

The Société générale de surveillance

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The creation of the Société générale de surveillance was a decisive stage in the formation of the Geneva commodity-trading ecosystem. Founded in Rouen in 1878 to inspect grain cargoes, the company moved to Geneva in 1915 and there developed a worldwide business of inspection, verification, testing and certification.¹ The Federal Department of Foreign Affairs cites it among the companies that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, made Geneva one of the most important centres of international trade in goods.² It is today presented as the world leader in inspection.³

In commodity trading, inspection performs a function comparable to that of the public weighing scales and the inspectors of the medieval fairs, described in Part A: it guarantees that the goods delivered correspond to the goods sold, in quantity and in quality. This guarantee is indispensable when buyer and seller never meet and the goods travel thousands of kilometres. Inspection certificates are a condition for payment of cargoes, in particular under the documentary credits that banks grant to traders. The presence of the world's leading inspection company therefore gave Geneva an infrastructure of trust that eased the arrival of the traders.

1 Notes

1. SGS, founded in Rouen in 1878 by Henri Goldstuck for the inspection of grain cargoes, head office transferred to Geneva in 1915, name Société Générale de Surveillance adopted in 1919; more than 99,000 employees and 2,700 laboratories and sites today; SGS, “Our History”, [sgs.com](https://www.sgs.com) (accessed September 2026). ↩
2. Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, cited above. ↩

3. “Matières premières. Genève, plate-forme mondiale dans le négoce”,
Le Temps, 16 February 2023. ↩

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