

Refugees, capital and skills: the first waves

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

From the 1540s onwards, Geneva took in a growing number of religious refugees. The city attracted thousands of Protestants from across Europe, and its reputation earned it the nickname of the “Protestant Rome”.¹ The movement gathered pace in the 1550s: the 2025 study already cited places the beginning of a major wave of immigration in the middle of that decade.² The authorities opened a register of new residents, the *Livre des habitants* (Book of Inhabitants), which makes it possible to trace these arrivals and to measure their scale.³

The French formed the majority of the refugees. Among them were craftsmen, merchants, nobles, lawyers and printers. The arrival of the printer Robert Estienne, who settled in Geneva around 1550, and that of Jean Crespin illustrate the rise of an industry that would make the city one of the great centres of Protestant publishing.⁴ These men brought with them capital, techniques, networks of correspondents and an international clientele.

An Italian community also took shape. An Italian church was organised as early as the 1540s, and aristocrats and merchants from Lucca, Naples, Cremona and Locarno settled in the city.⁵ The Neapolitan marquis Galeazzo Caracciolo, who arrived in the early 1550s, is its most famous figure.⁶ Several families from Lucca, established in Geneva at the end of the sixteenth century, would become leading lineages of the Genevan patriciate and of Genevan banking.⁷ They brought with them experience of the silk trade and of Italian banking, and their family networks extended as far as Lyon, Amsterdam and London.

The English Protestants who took refuge during the reign of Mary Tudor formed another group, smaller in number but influential. Their congregation, in which the Scottish reformer John Knox played an important part, produced in Geneva an English translation of the Bible that was destined for wide circulation.⁸ These refugees, who returned home on

the accession of Elizabeth I, would spread the Genevan model in England and Scotland.

The influx of refugees had considerable economic effects. It brought capital to a city impoverished by the decline of the fairs. It introduced or developed new industries: printing, cloth-making, silk-weaving, goldsmithing and, later, watchmaking. It extended the city's commercial networks towards France, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany and England. Finally, it raised the educational level of the population, since the refugees included a high proportion of literate people.

It also gave rise to tensions. Housing became scarce and expensive. Food prices rose. Genevan craftsmen feared competition from the newcomers. The old families feared losing control of the city. These tensions fed the opposition to Calvin until 1555, when the admission of many refugees to the bourgeoisie shifted the political balance in the reformer's favour.

Contemporary Geneva has retained from this experience a tradition of welcoming foreign skills, which finds expression today in the presence of international organisations, multinationals, trading houses and foreign banks. It has also retained the tensions: the cost of housing, the pressure on infrastructure and the debates over immigration have run through the city's history since the sixteenth century.

1 Notes

1. Article "Calvin's Geneva", Wikipedia (en) (accessed September 2026). ↩
2. Revue européenne des sciences sociales, 2025/1, p. 155 et seq., summary cited above. ↩
3. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS) (Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. "Habitants (Genève)": Livre des habitants de Genève, editions by Geisendorf (1957–1963) and Perrenoud (1985). ↩
4. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. "Estienne, Robert": born in 1503 in Paris, died on 7 September 1559 in Geneva, printer to the king for Hebrew, Latin (1539) and Greek (1540); harassed by the Sorbonne (1547), he "took refuge in Geneva in 1550, where he converted to the Reformation", bourgeois in 1556; Wikipedia (en), "Jean Crespin": lawyer born in Arras, settled in Geneva in 1548 with a printing house, bourgeois in 1555, Livre des martyrs (Geneva, 1554). ↩
5. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. "Réfugiés protestants": Italian refugees from Lucca, Genoa, Cremona and Milan fleeing the

Inquisition after 1542, including the Lucchese families “Burlamaqui, Diodati, Micheli or Calandrini”; around 8,000 Protestant refugees admitted to Geneva between 1549 and 1587, of whom some 3,000 settled permanently; Wikipédia (fr), art. “Galeazzo Caracciolo” (Italian Reformed Church of Geneva). ↩

6. Wikipédia (fr), art. “Galeazzo Caracciolo”: born in Naples in 1517, died in Geneva in 1586; the investigations of the tribunal of the Inquisition and the warrants for his arrest drove him, in 1551, into voluntary exile in Geneva, where he held important offices in the Italian Reformed Church and worked with Calvin, who dedicated an edition of his commentary to him. ↩
7. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Réfugiés protestants” (Lucchese families Burlamaqui, Diodati, Micheli and Calandrini established in Geneva after 1542); Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Turretini, François” (Liliane Mottu-Weber): born in Lucca on 5 May 1547, refugee in Lyon and then in Geneva between 1575 and 1579, settled in Geneva in 1592, founder of the Grande Boutique (1593) “which brought together the principal Italian silk merchants”, husband of Camilla Burlamacchi, daughter of Michele, a refugee from Lucca, bourgeois of Geneva in 1627, member of the Council of Two Hundred in 1628, died on 15 March 1628. ↩
8. Wikipedia (en), “Geneva Bible”: English exiles who took refuge in Geneva under Mary Tudor (1553–1558), including Christopher Goodman; New Testament by William Whittingham (1557), complete Bible in 1560, 51 years before the King James Version. ↩

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