

Swiss neutrality and Geneva's vocation

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Switzerland's neutrality, recognised by the powers in 1815, as Part C recalled, is the first condition of Geneva's international vocation. A neutral state offers other states a ground on which they can meet without advantage to any one of them, and gives a humanitarian organisation the assurance that it will not be instrumentalised by a belligerent. The International Committee of the Red Cross, composed exclusively of Swiss citizens, draws from this neutrality its capacity to act with all the parties to a conflict.¹

Neutrality on its own is not enough. Other Swiss cities could have hosted the international institutions, and Berne, the federal capital, does indeed house several international unions created at the end of the nineteenth century, such as the Universal Postal Union.² Geneva prevailed thanks to other assets: the city's humanitarian and philanthropic tradition, the presence of an educated, French-speaking and cosmopolitan elite, its geographical position between France, Italy and Germany, the quality of its hotels, the beauty of its setting and the reputation earned by the Red Cross and by the *Alabama* arbitration described in Part D.

Language plays a particular role. In the nineteenth century and until the middle of the twentieth, French was the language of diplomacy. A French-speaking city in a neutral country held an obvious attraction for the chancelleries. Part J will return to this dimension.

From the 1860s onwards, Geneva thus hosted a series of international initiatives and institutions: diplomatic conferences, scientific congresses, international associations and administrative unions. The city became a meeting place for pacifist, philanthropic and reformist movements. This vocation, still modest, prepared the ground for the great turning point of 1919.

1 Notes

1. Els Debuf, "Tools to do the job: The ICRC's legal status, privileges and immunities", *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 97, 2015, p. 209, n. 12: "The governing body of the ICRC, the Assembly (also called the Committee), recruits through co-optation its 15 to 25 members—who sit in private capacity—from among Swiss citizens"; Wikipedia (en), "International Committee of the Red Cross": an Assembly of at most twenty-five Swiss members, co-opted for four years. ↩
2. ITU, "ITU's History" (itu.int): first International Telegraph Convention signed in Paris on 17 May 1865 by twenty founding members; the Vienna conference of 1868 decided to establish a bureau in Berne, with three staff; "In 1948, the headquarters of ITU were moved from Berne to Geneva"; *Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse* (DHS; Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. "Union postale universelle (UPU)": convention signed in Berne on 9 October 1874, the General Postal Union renamed the Universal Postal Union in 1878, a UN specialised agency from 1 July 1948, headquartered in Berne. ↩

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