

From the "tunnel war" to the NRLA

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The idea of a base tunnel, a flat railway through the Alps at the level of the valleys, was discussed from the 1960s. On 22 January 1964 nine cantons founded the Permanent Conference of Gotthard Cantons to promote a railway base tunnel, and in 1968 it merged with the Gotthard committee. A federal commission voted in 1970 by 15 to 3 for the Gotthard route, and its report of September 1971 forecast that a base line could carry about 360 trains a day.¹ The project was delayed for two decades by the competition between the Gotthard, the Lötschberg–Simplon and an eastern route through the Grisons (the Splügen), a repetition of the nineteenth-century rivalry that contemporaries called a "tunnel war". On 10 May 1989 the Federal Council decided on a network solution, with a Gotthard base tunnel, a shorter Lötschberg base tunnel and improvements to the eastern connections.

The people approved the Federal Decree on the construction of the Swiss transalpine railway line on 27 September 1992 with 63.6 per cent. The project, estimated at about CHF 10.1 billion, provided for base tunnels on both the Gotthard and the Lötschberg–Simplon axes. Only Uri and the two Appenzells rejected it.² Two years later, on 20 February 1994, the people accepted the Alpine Initiative with 51.9 per cent, against the recommendation of the Federal Council and Parliament. The initiative required that transalpine goods traffic from border to border be carried by rail within ten years and prohibited any increase in the capacity of transit roads in the Alpine region. Uri approved it with 87.6 per cent, while the French-speaking cantons rejected it decisively.³ The article on the protection of the Alps, now Art. 84 of the Federal Constitution, gave the railway project a constitutional purpose that went beyond transport capacity: the protection of the Alpine region against the negative effects of transit traffic.⁴

1 The base tunnels of 2016 and 2020

The financing of the NRLA and the other large railway projects was secured by the vote of 29 November 1998, which created a special fund (see the next section).⁵ The Lötschberg base tunnel, 34.6 kilometres long, opened on 9 December 2007. The Gotthard base tunnel, 57 kilometres long between Erstfeld and Bodio, was inaugurated on 1 June 2016 in the presence of the President of the Confederation, the German Chancellor, the French President and the Italian Prime Minister. Scheduled service began on 11 December 2016.⁶ It runs up to 2,300 metres below the surface of the mountain, and its two single-track tubes and the connecting galleries amount to about 152 kilometres of tunnels. Construction took seventeen years, about 28.2 million tonnes of rock were excavated, and nine workers died in accidents among a workforce of about 2,600.⁷ The tunnel cost about CHF 12.2 billion, the Lötschberg CHF 5.3 billion and the Ceneri CHF 3.6 billion, while the extension of the Gotthard axis to a 4-metre corner height for lorry trailers and containers cost almost CHF 1 billion.⁸

The Ceneri base tunnel, 15.4 kilometres long between Camorino near Bellinzona and Vezia near Lugano, had been under construction since 2 June 2006. It was inaugurated on 4 September 2020 and entered scheduled service with the timetable change of 12 and 13 December 2020. Its completion concluded the construction of the NRLA, 28 years after the vote of 1992.⁹ For Ticino the Ceneri tunnel had an effect comparable to that of the Ceneri line of 1882. It reduced the travel time between Bellinzona and Lugano from about 30 to about 15 minutes and between Locarno and Lugano from about 50 to about 30 minutes, which made the canton a single labour market served by the regional TILO network. Zurich and Lugano are now less than two hours apart.¹⁰

2 The modal shift and its limits

The constitutional goal of transferring transalpine freight to rail has not been reached. The Federal Act on the Transfer of Heavy Goods Traffic from Road to Rail sets a target of 650,000 transalpine lorry journeys a year. In 2024 there were about 960,000, and the share of rail in transalpine freight fell to about 70.3 per cent at the end of 2024, 2.6 percentage points less than in 2022.¹¹ The Federal Council attributes the stagnation partly to the slow construction of the access lines in Germany and Italy and has supported their modernization. It has also proposed measures to support single-wagon freight and combined transport and to subject electric lorries to the heavy vehicle fee, so that rail remains competitive after the end of the rolling motorway (*Rollende Landstrasse*) in December 2025. The base

tunnels are therefore a Swiss investment whose return depends on the infrastructure of the two states that in 1869 and 1871 had paid for the original Gotthard line.

3 Notes

1. Meister (as above), for the Permanent Conference of 22 January 1964, the merger of 12 September 1968, the vote of 15 to 3 and the report of 16 September 1971 and the decision of 10 May 1989. Meister also cites a communiqué of 1973 entitled "Vom Tunnelkrieg zur Verständigung". ↩
2. Swissvotes, short description of vote no. 382 (27 September 1992), <https://swissvotes.ch/vote/382.00/kurzbeschreibung-de.pdf>. ↩
3. Swissvotes, short description of vote no. 408 (20 February 1994), <https://swissvotes.ch/vote/408.00/kurzbeschreibung-de.pdf>. ↩
4. Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation of 18 April 1999, SR 101, Art. 84, English text at droit-bilingue.ch, <https://droit-bilingue.ch/en-it/1/10/101-84-99.html>. ↩
5. Swissvotes, short description of vote no. 445 (29 November 1998), <https://swissvotes.ch/vote/445.00/kurzbeschreibung-de.pdf>. ↩
6. Federal Office of Transport (FOT), Neue Wege durch Europa. Die Neue Eisenbahn-Alpentransversale (NEAT) (2019), https://www.bav.admin.ch/dam/bav/de/dokumente/themen/neat/die_neue_eisenbahn-alpentransversaleneat.pdf.download.pdf/die_neue_eisenbahn-alpentransversaleneat.pdf, for the Lötschberg and the length of the Gotthard tunnel; TunnelTalk, "Grand opening of world record Gotthard Baseline", 1 June 2016, <https://tunneltalk.com/Gotthard-Baseline-1June2016-Opening-celebrations.php>, for the ceremony and the start of service on 11 December 2016. ↩
7. Ticino Turismo, "La nuova ferrovia transalpina (NFTA)", <https://www.ticino.ch/it/campaigns/alpransit.html>, for the depth and the 152 kilometres; TunnelTalk (as above), for the seventeen years, the excavated material and the nine deaths among 2,600 workers. ↩
8. FOT, Neue Wege durch Europa (as above). ↩
9. FOT, SBB and AlpTransit Gotthard AG, "Cerimonia di inaugurazione del Ceneri nel 2020", 29 August 2019, <https://www.newsd.admin.ch/newsd/message/attachments/58206.pdf>; Ticino Turismo (as above), for the start of construction on 2 June 2006. ↩

10. Ticino Turismo (as above). ↩
11. Swiss Federal Council, press release "Bundesrat setzt sich für leistungsfähige NEAT-Zulaufstrecken ein", 19 November 2025, <https://www.admin.ch/de/newsb/BeYR4WQfaWWdnbkUH7i9t;plattformj.ch>, "Alpenquerender Güterverkehr", 19 November 2025, <https://www.plattformj.ch/artikel/237926/>. Federal Act of 19 December 2008 on the Transfer of Heavy Goods Traffic from Road to Rail (Güterverkehrsverlagerungsgesetz, GVVG), SR 740.1, Art. 3 para. 1, <https://www.droit-bilingue.ch/de-fr/7/74/740.1-3-6.html>: "das Ziel von höchstens 650 000 Fahrten pro Jahr", to be reached under para. 2 "spätestens zwei Jahre nach Inbetriebnahme des Gotthard-Basistunnels". Both sources also cover the measures proposed by the Federal Council. ↩

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