

The spring of 1798: Lugano between Milan and the Confederation

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The events of February 1798 in Lugano can only be understood against the transformation of Lombardy in the two preceding years. Bonaparte's Italian campaign of 1796 had driven the Austrians out of Milan. On 29 June 1797 Bonaparte and the French Directory proclaimed the Cisalpine Republic, which soon absorbed the Cispadane Republic and covered some 42,500 square kilometres with about 3.24 million inhabitants, roughly modern Lombardy with parts of Emilia-Romagna and north-western Tuscany.¹ In the same year the new republic annexed the Valtellina, the Italian-speaking subject land of the Grisons, and occupied the enclave of Campione on the Lake of Lugano. For the Swiss bailiwicks on the lakes the message was plain. A neighbouring republic with an ideology of liberation and a large army was absorbing Italian-speaking subject territories along the Alpine border. Its partisans in Lugano, Mendrisio and the lake villages saw no reason why the Confederate bailiwicks should be treated differently.

1 Dependence on Lombardy and the Cisalpine temptation

Economic pressure accompanied the military threat. The *Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse* emphasizes the almost total dependence of Ticino on Lombardy for its supply of grain, salt and many other goods, which made the territory vulnerable to Cisalpine economic pressure and to trade embargoes for years after 1798. Chapter A.IV has shown that the bailiwicks lived from transit along the Gotthard route and from the Milanese market, and that their capitulations with Milan had secured the export of grain and salt from the duchy. A Cisalpine government that controlled those exports could starve the bailiwicks or reward them. The Cisalpine partisans in the lake towns, known in the local sources as *patrioti*, argued that union with Milan would bring both political liberty and secure access to the markets

on which the lake economy depended. In Bissone, Riva San Vitale and Mendrisio they found considerable support.²

The other side of the account was equally concrete. Union with the Cisalpine Republic meant conscription into a French-led army, the taxes of a centralized revolutionary state and the end of the communal and valley institutions that the bailiwicks had preserved under Confederate rule. The merchants, innkeepers, forwarding agents and emigrant builders of the Luganese elite earned their living from the routes and markets north of the Alps as much as from Milan. For them the Confederation offered a looser framework, lower taxes and the prospect of equal membership. Chapter A.II has explained how this calculation shaped the decision of 1798. This section concentrates on the days in which it was taken.

2 The volunteer corps and the night of 14–15 February

The force that decided the issue had been created only months before. In 1797 the *landfogto* (bailiff) of Lugano, Jost Remy Traxler, set up a volunteer corps of about sixty men to defend the town against incursions from Cisalpine territory. The Confederate cantons equipped it with a banner, 500 arquebuses and gunpowder.³ The *Corpo Volontari Luganesi* still exists. The City of Lugano describes it as the oldest association of the city, which still parades at civic ceremonies.

During the night of 14 to 15 February 1798 a Cisalpine force, assisted by local patriots, landed at the mouth of the Cassarate and entered the town by the San Rocco gate. According to the contemporary accounts collected by Rinaldo Caddeo and summarized in the cantonal school journal, the attackers stormed the town hall and occupied the Piazza Grande. The fighting lasted about an hour and cost the lives of three Cisalpines and of one volunteer, the young Giovanni Taglioretti. The bailiff Traxler was briefly taken hostage. The volunteers and the townspeople nevertheless drove the attackers out of the town on the same morning.⁴ The Swiss National Museum describes the episode as an attempted *putsch* by armed men who demanded the incorporation of Lugano into the Cisalpine Republic and were chased out of the town the same day.⁵

3 Notes

1. Dubini, "Cisalpine, République" (above). ↩
2. Giuseppe Mondada, "Dies natalis", Scuola ticinese, no. 64, https://www4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DS/Rivista_scuola_ticinese/ST_n.64/ST_64_Mondada_Dies_natalis.pdf. ↩

3. City of Lugano, "Corpo Volontari Luganesi" (above). ↩
4. "I moti di Lugano del 1798 e del 1799" (above), drawing on Rinaldo Caddeo; City of Lugano, "Corpo Volontari Luganesi" (above). ↩
5. Businger (above). ↩

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