

## Labour, death and the Göschenen strike of 1875

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The financial history of the Gotthard cannot be separated from the conditions under which the tunnel was built, because the pressure of Favre's contract passed directly to the men at the face. At times more than 3,000 workers laboured at the two sites of Göschenen and Airolo. Most of them came from poor rural regions of Piedmont and Lombardy.<sup>1</sup> They worked in shifts around the clock in air laden with dust, the fumes of explosives and the exhaust of the lamps, in heat and humidity that worsened as the headings advanced. Housing in the two villages was overcrowded and insanitary. Food was expensive because suppliers and landlords held local monopolies, so that much of the wage returned to the contractors and traders who controlled the settlements.

The death toll was high even by the standards of nineteenth-century construction. The Historical Dictionary of Switzerland gives 177 deaths for the summit tunnel alone.<sup>2</sup> An analysis of the recorded cases distinguishes 53 workers crushed by wagons and locomotives, 49 killed by falling rock, 46 killed by dynamite explosions and 23 who died from other causes.<sup>3</sup> SBB Historic, the foundation that holds the historical archives of the Federal Railways, gives a figure of 199 workers killed during the construction of the summit tunnel.<sup>4</sup> The difference reflects the incompleteness of the records and the question of who is counted. Neither figure includes the workers who died later of illnesses contracted in the tunnel, among them the hookworm infection that spread among the miners and became known as the tunnel disease.<sup>5</sup> A recent account in the blog of the Swiss National Museum points out that the true number was probably higher than the official counts.<sup>6</sup>

In the summer of 1875 the tensions erupted. On 27 and 28 July 1875 miners at Göschenen stopped work. The immediate cause was a dispute in which miners refused to return to the face before the smoke of the explosions had cleared. Their demands included one franc more pay per day, functioning

ventilation and better safety rules. The chief engineer of Favre's enterprise, Ernest von Stockalper, telegraphed to the cantonal government in Altdorf for armed men. A small force of cantonal militia and local men was assembled and advanced against the strikers, and when the workers resisted, shots were fired. Four workers were killed and several people on both sides were wounded.<sup>7</sup> Some recent accounts date the strike to June, although most sources and the federal investigation place it at the end of July.<sup>8</sup>

The shootings created a diplomatic problem, because the dead were Italian subjects and Italy was the largest subsidiser of the project. The Federal Council sent a federal commissioner, Hans Hold, a lawyer, member of the Council of States and colonel, to investigate. Hold's published report, which appeared in the *Bundesblatt*, largely blamed the workers for throwing stones and threatening the militia, while noting that many workers fed themselves on 60 to 80 centimes a day. It satisfied the Italian government. In a confidential report of 27 October 1875, however, Hold described the absence of the rule of law in the construction settlements, the misery of the living quarters with their crowded beds and half-rotten straw sacks, the bad air in the tunnel and the systematic cheating of workers out of their wages. The Federal Council did not act on the confidential report, which remained unknown until the historian Konrad Kuoni found it in the Federal Archives.<sup>9</sup>

For a book on a financial centre, these events also carry a financial lesson. They show how a financing structure that relied on a fixed-price contract with heavy daily penalties translated financial pressure into physical risk. Favre could meet his obligations only by driving the advance as fast as possible, while he could protect his margin only by keeping wages and safety expenditure low. The company, anxious about its own budget, had no incentive to intervene. The subsidy states monitored the progress of the tunnel and left the conditions in which it was achieved to the contractor and the canton. Modern project finance has responded to such experiences with environmental and social standards, such as the Equator Principles adopted by many banks since 2003, and with covenants on health and safety that lenders enforce through independent engineers. Zurich banks that sign such covenants today are, in a sense, applying lessons first taught at Göschenen.

## 1 Notes

1. SBB Historic, press release on the 145th anniversary of the Gotthard breakthrough of 1880 (1 April 2025),

- [https://api.sbbhistoric.ch/assets/file/Stiftung/Medien/MM-25/2025-0401\\_Medienmitteilung\\_Gottharddurchstich\\_1880\\_D\\_ib.pdf](https://api.sbbhistoric.ch/assets/file/Stiftung/Medien/MM-25/2025-0401_Medienmitteilung_Gottharddurchstich_1880_D_ib.pdf). ↩
2. HLS, “Ferrovia del Gottardo” (Bärtschi), Italian version (see above).  
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  3. Kuoni, “Der Gotthardbahnbau: Querelen und Opfer” (see above). ↩
  4. SBB Historic, press release of 1 April 2025 (see above); the Alptransit portal, “Einweihung des Gotthardtunnels”, <https://www.alptransit-portal.ch/de/uebersicht/bau/ereignisse/ereignis/einweihung-des-gotthardtunnels>true>, speaks of at least 199 dead, not counting those who died later of disease and exhaustion. ↩
  5. Wikipedia (English), “Gotthard Rail Tunnel”, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gotthard\\_Rail\\_Tunnel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gotthard_Rail_Tunnel), on the hookworm infection among the surviving workers. ↩
  6. Benedikt Meyer, “Durchbruch am Gotthard”, blog of the Swiss National Museum, 28 October 2019 (updated 17 December 2025), <https://blog.nationalmuseum.ch/2019/10/durchbruch-am-gotthard/>.  
↩
  7. Wikipedia (German), “Unruhen in Göschenen 1875”, [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unruhen\\_in\\_G%C3%B6schenen\\_1875](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unruhen_in_G%C3%B6schenen_1875), which gives the dates 27 and 28 July 1875, Stockalper’s request for armed men, and the deaths of four people, some of them only after several days; see also Tobias Kästli, *Der Streik der Tunnelarbeiter am Gotthard 1875: Quellen und Kommentar* (1977). ↩
  8. SRF, “Prekäre Arbeitsverhältnisse – Ein Geheimbericht entlarvte die Ausbeutung am Gotthard”, <https://www.srf.ch/kultur/prekaere-arbeitsverhaeltnisse-ein-geheimbericht-entlarvte-die-ausbeutung-am-gotthard>, which places the strike in late June 1875. ↩
  9. SRF, “Ein Geheimbericht entlarvte die Ausbeutung am Gotthard” (see above), on Hold’s confidential report and its discovery by Konrad Kuoni; Wikipedia (German), “Unruhen in Göschenen 1875” (see above), on the published report in the *Bundesblatt*, its remark on workers’ daily food expenditure and the confidential report dated 27 October 1875. ↩

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