

Geneva, the Red Cross and the Alabama arbitration

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The second half of the nineteenth century saw Geneva affirm an international vocation that would have a lasting influence on the image of its financial centre. In 1863 a committee of five Geneva citizens, among them Henry Dunant and Gustave Moynier, founded the organisation that would become the International Committee of the Red Cross.¹ The following year, a diplomatic conference convened in Geneva adopted the first Geneva Convention for the amelioration of the condition of wounded soldiers.²

In 1872 Geneva hosted the arbitral tribunal charged with settling the dispute between the United States and Great Britain over the damage caused by the *Alabama*, a ship built in England for the Confederates during the American Civil War.³ The award, which ordered Great Britain to pay a substantial indemnity, is often presented as one of the founding acts of modern international arbitration. The room in the Hôtel de Ville where the tribunal sat still bears the name Salle de l'Alabama.

These events helped to make Geneva a place of neutrality, law and international cooperation. They attracted diplomats, jurists and philanthropists, and they reinforced the image of a city where disputes could be settled by law and where the interests of the parties were treated with impartiality. For the financial centre, this image is an asset: an international clientele that entrusts its assets to Geneva expects precisely neutrality, legal certainty and impartiality. Part F will trace the rise of International Geneva in the twentieth century.

Key points. The foundation of the Red Cross in 1863, the first Geneva Convention in 1864 and the *Alabama* arbitration in 1872 established the image of a neutral Geneva committed to law and international cooperation. This image would become one of the assets of its financial centre in the eyes of foreign clients.

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS; Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. “Croix-Rouge”: the Comité international de secours aux militaires blessés (International Committee for Relief to the Wounded) was constituted in February 1863 by Henry Dunant, Gustave Moynier, General Dufour, Louis Appia and Théodore Maunoir, after Moynier had presented Dunant’s ideas to the Société genevoise d’utilité publique, of which he was president; in October 1863 the Committee brought together private experts and government representatives in Geneva; it subsequently took the name Comité international de la Croix-Rouge. ↩
2. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Croix-Rouge”: a diplomatic conference convened in Geneva “led in August 1864 to the signing of the first Geneva Convention, on the protection of wounded soldiers”; Croix-Rouge française, “22 août 1864 : signature de la 1ère convention de Genève” (croix-rouge.fr): convention adopted by sixteen states, providing for the care of the wounded without distinction of nationality, the neutrality of medical personnel and establishments, and the distinctive sign of the red cross on a white background. ↩
3. Archives d’État de Genève, “L’arbitrage de l’Alabama” (archives-etat-ge.ch): arbitral tribunal instituted by the Treaty of Washington of 8 May 1871, sitting in the Hôtel de Ville of Geneva in the room that has since borne the name Salle de l’Alabama; award rendered on 14 September 1872; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Alabama, arbitrage de l’”: Great Britain was held liable for having tolerated the delivery from its territory of some twenty armed ships to the Confederates, including the corvette Alabama; the former Federal Councillor Jakob Stämpfli played a notable role in the proceedings, which “contributed to the emergence of Geneva as an international forum”. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/geneva-geneva-the-red-cross-and-the-alabama-arbitration