

French Geneva: blockade, conscription and decline

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

The French period was one of economic decline for Geneva, as the Archives d'État note.¹ Several factors explain this decline. The wars of the Revolution and the Empire disrupted European trade. The Continental Blockade, decreed by Napoleon against Great Britain, closed important markets and drove up the price of raw materials, cotton in particular.² The Fabrique lost part of its markets and of its workforce. Conscription took young men away from the economy. French customs barriers hampered trade with Switzerland, which had been essential for Geneva.

The population of the city stagnated or declined during this period.³ Families emigrated to Switzerland, England or other countries. The capitalists, already hit by the “bankruptcy of the two-thirds”, saw their income reduced by the economic crisis. Integration into the French Empire did not make up for these losses.

The French period was not, however, without lasting effects. The French administration introduced the Civil Code, the metric system and a modern administrative and judicial organisation. The French Commercial Code, adopted under the Empire, applied in Geneva.⁴ Some of these innovations would survive the Restoration and influence Genevan law in the nineteenth century. Geneva's French-speaking legal tradition, which Part J will examine, bears their mark.

1 Notes

1. Archives d'État de Genève, page “Économie”, cited above. ↩
2. Wikipedia (en), “Continental System”: Berlin Decree of 21 November 1806 prohibiting the import of British goods into countries allied with or dependent on France, Milan Decree (1807); widespread smuggling, British exports to the continent reduced by 25 to 55 per cent; end of the blockade on 11 April 1814; Archives d'État de Genève, “L'annexion à la

France en 1798”: decline of the Genevan economy during the French period. ↩

3. Archives d'État de Genève, “L’annexion à la France en 1798” (archives-etat-ge.ch): treaty of union of 26 April 1798, Geneva chief town of the département du Léman (10 per cent Genevans, 17 per cent inhabitants of Gex, 73 per cent Savoyards); “its economy declines, many of the poor have to resort to public assistance, its population falls”; conscription from 1802; end of the occupation on 31 December 1813. ↩
4. Jean-Philippe Dunand, “Le géant et les nains. Le Code Napoléon comme modèle des codes civils des cantons suisses romands”, forum historiae iuris, 2005: “In the end, the French Civil Code remained applicable in Geneva until the entry into force of the Swiss Civil Code in 1912”; Archives d'État de Genève, “L’annexion à la France en 1798” (treaty of 26 April 1798). ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/geneva-french-geneva-blockade-conscription-and-decline