

The strike of 27 and 28 July 1875

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

In July 1875 the miners at Göschenen stopped work. The immediate causes were the bad air in the tunnel and the low pay. The strikers, led according to later research by Luigi Dissune, demanded an increase of one franc a day, a functioning ventilation and safer working conditions, and blocked the entrance to the tunnel.¹ On 28 July the Uri cantonal police and a citizens' militia from Göschenen were sent against the strikers. Shots were fired, and four workers were killed and several people wounded. It has never been established who fired first. From 29 July to 2 August cantonal infantry occupied Göschenen.²

The Federal Council sent a commissioner, Colonel Hans Hold, a Grisons lawyer and cantonal politician, to investigate. His published report of 16 October 1875 found that many workers spent only 60 to 80 centimes a day on food, which was entirely inadequate, but it attributed the strike largely to the workers themselves.³ A second, confidential report of 27 October 1875 was much harsher. Hold wrote that the housing of the workers lay "entirely in speculative hands", that the misery in their quarters exceeded all imagination, that wages were regularly stolen without intervention by the police and that the speculators exploited the workers while no office took care of them. The Federal Council did not publish the second report, which remained in the archives until the historian Konrad Kuoni found it.⁴ The strike of Göschenen, in which armed force was used against striking workers, has remained a reference point for historians of the Swiss labour movement and of Italian immigration, as the source edition of Tobias Kästli (1977) and the study of Alexandra Binnenkade (2018) show.⁵

1 Deaths, accountability and the contractor's fate

The human cost of the tunnel was very high. The official statistics recorded 199 deaths during construction and about 580 serious accidents, which corresponds to some 13 deaths per kilometre of tunnel. The main causes

The strike of 27 and 28 July 1875

were explosions, falling rock and collisions with the wagons of the construction railway.⁶ The Historical Dictionary of Switzerland gives 177 deaths for the summit tunnel alone.⁷ These figures did not include the workers who died later from injuries, from silicosis, from the hookworm disease or from malnutrition, and modern estimates of the total exceed 1,000. Accident reports often concluded that the misfortune had been chance, while the engineers and the management took no responsibility for deaths that occurred after the accident itself. A federal law on the liability of railway and steamship enterprises for deaths and injuries existed from 1875, but its protection reached the contractors' workers only imperfectly.⁸

Louis Favre did not live to see the end of the work. On 19 July 1879 he suffered a stroke during an inspection in the tunnel on the Göschenen side and died there.⁹ The two headings met on 29 February 1880. The lateral deviation amounted to only 33 centimetres and the vertical deviation to 5 centimetres, a result of the precision of the survey.¹⁰ Because the tunnel was finished more than a year late, penalties and higher costs ruined Favre's enterprise. His heirs and the contracting company (*Entreprise du grand tunnel du Gotthard*) tried to obtain a judicial declaration that they were entitled to an extension of 780 days because of geological difficulties and changes ordered by the company. On 12 August 1881 the Federal Court declared the action inadmissible. A declaratory action required a present legal interest in an immediate decision and the possibility of resolving the relationship conclusively. Neither condition was met while the contractual consequences were still open.¹¹ After the completion of the tunnel the company claimed payments running into millions from Favre's enterprise, which ruined his estate, so that the contractor whose bid had made the tunnel affordable for the company carried a large part of its overrun himself. His daughter received a life annuity of CHF 10,000 a year.¹²

Common misconception. The Gotthard tunnel is often remembered as a triumph of Swiss engineering achieved by Swiss workers. The contractor was a Genevan with limited capital who bore almost all the risk under a lump-sum contract. The workforce consisted overwhelmingly of Italian miners, who lived and worked under conditions that the Federal Council's own commissioner described in a confidential report as lawless. At least 177 to 199 workers died in accidents during construction, four strikers were shot at Göschenen in July 1875. Including disease, the total number of deaths is estimated at more than 1,000.

2 Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Göschenen riots", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G%C3%B6schenen_riots (consulted as a last resort), for the dates of 27–28 July 1875, the leader Luigi Dissune and the demands. The standard study is Alexandra Binnenkade, Sprengstoff. Der Streik der italienischen Gotthardtunnelarbeiter – Alltag und Konflikt im Eisenbahnerdorf Göschenen 1875 (Basel 2018), open access), <https://ub-emono-test.ub.unibas.ch/emono/catalog/book/51>. ↩
2. Zumstein (as above), on the deployment of the Uri police and the Göschenen militia and the four dead; Wikipedia, "Göschenen riots" (as above), on the uncertainty over who fired first and the occupation by cantonal infantry from 29 July to 2 August. ↩
3. Zumstein (as above), on Hold's person and the conclusion of his official report; Wikipedia, "Göschenen riots" (as above), for the date of 16 October 1875 and the passage on food expenditure of 60–80 centimes a day. ↩
4. Zumstein (as above), quoting the confidential report: "Die Unterbringung der Arbeitermassen liegt ganz in spekulativen Händen"; Wikipedia, "Göschenen riots" (as above), for the date of 27 October 1875. ↩
5. Tobias Kästli, Der Streik der Tunnelarbeiter am Gotthard 1875. Quellen und Kommentar (Basel: Z-Verlag, 1977), cited after Wikipedia (en), "Göschenen riots", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G%C3%B6schenen_riots (used as a last resort), which also gives the dates of 27 and 28 July 1875 and the four deaths; Alexandra Binnenkade, Sprengstoff. Der Streik der italienischen Gotthardtunnelarbeiter – Alltag und Konflikt im Eisenbahnerdorf Göschenen 1875 (Basel 2018), <https://ub-emono-test.ub.unibas.ch/emono/catalog/book/51>. ↩
6. SRF, "Gotthard: 13 Tote pro Kilometer", 23 November 2016, <https://www.srf.ch/kultur/gotthard-13-tote-pro-kilometer>, for the official figure of 199 deaths, 580 serious accidents, the main causes and the estimate of "über 1000 Menschenleben". ↩
7. HLS, art. "Gottardo, Ferrovia del" (as above): "177 morti solo per la costruzione della galleria di valico". ↩
8. SRF, "13 Tote pro Kilometer" (as above), on accident reports ("Dieses Unglück war Zufall") and the lack of responsibility for later deaths. ↩
9. Andreae (as above): "Er starb am 19. Juli 1879 an einem im Tunnel — auf Seite Göschenen — erlittenen Schlaganfall". ↩

The strike of 27 and 28 July 1875

10. Andreae (as above), for the breakthrough on 29 February 1880; Wikipedia (de), "Gotthardtunnel" (as above): "Die Abweichungen betrugen seitlich nur 33 Zentimeter und 5 Zentimeter in der Höhe." ↩
11. BGE 7 I 191 (as above), for the claim to an extension of 780 days and the reasons for inadmissibility. ↩
12. Wikipedia (de), "Gotthardtunnel" (as above), on the company's claims for "Nachzahlungen in Millionenhöhe" against Favre's enterprise and the "lebenslängliche jährliche Rente von 10'000 Franken" for his daughter. ↩

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