

The Helvetic Revolution and the end of the old order

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The old order of Basel, with its guild constitution and its patrician government, came to an end in 1798 with the Helvetic Revolution. Remarkably, the revolution was prepared and led in part by a member of the Basel elite. Peter Ochs, born in 1752 into a wealthy merchant family, was the chief magistrate of the city, the *Oberstzunftmeister*, and a man of the Enlightenment who admired the French Revolution. In 1797, he travelled to Paris, where he negotiated with the French Directory and drafted, at the request of the French, a constitution for a unified Swiss republic.¹

In January 1798, before the French invasion of Switzerland, Basel carried out a peaceful revolution: the city granted political equality to the rural population of its territory, abolished the privileges of the citizens and the guilds, and adopted a new constitution. Basel was the first Swiss canton to abolish the old order voluntarily. A few weeks later, French troops invaded Switzerland, overthrew the governments of the other cantons and imposed the Helvetic Republic, a centralised state modelled on the French Republic, whose constitution was largely based on Ochs's draft.

The Helvetic Republic lasted only five years. It was unpopular, divided by internal conflicts and burdened by the costs of the French occupation. In 1803, Napoleon replaced it with the Act of Mediation, which restored the cantons and a federal structure. Ochs, regarded by many Swiss as a traitor who had delivered his country to the French, lost his influence, although he remained active in Basel politics. His reputation has been partly rehabilitated by modern historians, who see him as a precursor of the Swiss federal state of 1848.

The Helvetic Revolution had lasting consequences for the economy of Basel. It abolished the guild monopolies and introduced, in principle, the freedom of trade, although the guilds regained some of their privileges after 1803. It abolished the feudal dues and tithes in principle, subject to

redemption. It gave political rights to the rural population, which ended the formal subordination of the countryside to the city. And it unified, for a few years, the Swiss currency and weights and measures. These reforms prepared the economic modernisation of the nineteenth century.

1 Notes

1. On Peter Ochs (1752–1821), Oberstzunftmeister of Basel, his mission to Paris in 1797 and his draft of the constitution of the Helvetic Republic (1798), see HLS, article "Ochs, Peter". To be verified. ↩

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