

The waves of the Refuge and the Geneva Fabrique — overview and summary

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

For more than two centuries, Geneva was a place of refuge for persecuted Protestants. The refugees brought their capital, their skills and their networks, and they transformed the economy of the city. This chapter distinguishes the main waves of the Refuge, describes how the Republic received and managed them, and shows how they fed the formation of export industries that enriched Geneva and prepared the rise of its banking.

1 In five sentences

1. Geneva received two great waves of Protestant refugees, in the sixteenth century and after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, the second wave making the city a hub of the Huguenot exodus.
2. Under the watchful eye of France, the Republic practised a cautious and selective reception, which retained artisans, merchants and capitalists useful to its economy.
3. The refugees contributed to the rise of the Fabrique – watchmaking, jewellery, enamelling – and of export industries such as printed cottons (indiennes) and gilding, often favoured by the restrictions imposed by neighbouring countries.
4. This prosperity took shape within a legally stratified society, in which the natifs and the habitants were excluded from political power and from certain economic activities.

The waves of the Refuge and the Geneva Fabrique — overview and summary

5. In the eighteenth century, the fortunes born of trade and manufacturing turned towards financial investments abroad, in particular French government debt, which made Geneva a capital centre exposed to sovereign risk.

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-waves-of-the-refuge-and-the-geneva-fabrique-overview-and-summary