berne; entry of La Marmora's troops, the Bernese and the French into the city on 2 July 1782; edict of pacification (the "code noir") passed on 21 November 1782; Du Roveray, Clavière and d'Ivernois "exiled in perpetuity"; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), article "Clavière, Etienne": "A member of the Commission of Safety during the revolution of 1782, Clavière was exiled after the capitulation of the bourgeoisie". ↩
3. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), article "Ivernois, François d'": "Exiled from 1782 to 1789, he tried without success to create a Genevan colony in Ireland"; Wikipedia (fr), "Révolution genevoise de 1782": attempt to found a "New Geneva" near Waterford; DHS, article "Clavière, Etienne": stay in Neuchâtel, ties with Brissot and Mirabeau, then Paris. ↩
4. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), article "Clavière, Etienne": founded with Brissot the Société gallo-américaine (1787) and "the Compagnie royale d'assurances sur la vie (1788)"; president of the Société des amis des Noirs. ↩

5. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), article “Clavière, Etienne”: Minister of Public Contributions from March to June 1792, then from August 1792 to June 1793. ↩
6. Encyclopædia Britannica, article “assignat”: in December 1789 the National Assembly issued the assignat in the form of a bond bearing 5 per cent interest, secured on nationalised Church lands; in September 1790 the Assembly turned it into paper money and raised the circulation from 400 million to 1.2 billion livres; the war of 1792 accelerated the depreciation, the assignats being replaced in 1796 by the mandats territoriaux at the rate of one mandat for thirty assignats, before the return to metallic currency in February 1797. Wikipédia (fr), article “Étienne Clavière”: Clavière was “at the origin of the creation of the assignats” in 1790. ↩
7. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), article “Clavière, Etienne”: “Arrested on 2 June 1793 with the Girondins, he committed suicide in his prison” on 8 December 1793. ↩
8. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), article “Dumont, Etienne”: born 18 January 1759 in Geneva, died 29 September 1829 in Milan; pastor (1783), in Saint Petersburg (1784-1785) then in London with Lord Shelburne; collaborator of Mirabeau in 1789; editor of Bentham’s manuscripts (Traité de législation civile et pénale, 1802); back in Geneva in 1814, member of the Conseil représentatif, whose rules of procedure he drafted (1815); DHS, article “Ivernois, François d”: born 9 April 1757 in Geneva, died 16 March 1842; author of the Tableau historique et politique des révolutions de Genève (1782), exiled from 1782 to 1789, knighted by George III in 1796, Councillor of State (1814-1824) and Geneva’s delegate to the Congress of Vienna. ↩

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