

Liberi e Svizzeri: what the crowd demanded

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What happened in the evening of 15 February was as important as the fighting of the morning. A crowd assembled on the Piazza Grande, led by Annibale Pellegrini of Ponte Tresa, a lawyer who would become the first secretary of the cantonal government in 1803. The crowd demanded, according to the report of the Confederate plenipotentiary Buman, "their Swiss freedom, to govern themselves". Among the organizers of the movement the sources name Giovan Battista Quadri, Giovanni Reali, Felice Bellasi, Zaccaria Re and the Riva brothers.¹ The citizens then raised a liberty tree. Crowning it with a hat of the kind attributed to William Tell, a pointed substitute for the red Jacobin cap of the Cisalpines, they adopted the cry *Liberi e Svizzeri*.²

Contemporaries and later historians distinguished two parties in Lugano from that day: the *libero-svizzeri*, who wanted liberty within Switzerland, and the *libero-cisalpini*, who wanted liberty through union with Milan. The slogan combined two demands. The word *liberi* meant the end of subjection, the abolition of the bailiffs and the right of the former subjects to govern themselves on equal terms with the old cantons. The word *Svizzeri* meant the rejection of Milan and the choice of the Confederation as the political community within which that liberty would be exercised. Both halves were necessary, since a Swiss connection without liberty meant the continuation of the bailiwicks and liberty without it meant absorption by the Cisalpine state.

Essentials. On 15 February 1798 Cisalpine partisans attempted to seize Lugano and were repelled within about an hour by the volunteer corps created in 1797 and by the townspeople. The same evening the citizens demanded selfgovernment within Switzerland and raised a liberty tree with the motto *Liberi e Svizzeri*. The episode decided that the Italian bailiwicks would remain in the Swiss political space, at a moment when the Cisalpine Republic had just annexed the Italian subject lands of the Grisons.

It also defined the double programme of the following decades: equality with the old cantons and independence from Milan.

1 Release from subjection and the provisional governments

The ruling cantons drew the consequences quickly, because the Old Confederation itself was collapsing under French pressure in the same weeks. Led by Basel, the sovereign cantons released the Italian bailiwicks from subjection in February and March 1798.³ The former bailiwicks constituted themselves as provisional free republics with their own governments. On 14 March 1798 the provisional government of Lugano addressed the population with a sentence that summed up the new identity: "La qualità di cittadino svizzero sia per te il più bello di tutti i titoli", may the quality of Swiss citizen be for you the finest of all titles.

The provisional republics lasted only a few weeks. In Paris and in the headquarters of General Brune several plans for the reorganization of Switzerland were discussed. One of them would have divided the country into three republics, among them a "Tellgovia" made up of the southern and central territories, with Ticino subdivided into five cantons. The Paris Directory rejected these schemes and imposed a single, unitary republic.⁴ On 12 April 1798 the Helvetic Republic replaced the Old Confederation, and on 14 April 1798 the former Italian bailiwicks entered it as two cantons, Lugano and Bellinzona.⁵ The choice of February had thus been honoured, but in a form that the Luganese had not chosen: membership of a centralized state organized on the French model.

The weeks between February and April 1798 left a lasting imprint on the political vocabulary of Ticino. Lugano still remembers the date of 15 February, while the motto *Liberi e Svizzeri* became the self-description of the canton founded in 1803. The episode also fixed a pattern that recurs in the history of the financial centre. Each time that the territory was offered integration into a larger Italian state, whether by Cisalpine partisans in 1798, by the Kingdom of Italy in 1810 or by irredentists in the twentieth century, its inhabitants chose the Confederation, with its decentralized institutions and its lighter public burdens. Chapter D.I returns to the irredentist pressure of the Fascist period.

2 Notes

1. "I moti di Lugano del 1798 e del 1799" (above); on Pellegrini, "Primi lavori del Piccolo Consiglio", Scuola ticinese, no. 65, plate 12,

- https://m4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DS/Rivista_scuola_ticinese/ST_n.65/ST_65_tavola_12_primi_lavori_Piccolo_Consiglio.pdf. ↩
2. City of Lugano, "Corpo Volontari Luganesi" (above); Businger (above). ↩
 3. Mondada, "Dies natalis" (above). The dates of release by each group of ruling cantons are discussed in Chapter A.II. ↩
 4. "Periodo della Repubblica elvetica: i due Cantoni", Scuola ticinese, no. 65, plate 6, https://m4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DS/Rivista_scuola_ticinese/ST_n.65/ST_65_tavola_6_periodo_repubblica_elvetica_i_due_Cantoni.pdf. ↩
 5. Andreas Fankhauser, "Helvetische Republik", in Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz (HLS), version of 27 January 2011, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/009797/2011-01-27/>; Giuseppe Negro, "Lugano (Kanton)", HLS, version of 19 November 2014, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/008637/>. ↩

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