

Geneva, city of refuge: an identity put to the test

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Geneva has long thought of itself as a city of refuge. Parts B and C showed the importance of the reception of Protestant refugees in its history, and the city today houses the headquarters of organisations devoted to the protection of refugees and to humanitarian action.¹ Swiss policy towards refugees during the Second World War, and in particular the turning back of people under threat, put this identity to the test.

The confrontation between the image the city had of itself and the reality of the decisions taken during the war fed a reflection on collective responsibility. It showed that a tradition of hospitality does not by itself guarantee choices consistent with that tradition when the authorities are faced with political, economic or military pressures. It also serves as a reminder that the reception of people and the reception of capital have often been treated differently: the assets of the persecuted sometimes found refuge in Switzerland while their owners were turned back.

For the financial centre, this reflection has a practical bearing. The protection of people threatened by authoritarian regimes remains a legitimate function of neutral financial centres. It requires, however, consistency between the values proclaimed and actual practice, and particular attention to situations in which the protection of assets serves interests contrary to those of the victims.

1 Notes

1. Wikipedia (fr), “Haut Commissariat des Nations unies pour les réfugiés”: “UNHCR was created on 14 December 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly”; “Since its foundation, UNHCR has had its headquarters in Geneva”; Convention of 28 July 1951 relating to the Status of Refugees; Nobel Peace Prize in 1954 and 1981; budget of USD 7 billion and 9,300 staff in 2015. ↩

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