

From the Red Cross to the League of Nations: the building of a vocation — overview and summary

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Nothing predestined Geneva to become a centre of international cooperation. In the middle of the nineteenth century the city was a medium-sized town in a small neutral country, with neither political nor military power. Its international vocation was built over half a century, through a succession of private initiatives, diplomatic choices and circumstances, in which Swiss neutrality, the Geneva humanitarian tradition and the city's geographical position played a decisive part. This chapter traces that construction, from the founding of the Red Cross to the establishment of the League of Nations, and then to the arrival of the United Nations institutions after 1945.

1 In five sentences

1. International Geneva was born in 1863 from the private initiative of five Genevans drawn from the city's philanthropic elite, whose action led to the first Geneva Convention of 1864.
2. Swiss neutrality, the humanitarian tradition, the French language, the geographical position and the *Alabama* arbitration of 1872 made Geneva a natural home for international cooperation.
3. The choice of Geneva as the seat of the League of Nations, in 1919–1920, turned the city into the capital of multilateral diplomacy, with political, economic and fiscal activities.
4. After the failure of the League of Nations and the war, the United Nations institutions settled in Geneva from 1946 onwards, with a technical, humanitarian, health and economic orientation.

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5. The international vocation has brought the financial centre an image, networks, skills and business, in a relationship that also carries tensions.

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