

The economy of a besieged republic

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In the 1530s and 1540s, the young Republic of Geneva faced a difficult economic situation. Its finances were burdened by military expenditure, by the debts contracted towards its allies and by the cost of organising the state. Its territory was cramped and surrounded by neighbours who were at times hostile. Its trade, already weakened by the decline of the fairs, suffered from the conflicts. Its population, finally, fluctuated with the departures of Catholics and the arrivals of refugees.

The city nevertheless had new resources at its disposal. The secularised ecclesiastical property yielded revenues. The minting of coinage produced a profit. Entry duties and taxes on trade continued to feed the treasury. The admission of new bourgeois, in return for payment, was an appreciable source of revenue as well as an instrument of demographic and social policy.

Genevan society was structured according to differentiated legal statuses. The citizens, born in the city to citizen or bourgeois parents, enjoyed full political rights. The bourgeois, admitted in return for payment, took part in the Conseil général but could not accede to every office. The habitants, foreigners authorised to reside in the city, had no political rights. Later, the natifs, the children of habitants born in Geneva, would form an additional category.¹ This hierarchy of statuses would have considerable economic consequences: it determined access to trades, to public office and to property, and it would be at the heart of the political conflicts of the eighteenth century.

The reception of refugees raised questions that the city had to settle. Refugees brought capital, skills and networks. They also posed problems of housing, provisioning, competition with local craftsmen and political balance. The old Genevan families feared that the newcomers, often wealthier and better educated, would take control of the city. The mass

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admission of refugees to the bourgeoisie in the 1550s would, moreover, tip the political majority in Calvin's favour.²

Trade reoriented itself. Exchanges with the allied Swiss cities, notably Bern, developed. Relations with Lyon were maintained despite religious tensions. The Protestant networks in France, Germany, the Netherlands and England opened up new prospects. The city began to develop new industries, driven by the refugees: printing, cloth-making, silk-weaving and goldsmithing. These activities would lay the ground for the prosperity of the following decades.

The situation of Geneva in the years 1536 to 1541 illustrates a truth that financial centres periodically rediscover: independence has a cost. A small sovereign entity must finance its defence, maintain its alliances, organise its institutions and attract resources. It can do so only if it offers those who sustain it, whether merchants, craftsmen, refugees or creditors, a framework that is sufficiently secure and attractive. Geneva's success over the following centuries would depend on its capacity to build that framework.

Date	Event
1519	Combourgeoisie with Fribourg; execution of Philibert Berthelier
1526	Combourgeoisie with Bern and Fribourg
1528	Adoption of the Reformation in Bern
1532	Beginning of Guillaume Farel's preaching in Geneva
1534	Fribourg breaks off the combourgeoisie
1535	Disputation of Rive; suspension of the Mass; creation of the Hôpital général
1536	Bernese conquest of the Pays de Vaud; decision of the Conseil général to live according to the Gospel (21 May); publication of the <i>Institution</i> in Basel; arrival of Calvin
1537	Articles on the organisation of the Church, confession of faith and catechism
1538	Expulsion of Calvin and Farel
1538–1541	Calvin's stay in Strasbourg; second edition of the <i>Institution</i> (1539); marriage to Idelette de Bure (1540)
1541	Return of Calvin; adoption of the Ecclesiastical Ordinances

The dates in the table follow the commonly accepted chronology.

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS) (Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. “Habitants (Genève)”: the habitant is “the foreigner who settles in the city of Geneva, may reside, work and marry there, but enjoys no political rights”, his admission requiring from the sixteenth century onwards “the approval of the Council and [the] payment of a surety to the Hôpital général”; his children are the natifs; Wikipedia (en), “Republic of Geneva” (citoyens, bourgeois, habitants, natifs). ↩
2. Archives d’État de Genève, “Première période (1517-1555)”: elections of February 1555 returning four syndics favourable to Calvin, admission of some sixty Frenchmen to the bourgeoisie, uprising of the Perrinists on 16 May 1555, their expulsion and the consolidation of Calvin’s ecclesiastical authority; Wikipedia (en), art. “John Calvin”: on 16 May, the opponents “took to the streets in a drunken protest and attempted to burn down a house”, Perrin seizing the syndic’s baton before the collapse of the insurrection. ↩

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