

Building a state from nothing: the first months

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The Grand Council met for the first time in Bellinzona on 20 May 1803. On 22 May it elected Gottardo Zurini as its first president and Vincenzo Dalberti as president of the Small Council.¹ The Small Council chose Annibale Pellegrini, the leader of the evening crowd of 15 February 1798, as its secretary. At its first meeting on 24 May 1803 it dealt with the judiciary and proposed a law on the organization of the Court of Appeal, which the Grand Council approved on the following day. The canton was given one Court of Appeal of thirteen members, eight district courts and thirty-eight courts of the justices of the peace, one for each circle, while the tribunals of the Helvetic cantons of Lugano and Bellinzona were abolished.² The priority was significant. Before it had a budget, a tax law or a building of its own, the new government organized the courts, because a territory without functioning courts could not protect property or enforce contracts.

The second priority was fiscal relief. The government announced "l'abolizione delle gravezze tanto impopolari", the abolition of the unpopular burdens introduced by the unitary Helvetic government. The new canton thus began without the direct taxes that had been the most hated feature of the Helvetic order. For half a century it financed itself through indirect taxes, regalian rights, tolls and customs duties. The section on 1848 below shows how that choice shaped its finances until the Federal Constitution of 1848 took away the customs and the post. On 26 May 1803 the Small Council fixed the colours of the canton, red and blue, which it described as dear to the Ticinese people, and adopted a seal with an oval shield divided vertically into red and blue, framed by olive branches.

The new state also had to manage functions that it could not yet perform itself. From 1804 to 1809 the Zurich postal administration ran the posts of Ticino under a convention that paid the canton an annual indemnity of

220 gold louis, about 3,500 francs. From 1809 to 1834 the post was leased to Lucerne for less than 4,000 francs a year.³ In 1804 the Grand Council passed the first school law, which required a primary school in every commune and attendance by all minors under threat of fines on fathers and guardians, but which lacked the regulations and funds needed to make it effective.⁴ These early arrangements show a canton that had sovereignty on paper, a tiny administration and almost no revenue of its own.

1 The occupation of 1810–1813

The sovereignty of the Mediation canton was soon tested. Napoleon's Kingdom of Italy, the successor of the Cisalpine Republic, disputed the Mendrisiotto with the canton and controlled the grain and salt on which Ticino depended. On 31 October 1810 Italian troops occupied Ticino. They remained until 7 November 1813, when Napoleon's defeat at Leipzig forced their withdrawal.⁵ The occupation did not lead to annexation, but it showed how fragile the existence of the canton remained as long as its powerful neighbour controlled the grain and salt on which it lived. On 29 December 1813 ten of the old cantons declared the Act of Mediation abrogated, and Ticino entered the uncertain period of the Restoration.

2 Notes

1. Ugo Sadis, "175 anni di autonomia cantonale", Scuola ticinese, no. 64, https://m4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DS/Rivista_scuola_ticinese/ST_n.64/ST_64_Sadis_175_anni_autonomia_cantonale.pdf. ↩
2. "Primi lavori del Piccolo Consiglio" (above). ↩
3. Marazzi, study of the cantonal postal service, Scuola ticinese, no. 86, plates XV–XVI, https://m4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DS/Rivista_scuola_ticinese/ST_n.86/ST_86_Marazzi_introduzione_servizio_postale_cantonale.pdf. ↩
4. "La prima legge sulla scuola", Scuola ticinese, no. 65, plate 13, https://m4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DS/Rivista_scuola_ticinese/ST_n.65/ST_65_tavola_13_prima_legge_sulla_scuola.pdf. ↩
5. Fankhauser, "Mediazione" (above); Dubini (above). ↩

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