

Under French Rule (1798-1815)

The French Revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic Wars altered the face of Europe. Switzerland, too, was not able to escape these changes. However, the legal equality that was being demanded primarily by the rural subject territories in opposition to the old elite was only established when in 1798 French troops marched in and the political system of the thirteen-canton Confederation collapsed, to be replaced by the centralised unitary state of the Helvetic Republic.

By 1803, Napoleon had passed the Act of Mediation to transform this crisis-ridden entity into a federal state, lending the cantons a geographic form that they retained after he was overthrown in 1814/1815.

The French Revolution



The Lion Monument in Lucerne was erected in 1820-21 in honour of the Swiss Guards who lost their lives during the assault on the Tuileries in Paris in 1792. The monument was designed by Danish artist Bertel Thorvaldsen and co-financed by various European Royal households. At the time, not everyone was pleased that a monument was being built to Swiss citizens serving a foreign monarchy. A number of liberals even planned to saw off one of the lion's paws in protest. © www.picswiss

France and Switzerland had had close political and above all economic ties since the 16th century. In return for trade privileges, the cantons sent hundreds of thousands of mercenaries to France. It was therefore no coincidence that some 760 Swiss Guards died during the assault on the Tuileries in 1792 as they tried to prevent angry crowds from storming the palace and making their way through to the royal family. The massacre provoked great dismay in Switzerland. This showed that, although the Confederation was a republic, it was also embedded in the estate-based, hierarchical society of old Europe and its political elite had little time for the Enlightenment principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. The Lion Monument in Lucerne was later erected in honour of the fallen Swiss Guards.

"People came and said a crowd had gathered in the square outside the Tuileries and that the fight had started. (...) The women in the house were our messengers. They brought us the news. (...) One woman reported that the king's palace was on fire. (...) Then my wife came from the market and said people were dragging the mutilated bodies of the Swiss round the streets. Whenever someone passed with part of the body of a murdered Swiss guard, I heard people shouting: 'Hoho, bravo, bravo!'"

*From a letter written by the Swiss officer
J.B. Good on 3 September 1792 to his brothers and sisters*

Switzerland was not only represented by its mercenaries in France. Paris as a cultural centre also attracted many civilians. Some of these were influenced by revolutionary ideas, if they had not already brought such ideas with them, like many of the refugees who arrived after the Geneva unrest in 1782.

The most famous Swiss revolutionary in France was Jean-Paul Marat (1743-1793) of Neuchâtel, who had lived in Paris since 1777. He founded the revolutionary newspaper *L'Ami du peuple* (Friend of the People) and was a member of the Paris National Convention, which in 1793 decided to execute the king. In July 1793, Marat was spectacularly murdered by Charlotte Corday whilst taking a bath.

The French invasion (1798)



The last bear of the old Bern. After marching into Bern, the French took the three adult bears from the bear pit back to Paris and left the bear cub behind, which died and was stuffed. © Historical Museum Bern

One of the French revolutionaries' aims was achieving national unity within their country's natural borders, an objective which soon affected the neighbouring Confederation. In 1792, revolutionary troops annexed the northern part of the Prince-Bishopric of Basel (Porrentruy, Delémont), which belonged to the Holy Roman Empire. The southern region of the Prince-Bishopric (Moutier, Biel), which belonged to the Confederation, was also occupied by France in 1797. The associated but isolated cities of Mulhouse and Geneva also became French at the start of 1798. Furthermore, in 1797 Napoleon incorporated Graubünden's subject territories of Valtellina, Bormio and Chiavenna into the recently founded Cisalpine Republic (in what is now part of northern Italy).

The promise of social and political emancipation which inspired the French Revolution's motto "liberty, equality, fraternity" was enthusiastically welcomed in some of Switzerland's subject territories. The 1794 Stäfner Memorial, for example, combined traditional concerns about restoring old municipality rights with modern demands for a written constitution and equality between the people of the country and the city of Zurich.

"Wealth, enlightenment, luxury and idleness have so changed conditions in the areas where manufacturing takes place that the educational institutions, the legislation and the professional restrictions with which the old shepherd folk of these regions were content no longer suit the present needs of this land. ... We can no longer live in the simplicity of the old type of government. Blessed was the time when we could, but it is no longer here."

Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), Note on the Nature of the People's Movement Emerging in the Zurich Region, 1795

A number of enlightened members of the city elites spoke out in favour of reform. They included Peter Ochs, Basel's chief master of the guilds, who drew up the first constitution for the whole of Switzerland on French orders at the start of 1798.

At the same time, Vaudois nobleman Frédéric-César de La Harpe campaigned in Paris for France to drive out the Bernese rulers from his homeland. When the Vaudois independence movement formed its own representative assembly, French troops moved into Vaud to

protect it against Bern. Subject territories began rising up in many parts of Switzerland and setting up short-lived republics of their own. After a number of small-scale skirmishes, the Bernese troops were decisively beaten in March 1798 at the Battle of Grauholz.

Now, the subject territories in Vaud and Aargau were also free. Bern's defeat and the suppression of the final pockets of resistance in Central Switzerland sealed the end of the old Confederation.

The Helvetic Republic (1798–1803)



Sign from an inn in Wattwil in the former "Canton of Säntis", one of the cantons formed in 1798 during the Helvetic Republic. Five years later this canton was abolished. © Toggenburg Museum Lichtensteig

Swiss revolutionaries working with Peter Ochs revised his draft constitution and created the Constitution of the Helvetic Republic, which was adopted in Aarau in April 1798. Despite federalist concerns, France imposed a centralist unitary state on Switzerland. The cantons lost their independence and were relegated to the status of mere administrative units, which in some cases were put together from several former cantons or subject territories. Civic equality was introduced, abolishing differences between citizens who were eligible to rule, ordinary citizens and subjects in the cantons and common lordships.

To ensure that all the power did not lie exclusively in the hands of a single authority, the new republic was founded – in line with the spirit of the Enlightenment – on the principle of the separation of powers (Montesquieu). The legislative body was the Grand Council, which had 144 members; the executive was the Directory, which comprised five members and was responsible for enforcing the laws; and the judiciary was the Supreme Court, which was responsible for legal rulings and consequently for interpreting the laws. This first national government of Switzerland was forced to accept many demands imposed by the French occupiers. The French transferred the canton's treasuries back to Paris. The Swiss were obliged to accommodate and feed the French occupying troops and allow France to use Switzerland as a transit route.

A defensive and offensive alliance with France broke the tradition of neutrality, and France soon instructed its Helvetic satellite to provide 18,000 support troops. During the War of the Second Coalition, Switzerland was turned into a battle zone in 1799 when Austrian and Russian troops tried to drive out the French (First and Second Battles of Zurich, Suvorov's Alpine crossing). The presence of so many foreign soldiers in Switzerland worsened the country's already impoverished state.



Monument to Russian General Alexander Suvorov, who led his troops across the Alps in 1799. He was not able to complete his mission of driving the French out of Switzerland. The monument was erected on the Gotthard Pass by Russian artist Dmitry Tugarinov in 1999. © www.picswiss

Napoleon the mediator (1803–1813)

The Helvetic Republic proved to be virtually ungovernable as it had no money and Parliament was split between federalist and centralist factions. This led to coups and a civil war, whereupon Napoleon intervened as “mediator of the Swiss Confederation”.

In March 1803, Napoleon summoned a Swiss envoy to Paris and handed him the Act of Mediation, which restored the federal system with largely independent cantons. One major change, however, was that the former Associated Places and subject territories were elevated to full cantonal status. This led to the Confederation being expanded by six cantons in 1803: St Gallen, Graubünden, Aargau, Thurgau, Ticino and Vaud.

The Confederation’s neutrality was formally recognised again, but a military capitulation and the defensive alliance meant that it had to continue supplying troops for the French army. Many Swiss soldiers died fighting for Napoleon, including most of the 9,000 or so men who had to take part in the Russian campaign of 1812.

The Swiss became famous for their fighting spirit during Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow in 1812. For a whole day, some 1,300 Swiss fought alongside allied troops at the Battle of Berezina to keep the far more numerous Russian army at bay while the rest of the French army crossed the river on pontoons. The majority of the Swiss troops paid for this campaign with their lives – only 700 soldiers eventually returned to Switzerland.

After Napoleon’s defeat at the Battle of the Nations in Leipzig in 1813, the Russians, Austrians, Prussians and their allies advanced towards France and crossed the Rhine near Basel in 1813/14. Until Napoleon’s final defeat at Waterloo in 1815, Switzerland remained under the influence of the victorious powers, who reorganised Europe at the Congress of Vienna in 1815.

“Brave Swiss! You have fought like lions. Each of you deserves the cross of the Legion of Honour.”

General Merle, Commander of the Swiss Division, after the Battle of Berezina in 1812

Territorial changes

Between 1798 and 1815, the Swiss borders – both internal and external – underwent a number of changes, before largely taking on the form they have today. The main changes related to the Holy Roman Empire and the German states, with borders being moved and exclaves abolished.

The Fricktal region, situated to the west of the Rhine but previously part of Further Austria, was transferred to France at the Peace of Campo Formio in 1797, before initially becoming a separate canton of the Confederation in 1802 and then a part of the newly created canton of Aargau as a result of the 1803 Act of Mediation.

Although the Free State of the Three Leagues became affiliated with the Helvetic Republic in 1799, the Austrians, Russians and French continued to battle for control of the area. Napoleon finally conquered the region in 1801 and handed it over to the Confederation in 1803 as the separate canton of Graubünden. However, the former subject territories of Valtellina, Bormio and Chiavenna, which he had integrated into the Cisalpine Republic in 1797, were not returned to Graubünden.

The previously independent but associated Republic of Valais was incorporated into the Helvetic Republic in 1798. However, in 1802 it was turned into an independent republic again by Napoleon, before being annexed by France in 1810 as the “département of Simplon”.

Valais was of key strategic importance to Napoleon as a transit route to Italy due to its Alpine passes (Great St Bernard and Simplon).

In 1814/15, the victorious allied powers rearranged the European states at the Congress of Vienna. Valais, Geneva and Neuchâtel joined the Confederation as cantons, but Neuchâtel was at the same time made into a Prussian principality. Geneva was given a number of French and Savoyard (Catholic) municipalities in order to establish a territorial link to the rest of the Confederation. The territory of the Prince-Bishopric of Basel (Jura), which was abolished in 1803, was taken back from France, with most of it going to Bern and a small part to Basel.