

The grain question: food security as a problem of foreign policy

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The bailiwicks could not feed themselves. The valleys of the Sopraceneri produced rye, millet, chestnuts, cheese and livestock, and the hills of the Bellinzonese, the Locarnese and the Luganese and the plain of the Mendrisiotto produced wine, wheat, rye and, from the seventeenth century, maize, but the region as a whole depended on grain from the Lombard plain.¹ The same was true of the ruling cantons of central Switzerland, whose economies had specialized in cattle and dairy production and who bought grain in the markets of Lombardy, Swabia and Alsace. Access to Lombard grain was therefore a matter of state for the rulers and a matter of survival for the subjects. It was also a lever in the hands of whoever governed Milan.

1 Export licences and the discretion of Milan

The Duchy of Milan, under the Sforza, then under Spanish rule from 1535 to 1706 and under Austrian rule after 1706 (by treaty from 1714), controlled the export of grain through a system of licences (*tratte*). In years of good harvest the authorities in Milan allowed exports against payment of duties. In years of scarcity they closed the border to protect the urban population of Milan and the other Lombard cities.² Grain exports to the Swiss were a recurring subject of negotiation, and the right to buy a certain quantity of grain in the Milanese markets at fixed conditions was one of the privileges that the Confederates sought in their treaties with Milan. Chapter A.IV follows these capitulations, from the fifteenth-century agreements to the Spanish capitulation of 1587 and the Capitolato of 1639 with the Grisons, as instruments of trade policy.

From the point of view of the bailiwicks, the discretion of the Milanese authorities meant that the food supply depended on political relations over which the subjects had no influence. A conflict between the ruling cantons

and Milan over extradition, confessional questions, recruitment or tolls could lead to a closure of the grain trade, and the first to suffer were the populations of the border bailiwicks. Grain also became a currency of confessional politics. The seven Catholic cantons concluded the Golden or Borromean League among themselves at Lucerne on 5 October 1586 and an alliance with Spain in 1587, renewed several times, which guaranteed the supply of the Swiss territories, and in particular of the Italian bailiwicks, with grain and salt. Access to Lombard grain thus came to depend on the alliance policy of the Catholic cantons with the Spanish rulers of Milan.³

2 Markets, prices and local regulation

The principal grain markets of the bailiwicks were Lugano, Bellinzona, Locarno and Mendrisio, whose weekly markets and annual fairs (Chapter A.IV) were supplied from Lombardy by boat across the lakes and by pack animals over the hills. The communities regulated these markets under their statutes. They fixed or supervised prices, prohibited forestalling (buying grain before it reached the market) and engrossing (hoarding it for resale), controlled weights and measures and in some places maintained communal stores for years of scarcity. In Bellinzona the grain merchants appear to have formed the only organized trade and held the monopoly of the grain trade. The town also remained a regional market for surplus agricultural produce. In Lugano the general congress of the community dealt among other matters with the supply of salt.⁴ The *landfogto* and the *sindacato* issued ordinances on the grain trade, especially in times of crisis, prohibiting exports from the bailiwicks to the ruling cantons or to other territories and regulating the activities of merchants.

The regulation of the grain market was one of the few areas in which the rulers exercised an active economic policy in the bailiwicks, and it was often in tension with their own interests. The ruling cantons, especially Uri and the other central Swiss cantons, wanted grain from Lombardy to pass through the bailiwicks to their own markets. The subjects wanted to keep it for themselves in times of scarcity. The conflicts between these interests were fought out in the *sindacato* and the Diet.⁵

3 Notes

1. Markus Mattmüller, Werner Baumann and Peter Moser, "Cerealicoltura", in DSS, version of 11 December 2006, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/013936/2006-12-11/> ("Nelle zone collinari del Bellinzonese, Locarnese e Luganese, e in pianura (spec. nel

Mendrisiotto), si produceva per lo più frumento, segale e, dal XVII sec. in avanti, Mais"); Glauser, "Capitolati di Milano" (above), on the obligation of the ruling cantons to secure grain from the Po plain for the bailiwicks. See also Ceschi, Nel labirinto delle valli (above). ↩

2. Ostinelli and Stadler, "Milano (ducato)" (above), on Spanish rule (1535–1706) and Austrian rule (1714–1797) and on the guarantee of the supply of the Swiss territories with grain and salt in the alliance of 1587. ↩
3. Rudolf Bolzern, "Lega d'oro", in DSS, version of 9 September 2005, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/017187/> (alliance concluded at Lucerne on 5 October 1586 by the seven Catholic cantons, the five of central Switzerland, Fribourg and Solothurn); Ostinelli and Stadler, "Milano (ducato)" (above), on "l'alleanza tra i cantoni cattolici e la Spagna (1587), più volte prorogata" and the "garanzia dell'approvvigionamento dei territori svizzeri, e in particolare dei baliaggi italiani, con cereali e sale". ↩
4. Schindler, Chiesi, Crivelli and Orelli, "Bellinzona (comune)" (above) ("L'unica categoria professionale organizzata sembra fosse costituita dai mercanti di granaglie, che detenevano il monopolio del commercio dei cereali"); Negro, "Lugano (pieve, baliaggio, distretto)" (above), on the competence of the general congress for "l'approvvigionamento del sale"; Ceschi (ed.), Storia della Svizzera italiana dal Cinquecento al Settecento (above). ↩
5. Würigler, Die Tagsatzung der Eidgenossen (above). ↩

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