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Geneva International

The years 1864 and 1872 were two important milestones on the way to the modern-day international city of Geneva: 1864 saw the signing of the first Geneva Convention, which brought the realization of Henri Dunant's dream conceived five years before on the battlefield of Solferino, viz the creation of the International Red Cross, whose name and mission are closely associated with the city; and 1872 was the year of the arbitration of the Alabama claims, which ended in the peaceful settlement of a major dispute between the USA and the United Kingdom.

Geneva assumed a new dimension with the appearance of Jean Calvin in the sixteenth century, becoming a place of refuge, capital of the Protestant world, a living theocracy opposed to Catholic Rome. Later on it was Jean-Jacques Rousseau—he signed his works as a "citizen of Geneva"—who made the city one of the symbols of the new order that was to replace the Ancien Régime. Nearer to our times, in the first half of the nineteenth century, Jean-Jacques de Sellon, another Genevese, though one less well known than he deserves to be, founded a "Society of Peace" and advocated the creation of a tribunal of arbitration to settle disputes between states.

The Geneva we know today took on its form and scope at the end of the First World War. In 1919 the international community converted it from a small town of 170 000 inhabitants into the capital of world peace by choosing it as the headquarters of the League of Nations, in which were invested the hopes of nations exhausted by four years of merciless war. Wishing to convey the full significance of this choice to the population, the government of Geneva issued a solemn proclamation in which it spoke of the "luminous perspectives charged with responsibility that are being opened up to the city". In the interval between the two World Wars numerous organizations established themselves in Geneva. One of them was the International Labour Office which watches over the interests of workers worldwide. The city also became a political centre: statesmen met here for interminable conferences on disarmament that revolved around secretariats composed of international functionaries from all parts of the globe.

The League of Nations was unfortunately ill-starred. From 1939 to 1945 the world was once more plunged into war. Geneva maintained its role only through the Red Cross, and in the Palais des Nations, which was completed a few months before the outbreak of war, halls and corridors remained empty and useless throughout the hostilities. At the end of the war the peoples

placed their hopes in a new organization, that of the United Nations. This time New York was chosen as headquarters, but Geneva remained the European centre and hosted the specialized "technical" activities. Numerous non-governmental agencies also set up house in Geneva.

After having been a strategic junction, the site of commercial fairs, a religious centre, the cradle of humanitarianism and the world's moral capital, it has now been promoted to the rank of a privileged venue for international discussions at the very highest level.

It is the smallest of big cities and the biggest of small ones. A tiny republic, it houses the world's greatest concentration of international institutions and functionaries, whether considered on a relative or an absolute scale. On a territory of 284 square kilometres, over 365 000 inhabitants rub shoulders with 16 international organizations, over 150 non-governmental agencies, 123 permanent missions, 5 observers, 8 special missions and 3 world commissions. Nearly all the countries in the world are represented here. Some 22 000 jobs, held by 10 per cent of the total working population, provide livelihoods for 35 000 "internationals". Around 85 000 delegates attend over 1300 meetings a year which hold a total of 14 000 business sessions.

This impressive sound box is used daily by statesmen, diplomats and the champions of all imaginable causes. Other aspects of modern Geneva are its roles as a centre of technical cooperation (CNUCED) and of economic negotiations (GATT) and as an instrument of Swiss foreign policy. Men of goodwill are always welcome here. Although the citizens of Geneva, like the rest of the Swiss people, voted against Switzerland joining the United Nations in 1986, for reasons connected with Swiss neutrality, no one here contests the indispensable function of the UN and its specialized agencies, or questions the value of this universal community in which a proportion of 35 per cent of foreigners can live without any racial or religious problems—a record figure in the industrialized countries.

The Swiss Federal Council stated on 29 May 1969 that "Geneva participates in one of the most important national tasks to an extent not equalled by any other canton in the country". Open to the world and to ideas from all points of the compass, an astonishing melting-pot that is sensitive to and occasionally daunted by the role history has allocated to it, Geneva is nevertheless desirous of being the meeting-place of all searchers for peace. It even dreams at times of putting its signature to the agreement that would settle once and for all the conflicts and the miseries of the whole world.

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