

The French return and the cost of war

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After the Russian retreat the French and the Helvetic authorities regained control of the south. Heinrich Zschokke, sent as government commissioner, restored the republican administration in the Canton of Lugano and appointed Giuseppe Franzoni as prefect.¹ The two cantons emerged from the war impoverished, with communes indebted for requisitions and with a population that associated the Helvetic Republic with taxes, conscription and foreign armies. The costs of the war were borne largely by the communes and the inhabitants. Requisitioned grain, livestock and transport were often paid for in promissory notes that were redeemed slowly or not at all.²

Common misconception. It is often assumed that Swiss neutrality protected the country during the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon. In 1798 and 1799 the opposite was true. French, Austrian and Russian armies fought on Swiss soil, crossed the Alpine passes at will and lived off the land. Swiss neutrality was recognized as permanent by the European powers only in the Second Peace of Paris of 20 November 1815.³ For the territory of Ticino, which lay across the main north-south route between the armies, the years 1799 and 1800 were a period of occupation in which property, persons and local institutions enjoyed no protection. The later value of neutrality for the financial centre rests on the contrast with this experience.

1 What the war meant for later institutions

The war of 1799 left a deep distrust of centralized government and of taxes imposed from outside, which shaped the constitution of 1803, and it confirmed the dependence of the territory on the Lombard plain for food, which made every later government seek treaties with Milan on grain and salt. For the modern financial centre the lesson concerns the security of property in a border territory. The bailiwicks had offered limited political

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rights but a stable legal order, while the Helvetic Republic offered rights but could not protect the territory against foreign armies. The canton founded in 1803 had to combine self-government with a legal order able to protect property and contracts. When Italian capital moved to Lugano in the twentieth century, it came to a country that had offered that combination for more than a century, behind a recognized neutrality and a border that no army had crossed since 1815.

2 Notes

1. Negro (above). ↩
2. Raffaello Ceschi (ed.), *Storia del Cantone Ticino*, vol. 1: L'Ottocento (Bellinzona 1998). ↩
3. Christian Koller, "Restaurazione", DSS, version of 12 January 2012, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/009799/>. ↩

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