

The end of the old order

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The old canton of Zug ended in the spring of 1798. On 11 February 1798, under the pressure of the revolutionary movement that was sweeping through the Confederation and of the French armies advancing on its borders, the town of Zug released its subject territories.¹ The inhabitants of Cham, Hünenberg, Risch, Steinhausen and Walchwil, who had been governed by bailiffs appointed by the town for centuries, became citizens with equal rights. Coming late and under duress, the release could not save the old order.

On 12 April 1798, the Helvetic Republic was proclaimed in Aarau.² It replaced the loose alliance of sovereign cantons with a unitary state on the French model. The cantons of central Switzerland, Zug among them, refused to accept the new constitution. Their resistance was brief. After the defeat of the central Swiss forces at Hägglingen on 26 April 1798, French troops occupied Zug on 29 April.³

The Helvetic constitution dissolved the old cantons of central Switzerland as political units. Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden and Zug were merged into a single administrative canton, the canton of Waldstätten, which existed from 1798 until the Act of Mediation.⁴ The merger was designed to reduce the political weight of the conservative, Catholic heartland in the new republic: the four old cantons, which would each have been represented in the senate under the first draft, received four senate seats in total instead of the sixteen originally envisaged.⁵ Zug became a district of the new canton, which also included parts of the Freiamt. The capital of the canton was first Schwyz and, from May 1799, the town of Zug.⁶

The elevation of Zug to capital of the canton of Waldstätten was an early instance of a pattern that would recur. The town was chosen because it was the most accessible and the least hostile to the new order among the old central Swiss capitals. Its position on the route between Zurich and Lucerne, its relative openness and its pragmatic political class made it the

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natural seat of an administration that had to govern a reluctant region. Two centuries later, companies looking for a seat in central Switzerland that was close to Zurich, accessible and administratively cooperative would make a similar choice.

1 Notes

1. HLS, "Zug (Kanton)", section on the revolutionary period: the town released its subject territories on 11 February 1798; HLS, "Zug (Gemeinde)": the town surrendered its bailiwicks on 11 February 1798. ↩
2. HLS, "Helvetische Republik", version of 27 January 2011: proclamation on 12 April 1798; existence until 10 March 1803; capitals Aarau (until September 1798), Lucerne (until May 1799) and Bern (until March 1803). ↩
3. HLS, "Zug (Kanton)": French occupation after the defeat at Hagglingen on 26 April 1798; Zug captured on 29 April 1798. ↩
4. HLS, "Zug (Kanton)": Zug part of the canton of Waldstätten from 2 May 1798 to 1801; Wikipedia (German), "Kanton Waldstätten", accessed September 2026: composition of Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden and Zug; formal abolition by the Act of Mediation of 1803. ↩
5. Wikipedia (German), "Kanton Waldstätten": the consolidation reduced the representation of central Switzerland to four senate seats instead of the sixteen originally proposed. ↩
6. Wikipedia (German), "Kanton Waldstätten": capital first Schwyz, from May 1799 the town of Zug; HLS, "Zug (Gemeinde)": district capital from June 1798 and capital of the whole canton of Waldstätten from May 1799. ↩

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