

The Refuge: how 8,000 refugees changed a city of 13,000

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Geneva's reputation as a city of refuge rests on two waves of Protestant migration, one in the sixteenth century and one after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. This article sets out the figures that the principal sources give for both waves, shows where those sources diverge and traces what the numbers reveal about the economic foundations of the later financial centre.

1 A note on the numbers

Every figure for the Refuge is an estimate, drawn from assistance records, population counts and the work of later historians. The sources used here do not always agree, which is why the book on which this article is based treats its figures and dates for the period as subject to verification. Each number below is therefore attributed to the institution or author that gives it, so that a reader can weigh one estimate against another.

2 The first Refuge, 1549–1587

According to the Historical Dictionary of Switzerland (Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse, DHS), Geneva took in some 8,000 Protestant refugees between 1549 and 1587. About 3,000 of them settled permanently, a group the DHS equates to 30 % of the population. Lucchese families such as the Burlamaqui, Diodati, Micheli and Calandrini entered the patriciate, while dozens of Huguenot printers turned the city into a centre for the publication of bibles and psalters. The institution that would carry much of the later burden already existed: the Musée protestant dates the Bourse française, founded by David de Busanton, to 1545.

3 From Nantes to Fontainebleau

The interval between the two waves rested on a legal settlement. Didier Boisson, writing in the *Encyclopédie d'histoire numérique de l'Europe*, describes the Edict of Nantes of 30 April 1598 as granting freedom of conscience and a limited freedom of worship. It comprised 93 general articles, 56 particular articles and two royal warrants, which provided among other things for 150 places of safety. The same author traces its erosion step by step. From 1661 Louis XIV meant to apply the edict strictly. After a fund for conversions had been created in 1676, the intendant Marillac obtained in 1681 the deployment of royal dragoons in Poitou, which produced some 30,000 conversions.

The Edict of Fontainebleau of 18 October 1685 revoked the Edict of Nantes and ordered the demolition of Protestant churches, while emigration from the kingdom remained forbidden. The French-language Wikipedia article on the Refuge states that men caught leaving faced the galleys and women the confiscation of their persons and property, so that fugitives had to cross the border clandestinely, often with the help of paid guides. For those who stayed and converted under pressure, the Musée protestant records that the penalties for emigration were tightened in 1699 and again in 1713. Parish priests had kept lists of new converts since 1686 and reported any lapses to the authorities.

4 How many left and where they went

The size of the exodus is where the sources diverge most. Boisson puts the number of Protestants who emigrated between 1680 and 1715 at 150,000 to 180,000, bound for England, the United Provinces, Geneva and several German states. The French-language Wikipedia article gives about 200,000 departures out of some 800,000 Protestants in the kingdom. The DHS works from a base of roughly 150,000 Huguenots who left France and states that some 60,000 are generally estimated to have passed through Switzerland, with a peak in 1687. Of these, about 20,000 settled permanently in the Swiss cantons.

Other states competed for the same migrants, as the English-language Wikipedia article on the Edict of Potsdam shows. It records that on 29 October 1685, days after the revocation, the Great Elector of Brandenburg offered Huguenots free choice of residence, exemption from duties and taxes for six to ten years, housing and civic equality. About 20,000 refugees settled in Brandenburg-Prussia, a figure that matches the DHS estimate for permanent settlement in Switzerland.

5 Geneva under pressure in 1687

For Geneva the burden was one of transit more than settlement. The Musée protestant estimates that the city assisted about 30,000 refugees between 1680 and 1689, with arrivals reaching 350 people a day in 1687. In that year alone the Bourse française distributed some 10,000 florins. A 2019 article on the blog of the Swiss National Museum reports that 8,000 people arrived on 30 August 1687, when Geneva counted only 16,000 inhabitants.

The city received these arrivals under close watch. The Musée protestant notes that from 1679 the French resident in Geneva pressed the authorities to expel Huguenots, which explains why the Republic helped refugees move on and limited the number who stayed. The long-term demographic effect was nevertheless marked, since the Archives d'État de Genève count about 20,000 inhabitants around 1725 and 25,000 around 1770, plus nearly 3,000 in the suburbs and subject territories. They attribute this growth to French immigration after the revocation, which they put at 3,000 to 4,000 refugees, together with a fall in infant mortality.

6 From refugees to industry and capital

The economic return of the second Refuge can be read in the textile figures. The DHS records that France prohibited the consumption and manufacture of printed calicoes, known as indiennes, in 1686, which opened a large contraband market for producers outside the kingdom. Geneva had four calico works by 1710, among them that of Antoine Fazy, with seven operating by the 1720s. After France lifted the ban in 1759, Geneva and Neuchâtel each had about ten such factories, employing at least 2,500 workers. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, according to the same source, 8,000 to 10,000 people worked in Swiss calico printing.

The same pattern appears in watchmaking. The DHS states that Huguenot refugees arriving from 1550 brought the skills of a professional elite, particularly in portable timepieces. The same source dates the creation of the watchmakers' mastership, the guild that regulated entry to the trade, to 1601. The profits of these trades later fed the capital that Genevan families placed in foreign public debt. A stratified legal order shaped who shared in that wealth: the Archives d'État de Genève note that natifs, the Geneva-born children of resident foreigners, were admitted to all trades only after 1738 and had no political rights.

7 What to take from it

Estimates diverge. Figures for the Huguenot exodus range from 150,000 to about 200,000 depending on the source and the period covered, so any single number calls for its source and dates.

Transit outweighed settlement. The DHS estimates that about a third of those who passed through Switzerland stayed, while the Archives d'État de Genève put post-revocation settlers in Geneva at 3,000 to 4,000.

Assistance laid economic foundations. Refugee skills fed the calico, watchmaking and related industries whose profits later supplied the capital of Geneva's eighteenth-century financial centre.

8 Sources

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Online version: helveticaregister.com/geneva-refuge-figures