

The Alpine transit question

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The idea of a railway through the Alps was as old as the Swiss railway itself. Already in the late 1840s and early 1850s engineers and cantonal governments were drawing lines across the passes. What divided the country was the choice of the pass through which such a line should run. The answer mattered to every region of the country. A transit line would attract the trade between the German states and the Italian peninsula, making the fortunes of the towns at its ends and along its approaches while condemning the regions that it bypassed to a secondary role in the new economy of steam. The rivalry between the routes was therefore a contest among cantons, railway companies and financiers, each of whom sought to capture the traffic of the future for its own network.

For a long time the eastern variants were the favourites. The Lukmanier, crossing from the Vorderrhein valley in Graubünden into the Blenio valley of Ticino, was promoted from 1847 by the Graubünden engineer Richard La Nicca and enjoyed the support of St. Gallen, Graubünden and eastern Switzerland. The cantons of St. Gallen, Graubünden and Ticino granted a concession for the Lukmanier project in September 1853, although it later failed for want of funds and because of quarrels among its promoters.¹ Until the 1860s the Lukmanier was regarded across the country as the most likely Alpine crossing. The Kingdom of Sardinia, which hoped to connect Genoa with the Lake Constance region, initially supported it with the promise of subsidies. When the affected cantons withdrew their concessions in 1861 and Sardinia revoked its subsidy commitment, the eastern project lost its footing.² The Splügen, a second eastern variant running from Chur towards Chiavenna and Lake Como, attracted support in Graubünden. It never assembled the coalition of cantons, companies and foreign states that a line of this size required.

The Gotthard had its own advocates from an early date. A first Gotthard committee was established in Lucerne on 19 August 1853 by nine cantons.

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Ticino and Zurich were absent, the latter because Alfred Escher, whose Nordostbahn looked towards the east, at that time favoured an eastern Alpine route.³ The central Swiss cantons had obvious reasons to prefer the Gotthard. The old mule and carriage road over the pass ran through Uri and the Leventina, a direct railway would pass through Lucerne and Schwyz, and the Schweizerische Centralbahn in Basel saw in a Gotthard line the natural southward extension of its own network from the Rhine through the Hauenstein to Lucerne. The obstacle was the mountain itself. A Gotthard railway required a summit tunnel of about 15 kilometres, much longer than anything yet attempted, together with long ramps on both sides.

The decisive turn came when Zurich changed sides. In the early 1860s Escher concluded that the eastern routes could not be financed and that a Gotthard line, fed from the north by the Nordostbahn as well as the Centralbahn, would serve Zurich better than a Lukmanier line that would draw the traffic of eastern Switzerland towards St. Gallen and Chur. Contemporary observers and later historians agree that Zurich's switch delivered a decisive blow to the project of an eastern Alpine railway.⁴ On 7 August 1863 the older committee was enlarged into the so-called great Gotthard association (*grosse Gotthardvereinigung*), which comprised fifteen cantons and two railway companies, the Centralbahn and the Nordostbahn. Escher became its president and from then on its driving force.⁵

The Swiss decision alone could not secure the line. No Swiss canton, company or bank could raise the sums that the Gotthard required. The federal state of 1848, for its part, had neither the competence nor the resources to build railways itself (see Chapter D.I). The line could only be built if foreign states with an interest in the transit traffic contributed. Two such states existed. The new Kingdom of Italy, proclaimed in 1861, needed a direct railway connection to central Europe that did not depend on Austria or France. Austria had opened the Brenner line in 1867 and the French-Italian tunnel under Mont Cenis was under construction, with its opening following in 1871.⁶ A Gotthard line would give northern Italy, and Milan and Genoa in particular, an independent route to the Rhine and to the German markets. The German states, and above all Prussia under Otto von Bismarck, had a strategic and commercial interest of the same kind. In 1869 Bismarck declared his support for the Gotthard route in preference to the Splügen.⁷

Accounts of the company describe the initiative as a product of economically liberal Zurich, which wanted to promote north–south transit

traffic to Italy and the development of commerce while countering the Brenner railway that Austria had opened in 1867.⁸ For the Zurich financial centre this origin is significant. The Gotthard was from the beginning a Zurich project in its political leadership and its financial architecture, although the company would be seated in Lucerne and most of the physical work would take place in Uri and Ticino. The capital that it required was to come to a large extent from abroad. Escher's task was therefore to convince foreign governments and foreign banks that a Swiss private company, operating under Swiss law and Swiss supervision, was a safe vehicle for their money.

1 Notes

1. Jürg Meister, Die Geschichte des Gotthard-Komitees (Gotthard-Komitee, April 2017), on the Lukmanier project of Richard La Nicca and its concession, https://www.alptransit-portal.ch/Storages/User//Meilensteine/Pin_066/Dokumente_066/Geschichte_Gotthardkomitee.pdf. ↩
2. Simon Heid, Chiara Spirig, Dragana Ljuboja and Dario Seitz, "Verkehr – Nord-Süd-Transit", [sozialgeschichte.ch](https://www.sozialgeschichte.ch) (Pädagogische Hochschule St. Gallen and Gemeinnützige Gesellschaft des Kantons St. Gallen), <https://www.sozialgeschichte.ch/themen/nord-sued-transit/>. ↩
3. Meister, Geschichte des Gotthard-Komitees (see above), on the committee of 19 August 1853 and the absence of Zurich and Ticino. ↩
4. Heid et al., "Verkehr – Nord-Süd-Transit", [sozialgeschichte.ch](https://www.sozialgeschichte.ch) (see above), which describes Zurich's change of support from the Lukmanier to the Gotthard in the early 1860s as the decisive blow against the eastern Alpine railway. ↩
5. Meister, Geschichte des Gotthard-Komitees (see above), on the foundation of the Gotthardvereinigung on 7 August 1863; Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz (HLS), "Escher, Alfred" (Markus Bürgi), French version, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/fr/articles/003626/2020-01-20/>, confirms that Escher presided over the association from 1863. ↩
6. Heid et al., "Verkehr – Nord-Süd-Transit", [sozialgeschichte.ch](https://www.sozialgeschichte.ch) (see above), with the opening dates of the competing Alpine lines: Semmering 1854, Brenner 1867, Mont Cenis 1871, Simplon 1906, Lötschberg 1913. ↩
7. Dodis (Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland), "Diplomatie auf Schienen – Gotthardbahn und Aussenpolitik",

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<https://www.dodis.ch/en/diplomatie-auf-schienen-gotthardbahn-und-aussenpolitik>. ↩

8. Wikipedia (German), “Gotthardbahn-Gesellschaft”, section on origins, <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gotthardbahn-Gesellschaft> (used for orientation where no better source was accessible). ↩

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