

War on the southern passes, 1799–1800

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In 1799 the war of the Second Coalition turned Switzerland into a battlefield of foreign armies. Austria and Russia, allied against revolutionary France, drove the French out of most of Lombardy in the spring of that year. Their armies then pressed against the French positions in the Alps. For the two southern cantons this meant occupation, requisitions and a brief but violent counter-revolution. The episode is short in the chronology of the canton, but it fixed in the collective memory a lesson that later generations of Ticinese bankers and politicians took for granted: a small territory on the border between great powers needs a legal and political order that outsiders respect, because it cannot defend itself by arms.

1 The insurrections of April and May 1799

The Austrian advance into Lombardy in April 1799 encouraged the opponents of the Helvetic regime in Lugano. On 28 April 1799 a crowd from Sorengo and the surrounding villages descended on the quarter of Nassa, forced the prefect Francesco Capra to resign and killed the war commissioner Felice Stoppani. On the following day the lawyer Papi, secretary of the canton, and a lieutenant named Castelli were dragged from their beds, imprisoned and executed at the foot of the liberty tree. The rioters killed Giuseppe Vanelli, a priest and the editor of the local gazette, as the herald of the new ideas. They also sacked the printing house of the Agnelli family "from the ground floor to the ceiling".¹ The Agnelli press had printed the *Gazzetta di Lugano*, one of the most widely read Italian-language newspapers of the late eighteenth century, which reached readers far beyond the bailiwick because it was printed outside the censorship of the Italian states.² Its destruction ended the first period of Lugano's history as a centre of Italian publishing, which the exiles of the Risorgimento revived after 1830 and which Chapter C.II describes.

Imperial troops entered Lugano on 10 and 11 May 1799. In the north of the territory the Leventina rose against the French in May 1799 in what the local tradition calls the *guerra delle forcelle*, the war of the pitchforks, in which the valley showed secessionist tendencies directed against the Helvetic order.³ The Austro-Russian occupation brought further requisitions. The DSS article on the Canton of Lugano records that the population suffered under the demands of the occupying armies. Its counterpart on the Canton of Bellinzona states that the passage of French and Austro-Russian troops caused grave damage to the population.⁴

2 Suvorov's army crosses the canton

The most famous military episode of the period began in September 1799. The Russian field marshal Alexander Suvorov, who had defeated the French in northern Italy, was ordered to march north across the Alps to join the Russian army of Alexander Korsakov near Zurich. On 21 September 1799 he set out from Taverne, north of Lugano, with around 21,000 to 22,000 men.⁵ His route led over the Monte Ceneri to Bellinzona and up the Leventina to Airolo, from where his troops attacked the French positions on the Gotthard. In the Val Tremola, the steep valley below the pass on the southern side, the Russians are said to have lost 1,200 men in frontal attacks. On 24 September they took the pass, and on 25 September they fought their way through the Schöllenen gorge on the Uri side.

The march failed in its strategic purpose. On 26 September 1799 the French defeated Korsakov in the second battle of Zurich, so that Suvorov found no army to join. He withdrew over the Kinzig and Panix passes into the Grisons and left Switzerland via Ilanz and Chur on 12 October 1799. About 5,000 of his men had died, leaving some 14,000 survivors.⁶ For the Leventina and the Bellinzonese the passage of more than 20,000 soldiers, with horses and mules that needed fodder and with officers who requisitioned food and shelter, was a heavy burden in a mountain economy that barely fed its own population. The Russian monument in the Schöllenen, erected between 1895 and 1898, and the hiking route *ViaSuvorow* now commemorate the march. In Ticino the memory is mainly one of requisitions.

3 Notes

1. "I moti di Lugano del 1798 e del 1799" (above); Negro (above). ↩
2. DSS, articles "Agnelli" and "Gazzetta di Lugano"; Fabrizio Mena, *Stamperie ai margini d'Italia* (Bellinzona 2003). ↩

3. "Periodo della Repubblica elvetica" (above); Mondada, "Dies natalis" (above); Pauli Falconi (above). ↩
4. Negro (above); Pauli Falconi (above). ↩
5. MySwitzerland, "ViaSuworow", stage 1, https://www.myswitzerland.com/en-ch/experiences/route/viasuworow-55_01/; Elizabeth Camozzi, "Il monumento urano dedicato ad Alexander Suvorov", RSI, 6 February 2023, <https://www.rsi.ch/cultura/focus/Il-monumento-urano-dedicato-ad-Alexander-Suvorov-15969310.html>. ↩
6. Camozzi (above). ↩

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