

# The Napoleon Series

## Napoleon and Switzerland

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Since its foundation in 1291, Swiss has followed the model of a Confederation. However, until 1848, no federal constitution was in place to define the dynamics of the relation among cantons (Swiss states.) The experience of the French Revolution and specifically Napoleon's invasion of Switzerland in 1798 became an important factor in the redefinition of a federative state.

In the late eighteenth century several of Switzerland's federated states, inspired by the Enlightenment, experienced rebellions demanding the granting of various rights. Small groups of intellectuals and merchants in cities sympathized with the agenda of the early French Revolution and looked to Paris for inspiration, in particular through news coming from the Helvetic Club based there. As Bonaparte planned his strategy against coalition forces, he tried to use the Helvetic Club in Paris to influence rebellions in the Swiss Confederation. A Helvetic revolution thus followed, beginning in Basel on 20 January 1798, and leading to governmental change in several cantons, including Zurich and Schaffhausen. France supported the rebellions, and its troops also occupied Catholic cantons, forcing capitulation of all Swiss troops in March 1798.

French representatives immediately went to work and remodeled the Confederation into a Helvetic Republic. The constitution of 6 April 1798 included a Directory of five members (similar to France's,) with a "Grosser rat" (Great Assembly) of 152 and a senate of 76. Central Switzerland, however, resisted the new constitution, but Bonaparte soon triumphed, imposed the new structure, and took control of strategically important Alpine passes. In response to this turn of events, in February 1799 a second Austro-Russian coalition force led by Karl of Austria challenged the 70,000 strong French army group in Switzerland, led by General Masséna. Despite several early defeats, French troops triumphed in September 1799 and retained control of Switzerland.

From then until 1802, the Helvetic Republic witnessed a struggle between two major Swiss parties: the "Unitarier" who wanted to keep a centralized state and the Federalists, favoring a looser union. The resulting instability caused five different governments to rule over three years. Local skirmishes among the Swiss even prompted the return of Napoleonic troops. Marshall Ney acted as negotiator and in February 1803 forced representatives of the thirteen cantons to accept his solution of reducing the number of states to six. Currency and measure units were standardized, and censorship of the press was lightened. This state of affairs would last ten years and became known as the Mediation Period, an era of peace without independence.

At the same time, Napoleon gained the right to raise 16,000 Swiss soldiers, and an additional 8,000 in case France was attacked. The agreement covered replenishment of the forces, too. The 16,000 men were incorporated into four regiments. The uniform chosen incorporated the red motive that Swiss mercenaries serving France had worn. Napoleon, who as a young artillery officer had witnessed the August 1792 attack on the Tuileries (the palace was defended to the last by Swiss mercenaries), decreed that only Swiss citizens should be recruited because of their tenacity as a group. While Zurich provided nineteen companies of volunteers (2,076 men), some cantons actually used recruitment as punishment for civil offenders. Each of the four regiments was reduced in number following the military capitulation of 28 March 1812, yet stayed by the emperor's side till his abdication in April 1814. In all, some 90,000 Swiss served Napoleon, 50,000 of which died. In the meantime, Switzerland returned to its Federal status in 1813.

Overall, Bonaparte's designs on Switzerland, first as a strategic knot, then later as a point of concern due to its stability changed the direction of the country forever. The imposition of temporary unity, but also the decision of the Congress of Vienna to confirm the nation as a buffer state set the stage for a maturation process that, following two constitutional drafts, would redesign Switzerland into a neutral, federal democratic state by the end of the nineteenth century.

## Sources

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