

The finances of the revolutionary Republic

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

The Genevan revolution had to contend with considerable financial difficulties. State revenues fell as the economy slowed, while expenditure rose, in particular for the relief of the unemployed of the Fabrique, which had been hit by the loss of its markets and by the French crisis. The new regime resorted to extraordinary levies, often progressive, which fell upon large fortunes.¹

The position of the Genevan capitalists was particularly difficult. Their income, which had come largely from French annuities, shrank with the depreciation of the assignats and the difficulties of the French Treasury. Their property in Geneva was subject to the levies and at times confiscated. The part of their wealth invested in England or the Netherlands allowed them to survive, but those investments were themselves exposed to the hazards of the war between revolutionary France and the rest of Europe.

These years show how a political crisis can strike the income and the capital of asset holders at the same time. Exceptional taxation, confiscations, monetary depreciation and the loss of markets combined to reduce the wealth of the elite. For the financial centre, the revolutionary experience reinforced the conviction that international diversification and political stability are essential conditions for the preservation of wealth.

Worked example. In 1789 a Genevan rentier has an annual income of 10,000 livres, of which 7,000 come from French annuities and 3,000 from English funds. In 1795 his French annuities are paid to him in assignats that are now worth only a tenth of their face value, or 700 livres in real terms, and he must pay an extraordinary levy equal to one year's English income. His real disposable income for the year falls to practically 700 livres. The figures are fictitious; they illustrate the combination of monetary and fiscal losses suffered during the revolutionary period.

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Genève (canton)”: the revolutionary period was marked by an extraordinary tax on fortunes that fell heavily on the aristocrats and by the requirement of a civic oath in 1793; Wikipédia (fr), art. “Histoire de Genève”: the constitution approved in 1793 established extensive control by the citizens over the acts of the government. ↩

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-the-finances-of-the-revolutionary-republic