

The missions and the Geneva view of Africa

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In the nineteenth century, Protestant Geneva took part in the missionary movement that brought European pastors, physicians and teachers to Africa. The Mission romande, founded in the 1870s by the churches of French-speaking Switzerland, established itself in southern Mozambique and in the Transvaal, where it founded schools, hospitals and churches, and where several of its members studied the local languages and cultures.¹ Other Geneva and Swiss missionaries worked in West and Central Africa, often within French or English missionary societies.

These missions shaped the way the people of Geneva looked at Africa, somewhere between paternalism, scientific curiosity and humanitarian commitment. They educated generations of Africans in their schools, some of whom became leaders of their countries after independence. They also created networks between French-speaking Switzerland and regions of Africa that outlived the end of the colonial era.

In the twentieth century, missionary commitment found its continuation in humanitarian action and development cooperation. The International Committee of the Red Cross, whose history Part F traced, has been present in most African conflicts since independence. Geneva's non-governmental organisations, Swiss development cooperation and the institutions of International Geneva have made Africa one of their principal fields of activity. This tradition partly explains the particular sensitivity of Geneva public opinion to African questions, including when they call the financial centre into question.

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), article “Mozambique”: “The Swiss presence in Mozambique, a Portuguese colony since the sixteenth century, became significant from 1887 with the Mission romande”, whose missionaries Paul and Henri Berthoud published linguistic and ethnological studies; participation of Swiss nationals in commercial and agricultural enterprises (Boror, founded in 1899; the Angoche sisal company, 1922); consulate established in 1922; Dictionary of African Christian Biography (dacb.org), entries “Berthoud, Paul” and “Berthoud, Henri” (Mission romande in the Transvaal and at Lourenço Marques). ↩

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