

The revolutions of 1841 and 1846

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From the 1830s onwards, the conservative regime of the Restoration met with growing opposition. Artisans, the workers of the Fabrique, part of the bourgeoisie and the Catholics of the annexed communes challenged a system that reserved power to a wealthy elite. Liberal and democratic ideas, spreading from France and from the other Swiss cantons, fed this opposition.

A first revolution, in 1841, forced the election of a constituent assembly and the adoption of a more democratic constitution, which widened the franchise and strengthened the power of the citizens.¹ But the conservatives retained considerable influence, and tensions persisted.

In October 1846 a Radical revolution, led by James Fazy, overthrew the conservative government.² James Fazy, who came from a family of calico manufacturers and had trained as a journalist and politician in Paris, became the dominant figure in Genevan politics for nearly two decades. A new constitution, adopted in 1847, introduced universal male suffrage, separated Church and State more clearly and opened the way to a profound transformation of the city.³

The Radical revolution formed part of a broader Swiss movement. In the same year, the Radical and Liberal cantons confronted the alliance of the conservative Catholic cantons, the Sonderbund. The brief Sonderbund War of 1847 ended in victory for the Radicals and opened the way to the Federal Constitution of 1848, which transformed the confederation of states into a federal state.⁴

Caution. The Radical revolution of 1846 challenged the political dominance of an elite to which the bankers belonged. Its economic programme, described in the next chapter, sought to open up credit to new categories of entrepreneurs and to break the de facto monopoly of the great families over Genevan finance.

1 Notes

1. Wikipedia (fr), “Association du Trois-Mars”: association demanding the abolition of the property-based franchise, the reduction of the Council of State from eleven to seven members and increased legislative and budgetary powers for the Representative Council; on 22 November 1841, after a popular demonstration at the Treille during a sitting of the Representative Council, the authorities agreed to convene a constituent assembly; James Fazy took the lead of the association; Ville de Genève, “Entrée dans la Confédération”: the constitution that emerged from this movement partially democratised the institutions, while that of 1847 “establishes an elective democracy”; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Ferrier”: Jean-Henri Ferrier (1798–1872) delegate to the Constituent Assembly. ↩
2. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Fazy, James” (hls-dhs-dss.ch): James Fazy (1794–1878) “foments the revolution of 1846 and overthrows the government”; Ville de Genève, “Entrée dans la Confédération” (geneve.ch): the Constitution of 1841 partially democratised the institutions, while that of 1847 “establishes an elective democracy”. ↩
3. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Fazy, James”: Fazy was the author of the Genevan Constitution of 1847, “which enshrines the principle of representative democracy”; DHS, art. “Constitutions cantonales”: Geneva was the first, in 1847, to introduce the direct election of the government by the people; Hospice général, “Notre histoire” (hospicegeneral.ch): the Constitution of 1847 stipulated for the first time that “the distribution of charity” is a branch of public administration. ↩
4. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Sonderbund”: defensive alliance concluded at Lucerne on 11 December 1845 by seven conservative Catholic cantons; dissolution pronounced by the Diet on 20 July 1847; campaign of November 1847 under the command of General Dufour (twenty-five days; 60 dead and 386 wounded among the Diet’s troops, 33 dead and 124 wounded on the other side); from February 1848 a commission of the Diet drafted the new Federal Constitution, adopted the same year. ↩

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