

Geneva between the wars: capital of an ideal

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Between the wars, Geneva embodied the hope of an international order founded on law and cooperation. The sessions of the Assembly and the Council of the League of Nations drew the foreign ministers of the great powers, and in the 1920s the “spirit of Geneva” came to denote the ideal of conciliation that animated the negotiations on disarmament, collective security and the peaceful settlement of disputes.¹

The League of Nations also developed technical and economic activities that are less well known but proved lasting. Its Economic and Financial Organization convened international conferences, helped to stabilise the finances of several central European countries through loans issued under its auspices, and produced statistics and comparative studies.² Its Fiscal Committee, as Part D recalled, drew up the first model conventions against double taxation. This work made Geneva a place where the rules of the international economy were discussed, foreshadowing the role of the World Trade Organization and the other economic organisations established in the city after 1945.

Geneva also hosted scientific and intellectual institutions linked to this vocation. The Graduate Institute of International Studies was founded in 1927 to train the senior staff of diplomacy and the international civil service.³ International schools, libraries and associations completed this framework. The city equipped itself with the intellectual infrastructure of its vocation.

For the financial centre, the presence of the League of Nations had effects that were indirect but real. It strengthened Geneva’s international image among a foreign clientele. It attracted wealthy individuals, diplomats and officials who needed banking services. It made Geneva a meeting place where business relationships were formed. The Geneva bankers, some of whom took part in the activities of the League of Nations or of the institutions surrounding it, drew benefit from this standing.

Key point. Between the wars, Geneva embodied the ideal of international cooperation. The League of Nations developed political activities there, but also economic and financial ones, which foreshadowed the city's role in global economic governance.

1 Notes

1. The phrase “spirit of Geneva” is owed to Robert de Traz (1884-1951), founder of the *Revue de Genève* (1920), whose essay *L'Esprit de Genève* (1929) examined the city's international vocation ten years after the arrival of the League of Nations (*Ville de Genève*, page “Qu'est-ce que l'Esprit de Genève ?”, geneve.ch; Wikipédia fr, art. “Robert de Traz”). The Protocol for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes, known as the Geneva Protocol, was adopted on 2 October 1924 by the Assembly of the League of Nations on the proposal of Ramsay MacDonald and Édouard Herriot; it instituted compulsory arbitration and provided for a disarmament conference in 1925; the United Kingdom refused to ratify it in March 1925 (Wikipedia (en), art. “Geneva Protocol (1924)”). ↩
2. Wikipedia (en), “Economic and Financial Organization of the League of Nations”: organisation created in 1920, “the largest of the technical arms of the League”, headed by Arthur Salter until 1931; Brussels conference (September-October 1920); Austrian reconstruction under “the plan, finalized in three protocols signed in Geneva on 4 October 1922”, loan raised in May 1923 with J.P. Morgan and the Bank of England; Hungarian loan requested in August 1923; nine League loans in six countries for 81 million pounds; model conventions against double taxation (eighty conventions signed from 1929 to 1938). ↩
3. Wikipedia (en), “William Rappard”: co-founder, with Paul Mantoux, of the Graduate Institute of International Studies in 1927; director of the League's Mandates Section (1920-1925), member of the Permanent Mandates Commission from 1925, rector of the University of Geneva in 1926. ↩

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