

The spring of 1798

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In 1796 and 1797 Bonaparte's campaigns in Italy created the Cisalpine Republic, constituted on 29 June 1797, which absorbed the former Duchy of Milan and, later in 1797, the Valtellina, Bormio and Chiavenna, which the Grisons had ruled as subject lands since 1512. The loss of the Valtellina showed what could happen to the Italian bailiwicks. The Cisalpine government and its supporters in the bailiwicks agitated for union with the new republic, and the Swiss cantons, themselves under French pressure, lost the will and the means to defend the old order.¹

On 15 February 1798 an attempted coup by Cisalpine partisans in Lugano was repelled by the town's volunteer corps, which declared itself in favour of remaining with Switzerland under the motto *Liberi e Svizzeri* ("free and Swiss"). In the following weeks the other bailiwicks followed, and the ruling cantons released their Italian subjects from subjection: the twelve cantons the four lake bailiwicks, Uri, Schwyz and Nidwalden the bailiwicks of Bellinzona, the Riviera and Blenio, and Uri the Leventina, whose sovereignty it renounced on 14 March 1798.² The former bailiwicks became provisional free republics and declared their allegiance to the Confederation. The French generals wanted to unite them in a single canton but failed, and in 1798 they were incorporated into the Helvetic Republic as two cantons, Lugano and Bellinzona. Chapter C.I follows the path from these events to the Act of Mediation of 1803 and the creation of the Canton of Ticino.

Common misconception. It is sometimes assumed that the Ticinese joined Switzerland in 1798 because they had been Swiss subjects for three centuries and had become attached to Swiss rule. The motto *Liberi e Svizzeri* expressed something more specific: the rejection of annexation by the Cisalpine Republic, which would have meant dependence on Milan and the conversion of the communes into mere administrative units without political autonomy, combined with the demand for freedom from

subjection. The choice was for Switzerland as a federation of free members, and it was made at the moment when subjection ended.³

1 Two roads out of the old regime: Geneva and the bailiwicks

The contrast with Geneva, which the Geneva volume treats at length, illuminates the peculiarity of the Ticinese path. Geneva freed itself in the 1520s and 1530s from the authority of its bishop and the House of Savoy, adopted the Reformation in 1536 and remained an independent city-republic until the French annexation of 1798. It concluded alliances (*combourgeoisies*) with Fribourg and Bern in 1526 and with Zurich and Bern in 1584, and it defended its independence against Savoy by arms, most famously in the Escalade of December 1602, followed by the Treaty of Saint-Julien of 1603.⁴ Geneva became a Swiss canton only in 1815. Throughout the early modern period it was a sovereign state that made its own laws, levied its own taxes, ran its own courts and conducted its own diplomacy.

The Ticinese territories followed the opposite path. They lost their political autonomy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and were governed as subject lands until 1798. They had no government of their own, no foreign policy, no army under their own command and no institutions above the level of the commune and the valley. Geneva's elite was formed in the government of a republic, in the councils, the consistory and the diplomacy of a small state. The elite of the bailiwicks was formed in the mediation between distant rulers and local communities, in notarial practice, in emigration and in trade.

The two experiences produced different legal and financial cultures. Geneva's banking tradition grew out of the public finance of a sovereign republic, the Huguenot networks and the lending to the French crown that the Geneva volume describes. Lugano's tradition grew out of the private wealth of emigrant families, the notarial and fiduciary practice of a society without its own state and the handling of money across a border it did not control. That difference is visible to this day: Geneva's financial centre sees itself as an international institution with a diplomatic and multilateral vocation, while Lugano's financial centre is organized around families, fiduciaries and the relationship with a single large neighbour.

2 Why the subjects chose Switzerland

The decision of 1798 has often been presented as a paradox: former subjects chose to join the federation of their former rulers. The paradox dissolves when the alternatives are considered. Union with the Cisalpine Republic meant integration into a centralized state dominated by Milan, in which the communes would have been reduced to administrative units and the *vicinanze* would have lost their control over forests and common land. Membership of the Helvetic Republic, and after 1803 of the Swiss Confederation, meant equality with the former rulers, the preservation of local institutions and a light federal burden. For merchants and emigrants whose business depended on the transit routes and on markets north of the Alps, the connection with Switzerland was also an economic asset.⁵ The Ticinese chose the federation that allowed them to keep what they had defended under the bailiwicks: their communes, their statutes and their control over their own money.

3 Notes

1. Marco Dubini, "Cisalpine, République", in DHS, version of 12 December 2019, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/fr/articles/006621/> (constitution of the republic on 29 June 1797; "l'annexion de la Valteline grisonne" and the Cisalpine claims on Ticino); Businger, "Why is Ticino part of Switzerland?" (above), on Bonaparte's integration of the Valtellina into the Cisalpine Republic in 1797; Stadler, "Ennetbirgische Feldzüge" (above), on the Grisons' conquest of the Valtellina, Bormio and Chiavenna in 1512. ↩
2. Dubini, "Cisalpine, République" (above), on "le coup de main sur Lugano du 15 février 1798"; Businger, "Why is Ticino part of Switzerland?" (above), on the volunteer corps that drove the putschists out of the town on the same day, the motto *liberi e svizzeri*, the other bailiwicks following Lugano's lead and the two cantons of Lugano and Bellinzona; Fransioli and Locarnini, "Leventina" (above) ("il 14.3.1798 Uri rinunciò alla sovranità sulla L."); Huber, "Locarno (pieve, baliaggio, distretto)" (above) ("Nel 1798 il baliaggio di L. ottenne la libertà per iniziativa dei cant. sovrani"). See also SWI swissinfo.ch, "Perché il Ticino fa parte della Svizzera?", <https://www.swissinfo.ch/ita/storia/perch%C3%A9-il-ticino-fa-parte-della-svizzera/72599952>; City of Lugano, "Corpo volontari luganesi", <https://www.lugano.ch/la-mia-citta/identita-e-storia/corpo-volontari/>. ↩

3. Businger, "Why is Ticino part of Switzerland?" (above), according to which under Confederate rule "each commune had been self-governing to a large extent", whereas in the Cisalpine Republic "individual communes were converted into pure administrative entities with no political autonomy". ↩
4. Martine Piguet et al., "Genève (canton)", in DHS, version of 30 May 2017, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/fr/articles/007398/> ("la combourgeoisie signée avec Berne et Fribourg en 1526"; the adoption of the Reformation in 1536; Zurich as a new ally in 1584 after the failed siege of 1582; the Escalade of December 1602; the Treaty of Saint-Julien of July 1603; the occupation by French troops on 15 April 1798; entry as a canton in 1815). The details are treated in the Geneva volume. ↩
5. Businger, "Why is Ticino part of Switzerland?" (above), on communal self-government under the Confederates, the vicinanza as the body that "controlled public assets such as the forests and common land" and the loss of political autonomy of the communes in the Cisalpine Republic. See also Ceschi (ed.), *Storia della Svizzera italiana dal Cinquecento al Settecento* (above). ↩

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