

The response: the Confederates, Savoy and diplomacy

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

Geneva could not answer on the same ground. The city had neither an army capable of reopening the routes nor any means of bringing pressure to bear on the kingdom of France. Nor could it offer merchants privileges comparable to those Louis XI granted to Lyon, since it lacked full sovereignty and sufficient resources. Its response was therefore essentially diplomatic.

The Swiss cantons played a decisive part. The Archives d'État de Genève (Geneva State Archives) point out that when Louis XI issued severe measures against Geneva in 1462 to favour the fairs of Lyon, the Swiss intervened on the city's behalf, because it was not in their interest to see that route abandoned. According to this source, this was the first relationship between Geneva and the Swiss.¹ The cantons' intervention is explained by the tolls they levied on the route across the Plateau. If Genevan traffic collapsed, their revenues fell. Their solidarity rested on well-understood self-interest.

This first relationship deserves emphasis, because it opens a history that would lead, three and a half centuries later, to Geneva's entry into the Confederation. The alliances between Geneva and the Swiss cantons were born of commercial and strategic interests: Bern was a German-speaking city, Fribourg a bilingual one, and their interest in Geneva lay first and foremost in routes and tolls. This economic origin of the confederal ties is a lasting feature of Geneva's position within Switzerland, made up of belonging and singularity alike.

Savoy's position was more ambiguous. The duchy profited from the Geneva fairs through tolls and through the influence it exercised over the city. It also maintained close dynastic ties with the French crown, since Louis XI had married a princess of Savoy.² The history of the French customs administration recalls that the first economic conflict Louis XI

faced lay in his rivalry with the House of Savoy.³ Relations between Paris and Chambéry oscillated between alliance and tension, and Geneva found itself caught up in this game. On the Savoyard side, the reaction took the form of measures designed to attract trade — diplomatic agreements, the upkeep of bridges and the security of roads, the quality of the coinage — whose effect remained limited in the face of the shift in trade circuits.⁴

Genevan diplomacy thus revealed both its possibilities and its limits. It made it possible to mobilise allies with an interest in maintaining the traffic, but it could not compel the King of France to reverse his measures. A small financial centre facing a great state has few means at its disposal. It can seek allies, invoke principles, propose compromises and improve what it has to offer, but it cannot impose its will. This asymmetry is a constant that contemporary Switzerland knows well from its relations with the great powers and with the European Union.

1 Notes

1. Archives d'État de Genève, page "Économie", archives-etat-ge.ch (accessed September 2026). ↩
2. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS; Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. "Louis XI": marriage in 1451 to "Charlotte de Savoie, daughter of Duke Louis"; renewal in 1464 of the treaty of friendship concluded with the Confederates in 1453. ↩
3. Histoire-de-la-douane.org, article cited above. ↩

4. Emmanuel Coux, “Les relations entre Genève et la Savoie aux XVe-XVIe siècles sous l’influence des circuits économiques mondiaux” (flanerie-historique-dans-l-ancien-duche-de-savoie.over-blog.com): the Geneva fairs, favoured around 1390 by Pope Clement VII, Robert of Geneva, placed the city at the crossroads of the traditional Champagne–Genoa axis and the new Catalonia–Silesia axis; in 1463 the great fairs were “transferred” to Lyon and the Medici bank set up its principal branch in Lyon from 1465, reducing Geneva to the rank of a redistribution centre; the ducal administration responded with diplomatic agreements, notably with Aragon, with the upkeep of bridges and the security of roads, with a monetary policy attentive to the quality of the coinage and with religious investments intended to enhance the city’s prestige, measures the author considers insufficient in the face of the structural recomposition of trade, up to the rupture of 1536. ↩

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-response-the-confederates-savoy-and-diplomacy