

Geneva, a city of transit and refuge under surveillance

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The mass arrival of refugees placed Geneva in a delicate position. The Republic wished to assist its co-religionists, in keeping with its tradition and its identity. But it could not ignore the pressure of its powerful neighbour. Louis XIV maintained a resident in Geneva, charged with keeping watch over the city and asserting the king's interests.¹ France could threaten the city's supplies, hamper its trade and even contemplate military intervention. Geneva therefore had to offer refuge without giving provocation.

The Republic adopted a cautious policy. It assisted refugees in transit, provided them with temporary shelter and help to continue their journey, but it limited the number of those who settled permanently. The authorities sometimes invited refugees to leave the city when French pressure increased. The Bourse française, already long established, played a major part in the relief effort, supported by donations from across Protestant Europe.²

The Reformed Swiss cantons, in particular Bern and Zurich, also received many refugees, and the Protestant states of Germany, the United Provinces and England organised their settlement. The Great Elector of Brandenburg published, a few days after the revocation, an edict inviting the Huguenots to settle in his territories, with tax and economic advantages.³ This competition between host countries to attract skilled refugees shows that the sovereigns had understood the economic value of these migrants.

For Geneva, the policy of selective reception had several advantages. It made it possible to retain the refugees most useful to the city's economy – skilled artisans, merchants, capitalists – while limiting the burden of the most destitute and the diplomatic risks. It also reinforced Geneva's role as a hub: refugees who had passed through the city often kept their ties with it, and these ties would later feed the networks of Protestant banking.

The reception policy also had lasting demographic effects. Geneva's population grew over the course of the eighteenth century, and the proportion of people of refugee origin was significant.⁴ This growth, within a cramped and fortified territory, led to a densification of the city, a rise in rents and social tensions between the different categories of the population.

1 Notes

1. Musée protestant, "Le Refuge huguenot en Suisse" (museeprotestant.org): from 1679, French tutelage was exercised through the French resident, "who intercedes with the city authorities to obtain the expulsion of the Huguenots". ↩
2. Musée protestant, "Le Refuge huguenot en Suisse": the Bourse française, founded in 1545 by David de Busanton, distributed around 10,000 florins in the year 1687 alone; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. "Réfugiés protestants": the Reformed cantons created "Chambres des réfugiés" and "Bourses" (or French corporations) for the relief and social control of the refugees; Swiss National Museum, blog, "L'arrivée des huguenots" (2019): on 30 August 1687, 8,000 people arrived in Geneva, which then had only 16,000 inhabitants. ↩
3. Wikipedia (en), "Edict of Potsdam": edict of 29 October 1685 of the Great Elector Frederick William of Brandenburg, offering the Huguenots free choice of their place of settlement, exemptions from duties and taxes (six to ten years), housing, civic equality and worship in French; around 20,000 refugees settled in Brandenburg-Prussia. ↩
4. Archives d'État de Genève, "Genève au XVIIIe siècle" (archives-etat-ge.ch): around 20,000 inhabitants in about 1725 and 25,000 in about 1770, plus nearly 3,000 in the suburbs and subject territories; French immigration following the Revocation (3,000 to 4,000 refugees) and the decline in infant mortality fed this growth; Swiss National Museum, blog (2019): 16,000 inhabitants in 1687. ↩

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