

Italian unification and Escher's conversion

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Two events in the early 1860s decided the question. The first was the unification of Italy. As long as Lombardy belonged to Austria, Piedmont had an interest in routes that avoided Austrian territory, which favoured the Lukmanier. After 1859 and the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, the new state controlled the whole plain of the Po and could choose the route that best connected Milan and Genoa with northern Europe. A historian of the Ticinese railway question described Italian unification as a "beneficial upheaval" in the debate.¹ Koller and Wetli travelled to Turin to win over the government there. According to the history of the Gotthard committee, the Italian side set three conditions for its support: precise construction plans, solid Swiss co-financing and a substantial security deposit.² In 1865 and 1866 the Italian government had the alternatives examined by a commission under the minister Stefano Jacini. In its final vote the Gotthard received eight votes, the Splügen three and the Lukmanier none. In February 1866 the Italian government committed itself to support only the Gotthard.³

The second event was Alfred Escher's change of side. As president of the Nordostbahn, Escher had at first favoured an eastern Alpine route, which would have fed traffic into the Zurich network. In the early 1860s he concluded that only the Gotthard could attract the subsidies of Italy and the German states and that a central route through Lucerne and Zug could also be connected to Zurich. On 7 August 1863 the Gotthard committee was reorganized as the Gotthard Association (*Gotthardvereinigung*), which now comprised fifteen cantons and the two largest railway companies, the NOB and the SCB. Escher became its president and the driving force of the project.⁴ The Lucerne politician Josef Zingg was his closest collaborator in the association and later vicepresident of the company.⁵ Escher's conversion joined the financial power of Zurich to the geographical logic of the central route. It also gave the project a leader who controlled both

the largest Swiss railway company and the largest Swiss commercial bank, a concentration of roles that later contributed to his fall.

1 Ticino between the routes

Ticino's position was more complicated than the later celebration of the Gotthard suggests. The canton wanted a railway at almost any price, but its regions had different interests. The Sopraceneri, with Bellinzona, Locarno and the Blenio valley, benefited from either the Lukmanier or the Gotthard, since both would descend to Biasca and Bellinzona. The Sottoceneri, with Lugano and Mendrisio, depended on a line over or under the Monte Ceneri to Lugano and Chiasso, which only the Gotthard project included with certainty. Between 1861 and 1869 the Grand Council therefore granted concessions to several promoters in turn. In 1861 it approved a concession to the British promoter R. G. Sillar for the internal lines, with preferential rights for both the Lukmanier and the Gotthard. In December 1864 Sillar transferred these rights to the European Central Railway Company. In the autumn of 1866 the Grand Council rejected a proposal of the Lucerne committee, accepted instead a capitulation with the group of the British diplomat Sir James Hudson and the Ticinese Genazzini, secured by a deposit of CHF 900,000, and granted a Lukmanier concession to the Geneva bank Hentsch & Cie.⁶

None of these concessions led to construction. In the summer of 1868 the Grand Council approved two local lines, Chiasso–Lugano for the group of Lavizzari and Frascaia and Locarno–Biasca for a Locarno group, and promised each a subsidy of CHF 1 million. On 15 May 1869 it assigned all its railway privileges to the Lucerne Gotthard committee. Ticino's total subsidy to the Gotthard enterprise finally amounted to CHF 3 million, a large sum for one of the poorest cantons of the Confederation. A contemporary wrote that the canton had given "everything it could give".⁷ Carlo Cattaneo, the Lombard federalist who lived in exile at Castagnola (Chapter C.II), had campaigned for the Gotthard in writing and had translated the Jacini report into a public argument for the central route. He died in February 1869, a few months before the conference that decided the matter.⁸

Common misconception. The Gotthard railway is often presented as the obvious choice that Switzerland made for itself. The sources show a long competition between three routes, decided less by Swiss planning than by the money of foreign states. The Lukmanier had the support of the eastern cantons, of Piedmont and at first of Ticino. The Gotthard won after Italian unification, when the Italian government chose it in 1866 and offered the

largest subsidy, and after Alfred Escher brought the Nordostbahn and Zurich's capital over to the central route in 1863. Ticino itself granted concessions for both routes until 1869.

2 Notes

1. Bruno Caizzi, "La fine di una tormentata vicenda ferroviaria e la vittoria del San Gottardo", Scuola ticinese no. 102, https://m4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DS/Rivista_scuola_ticinese/ST_n.102/ST_102_Caizzi_fine_tormentata_vicenda_ferroviaria_e_vittoria_del_San_Gottardo.pdf: "l'unificazione italiana avrebbe provocato un benefico sconvolgimento". The title is given as it appears in the file name of the online edition. ↩
2. Meister, Geschichte des Gotthard-Komitees (as above), on the journey of Koller and Wetli to Turin and the three conditions set there. Meister attributes the conditions to Cavour but dates the journey to 1862, after Cavour's death on 6 June 1861. The text therefore names no minister. ↩
3. Caizzi, "La fine di una tormentata vicenda" (as above), for the Jacini inquiry of 1865–1866 (Gotthard eight votes, Splügen three, Lukmanier none) and the Italian commitment of February 1866. ↩
4. Meister, Geschichte des Gotthard-Komitees (as above), for the reorganization of 7 August 1863, the fifteen cantons, the NOB and the SCB, and Escher's conversion; HLS, art. "Gottardo, Ferrovia del" (Hans-Peter Bärtschi, Italian translation Sandro Guzzi-Heeb, version of 09.01.2007), <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/042006/>, for the union of 1863 under Escher's leadership; HLS, art. "Escher, Alfred" (as above), for his presidency of the association from 1863. ↩
5. Verkehrshaus der Schweiz, collection database, entry "Gotthard-Vereinigung (Grosse Gotthardvereinigung)", <https://sammlung.verkehrshaus.ch/de/artists/artist/20112>, naming Josef Zingg-Kopp (1828–1891); H. Etter, "Vom Bau der Gotthardbahn und den Männern, die dabei waren", Schweizer Illustrierte Zeitung no. 20, Swiss National Library e-dossier, https://www.nb.admin.ch/dam/snl/fr/dokumente/vermitteln/e-dossier/hans_etter_vom_baudergotthardbahnunddenmaennerndiedabeiware_nins.pdf.download.pdf/hans_etter_vom_baudergotthardbahnunddenmaennerndiedabeiware_nins.pdf, naming J. Zingg as vice-president. ↩

6. Caizzi, "La fine di una tormentata vicenda" (as above), for the Sillar concession of 1861, its transfer in December 1864, the Hudson–Genazzini capitulation with a deposit of CHF 900,000 and the Lukmanier concession to Hentsch & Co. in the autumn of 1866. ↩
7. Caizzi, "La fine di una tormentata vicenda" (as above), for the local lines approved in the summer of 1868, the subsidies of CHF 1 million each, the assignment of 15 May 1869 and the total cantonal subsidy of CHF 3 million ("tutto quello che poteva dare"). ↩
8. Caizzi, "La fine di una tormentata vicenda" (as above), on Cattaneo's appeal for the Gotthard and his translation of the Jacini report; Treccani, *Enciclopedia italiana*, art. "Cattaneo, Carlo", <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/carlo-cattaneo/> (died at "Castagnola, Lugano, 1869"); Wikipedia (it), "Carlo Cattaneo", https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carlo_Cattaneo (used as a last resort), for the date of 6 February 1869. See Chapter C.II. ↩

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