

Revolt, critique and the end of subjection, 1755–1798

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Confederate rule in the south was remarkably stable for more than two centuries. There were petitions, local conflicts and occasional violence, but no general uprising against the ruling cantons until the eighteenth century. Two developments then undermined the system. The first was the attempt of Uri to strengthen its control over the Leventina, which provoked the revolt of 1755 and its bloody repression. The second was the Enlightenment critique of the bailiwicks by Swiss authors, which made the Italian subject lands a symbol of everything that was wrong with the old Confederation. The French Revolution and the Italian campaigns of Bonaparte then brought the system to an end within a few weeks in 1798.¹

1 The revolt of the Leventina, 1755

The Leventina had enjoyed privileges that distinguished it from the other bailiwicks: its own council, its own officers, the right to bear arms and a share in the administration of guardianships and communal property. Older disputes over tolls, ecclesiastical benefices and the administration of justice came to a head in 1754, when the valley's parliament opposed new provisions on guardianship (*curatela*) issued by Uri. The valley regarded these measures as a violation of its liberties. On 8 May 1755 the rebels seized the *landfogto* of Uri.²

The revolt collapsed quickly. Troops of Uri and of other Confederate cantons occupied the valley, which submitted without significant fighting. The repression was severe. On 2 June 1755 the three leaders of the revolt, Giovan Antonio Forni, Giuseppe Sartore and Lorenzo Orsi, were publicly executed at Faido.³ Uri imposed a new and restrictive statute, abolished the parliament of the Leventina and strengthened the powers of its *landfogto*, so that the valley was thereafter governed like an ordinary subject territory until 1798. The executions left a lasting mark on the collective memory of the valley. In the nineteenth century they were commemorated as a symbol

of the struggle for freedom, and Stefano Franscini, who came from Bodio in the Leventina, used them in his writings as evidence of the injustice of the old regime.⁴

2 The Enlightenment critique

The eighteenth century produced a literature of critique that turned the Italian bailiwicks into a cause for Swiss reformers. The most influential texts came from within the ruling cantons. The Zurich pastor Hans Rudolf Schinz travelled through the Italian bailiwicks and published in the 1780s a detailed description of their geography, economy and administration, which documented both the poverty of the valleys and the abuses of the governors.⁵ Karl Viktor von Bonstetten, a Bernese patrician of the Enlightenment who served as his canton's delegate at the *sindacato* in the 1790s, wrote letters on the Italian bailiwicks of Lugano, Mendrisio, Locarno and the Vallemaggia in which he described the venality of justice and the neglect of the population with the eye of a reformer who shared responsibility for what he criticized.⁶

These writings were part of a broader movement of self-criticism within the Swiss elite, associated with the Helvetic Society (founded in 1761–1762) and with the physiocratic and economic societies of Bern and Zurich. They did not lead to reform before 1798. The constitutional structure of the common lordships made reform almost impossible, since any change required the consent of all co-owners, and the cantons that profited most from the offices had no reason to agree. The critique nonetheless prepared the ground for the rapid collapse of the system when external pressure came.

3 Notes

1. Canton of Ticino, Divisione della cultura e degli studi universitari, "Tante patrie separate e sottomesse", in the online publication Ticino 1803 – nascita di un cantone, <https://www4.ti.ch/decs/dcsu/pubblicazioni/ticino-1803-nascita-di-un-cantone/tante-patrie-separate-e-sottomesse> (the eight Italian bailiwicks and their rulers; institutions that, "irrigidite nel corso dei secoli, non avrebbero retto all'urto dirompente di una società in piena evoluzione"); Hans Stadler, "Leventina, rivolta della", in DSS, version of 18 June 2020, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/017207/>. ↩
2. Hans Stadler, "Leventina, rivolta della", in DSS, version of 18 June 2020, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/017207/>. ↩

3. Stadler, "Leventina, rivolta della" (above), which records the executions at Faido on 2 June 1755 of Giovan Antonio Forni, Lorenzo Orsi and Giuseppe Sartore and the consequences for the valley. See also Canton of Ticino, Scuola ticinese no. 65, "Tavola 5: La rivolta leventinese del 1755", https://m4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DS/Rivista_scuola_ticinese/ST_n.65/ST_65_tavola_5_rivolta_leventinese_1755.pdf. ↩
4. Stefano Franscini, *La Svizzera italiana*, 2 vols (Lugano 1837–1840); *laRegione*, report on a sculpture commemorating the executed men in Faido, <https://www.laregione.ch/cantone/bellinzonese/1367279/>. ↩
5. Schinz, *Beyträge* (above). ↩
6. Bonstetten, *Briefe über die italienischen Ämter* (above). The Italian translation is often cited as *Lettere sopra i baliaggi italiani*; see also "Viaggio nei baliaggi italiani dei Cantoni svizzeri", *Illuminismo lombardo*, <https://illuminismolombardo.it/testo/viaggio-nei-baliaggi-italiani-dei-cantoni-svizzeri/>. ↩

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