

Revolution, Helvetic Republic, Mediation and Restoration — overview and summary

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On 5 June 1798 French soldiers opened the vault beneath the Grossmünster in Zurich, in which the republic of the guilds had kept its reserve of coin, and carried the contents away. The act took only a few hours. It ended a practice of fiscal prudence that the city had cultivated for more than a century and that contemporaries across Europe had regarded as one of the marks of a well-governed Protestant republic. Three decades later, on 22 November 1830, some ten thousand men from the Zurich countryside assembled on a hill above Uster and demanded a constitution in which the city would no longer rule the land. Between these two dates lie the French invasion, two battles fought in and around Zurich and a unitary Helvetic state that tried to replace tithes with taxes and failed. The same years saw a constitution dictated by Napoleon, a peasant rising suppressed with executions, a restoration of patrician rule and, finally, a liberal revolution that gave the canton the legal order under which its modern economy and its financial institutions would grow.¹

This chapter follows the fate of Zurich's wealth and institutions through that sequence of upheavals. Its subject is the political history of the period only in so far as politics determined who could own, trade, lend and tax. For a financial centre the decades between 1794 and 1839 are formative in a precise sense. They dissolved the legal privileges on which the old merchant patriciate had built its fortunes, above all the monopoly of the city burghers in trade and manufacture. They began the long process by which feudal charges on land were converted into money and extinguished, and so created the unencumbered, mortgageable property that a modern credit system needs. They shifted the base of public finance from tithes and ground rents to taxes. Under the pressure of Napoleon's blockade they produced the first mechanised cotton spinning mills and the engineering works that grew out of them, together with a class of liberal industrialists who would found the banks of the next generation. And they gave Zurich,

in 1831, a constitution that guaranteed freedom of trade and the inviolability of property in express terms.

The story has a second theme, which is the relationship between city and countryside. Before 1798 Zurich was a city-state in which the burghers of a town of about eleven thousand inhabitants governed a territory of more than one hundred and eighty thousand subjects.² The wealth of the city rested in part on privileges that excluded rural entrepreneurs from the most profitable forms of commerce. Almost every conflict of the period, from the Stäfa memorial of 1794 to the Ustertag of 1830, turned on that relationship. Its resolution in favour of legal equality opened the path to the modern canton in which the financial centre is located. The comparison with Geneva, treated in the companion volume, is instructive: Geneva was annexed by France in 1798 and experienced the revolutionary period as a French department, whereas Zurich passed through it as a member of a Swiss state whose shape changed four times in thirty-three years. The earlier chapters of this Part describe the Verlag system and the merchant bankers (Chapter C.I) and the state's investment house Leu & Co. (Chapter C.II), while the Swiss franc and the federal state of 1848 follow in Chapter C.IV.

1 Notes

1. Staatsarchiv des Kantons Zürich (ed.), *Kleine Zürcher Verfassungsgeschichte 1218–2000* (Zurich: Chronos, 2000), p. 35, https://www.zh.ch/content/dam/zhweb/bilder-dokumente/themen/politik-staat/recherche-im-staatsarchiv/z%C3%BCrcher-geschichte/zh_verfassungsgeschichte.pdf. The text states that the first French troops entered Zurich on 27 April 1798 and that the state treasure was removed by force from the vault of the Grossmünster on 5 June 1798. ↩
2. Wikipedia (German), “Verfassung des Kantons Zürich”, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Verfassung_des_Kantons_Z%C3%BCrich, which gives around 1803 some 11,000 inhabitants for the city and 182,000 for the countryside. ↩

2 Conclusion

The revolutionary period destroyed the old Zurich and created the conditions for the new. The Stäfer Handel of 1794–95 showed that the rural elite, enriched by the textile trade, would no longer accept a constitution that excluded it from politics and from the most profitable

forms of commerce. After the French invasion of 1798 had taken away the state's cash reserve, the war of 1799 consumed far more in requisitions and destruction. The Helvetic Republic abolished the privileges of the city, proclaimed the redemption of feudal charges and attempted to build a modern tax state and a single currency, and failed for want of money and consent. The Mediation restored the canton as a state of property owners, separated the property of the canton from that of the city and enforced the redemption of tithes against a peasant rising with executions. Under the protection of Napoleon's blockade, the first mechanical spinning mills and the engineering works of Escher Wyss were founded. The Restoration returned the city to political dominance but could not restore its economic privileges. Meanwhile the new industrial wealth of the countryside, embodied in entrepreneurs such as Heinrich Kunz, grew beyond its control.

The Ustertag of 22 November 1830 and the constitution of 1831 resolved the conflict between city and countryside in favour of legal equality and gave Zurich an express constitutional guarantee of freedom of trade, the inviolability of property and the right to redeem feudal charges. The liberal government of the 1830s reformed the courts, founded the university, demolished the fortifications and protected the owners of the new machines against the weavers who burned them. The Züriputsch of 1839 interrupted the liberal regime without undoing its economic settlement. By the time Zurich entered the federal state in 1848, it possessed the legal order, the industrial base, the new entrepreneurial elite and the first joint-stock bank from which the financial centre of the second half of the century would grow.

3 In five sentences

1. The Stäfer Memorial of 1794 and its harsh repression in 1795 expressed the demand of a prosperous rural elite for political equality, freedom of trade and the abolition of tithes, and prepared the collapse of the city's rule in February 1798.
2. The French invasion of 1798 removed Zurich's state treasure of some 622,000 livres from the Grossmünster vault on 5 June 1798, after which the occupation and the two battles of Zurich in 1799 imposed requisitions and destruction far exceeding that sum.
3. The Helvetic Republic ended the commercial privileges of the city burghers, suspended tithes and ordered their redemption, and tried without success to replace feudal revenues with modern taxes and cantonal coins with a Swiss franc.

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4. The Mediation of 1803 restored Zurich as a canton governed by property owners, divided public assets between canton and city, suppressed the Bockenkrieg of 1804 over tithe redemption, and saw the founding of the first mechanical spinning mills in the Hard (1802) and by Escher Wyss (1805) under the protection of the Continental Blockade.

5. After a Restoration that returned the city patriciate to power from 1814, the Ustertag of 1830 and the constitution of 1831 established legal equality, freedom of trade and the inviolability of property, while the reforms of the 1830s, from the Obergericht to the university of 1833 and the Bank in Zürich of 1836, laid the institutional foundations of the modern financial centre.

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