

From the first to the second Refuge

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Historians usually distinguish two great waves of Protestant refugees in Geneva. The first Refuge corresponds to the sixteenth century, and in particular to the 1550s and 1560s, when persecution in France, Italy, England under Mary Tudor and the Low Countries drove thousands of people towards the city of Calvin. Part B described this wave and its effects. It brought printing, cloth-making, silk-weaving and goldsmithing, as well as families that would become leading lineages of the Geneva elite.

Between the two waves, the situation of French Protestants stabilised to some extent. The Edict of Nantes, promulgated by Henri IV at the end of the sixteenth century, granted them limited freedom of worship together with legal and military guarantees.¹ The Huguenots remained in France, where many of them turned to trade, manufacturing and finance, partly because other careers were gradually closed to them. Protestant commercial networks formed between the French cities, Geneva, Switzerland, the Low Countries and England.

The situation deteriorated from the 1660s onwards. Louis XIV pursued a policy increasingly hostile to Protestants: professional bans, the destruction of temples, forced conversions, in particular through the “dragonnades”, which consisted in billeting soldiers with Protestant families to compel them to abjure.² The movement of emigration began even before the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.

The second Refuge culminated after the revocation, in 1685. It was far larger than the first, and Geneva served above all as a place of transit towards German-speaking Switzerland, the German states, in particular Brandenburg, the United Provinces and England. Some of the refugees nevertheless settled there permanently, and their contribution would leave its mark on the Geneva economy of the eighteenth century.

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Key point. Geneva experienced two great waves of Protestant refugees: the first Refuge in the sixteenth century, which transformed the city of Calvin, and the second Refuge at the end of the seventeenth century, following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, which made Geneva a hub of the Huguenot exodus.

1 Notes

1. Didier Boisson, “L’Édit de Nantes et sa révocation (1598-1685)”, Encyclopédie d’histoire numérique de l’Europe (ehne.fr): edict of 30 April 1598 granting freedom of conscience and limited freedom of worship, with access to public office; 93 general articles, 56 particular articles and two brevets, including 150 places of safety. ↩
2. Didier Boisson, “L’Édit de Nantes et sa révocation (1598-1685)” (ehne.fr): from 1661, Louis XIV intended to apply the edict “to the letter”; Caisse des conversions created in 1676; in 1681, the intendant Marillac obtained in Poitou the intervention of the king’s dragoons, which produced “some 30,000 conversions”. ↩

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