



# **International Boundary Study**

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## **Italy – Switzerland Boundary**

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**The Geographer  
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**INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY STUDY**

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# ITALY - SWITZERLAND BOUNDARY

## I. BACKGROUND

The Italy - Switzerland boundary extends from Mt. Dolent, the French tripoint in the west, to Piz Lad, the Austrian tripoint in the east. The boundary traverses, for the most part, a rugged and thinly-settled alpine region. In spite of this rugged setting, physical factors have not completely dominated the selection of the boundary site. In fact, the border often departs from the alpine watershed to follow straight, geometric lines. The greatest deviation from the physical boundary, as would be expected, is in the densely settled area of the Lake country, i.e., Como, Lugano, Maggiore, where the boundary between Ticino on one side and Lombardy and Piedmont on the other presents a complex and irregular cultural pattern. Historical factors have overruled physical and ethnic criteria to create this complicated situation. As a result, the Mendrisio area is separated from the remainder of Switzerland by the waters of Lago Lugano and by Italian territory. In addition, the Mendrisio conclave completely isolates the Italian exclave of Campione.

While deviations elsewhere have not created comparable anomalies, the modern tendency in relocating the boundary has been to prefer geometric lines to the sinuosities of the watershed. Simplicity of administration and maintenance are given as the reasons for the preference.

## II. TREATIES

Due to the relatively recent unification of Italy, many of the treaties affecting the boundary were negotiated by the various kingdoms and republics of northern Italy. As a result of the political division and the alpine nature of the boundary, a myriad of treaties, conventions, acts, agreements, etc., determine the boundary. Colonel Vittorio Adami, the former chief of the Italian boundary document section, lists 382 separate documents affecting the boundary up to 1922. A smaller but still impressive number is needed to bring the total list to the present. Consequently, it is not possible to include in the section below all effective documents on the boundary. The major actions and all recent treaties and acts are listed.

**A. Treaty for the Regulation of the Boundary Between Lombardy and the Three Prefectures of Lugano, Locarno, and Mendrisio**, signed on August 2, 1752, at Varese by the Duchess of Milan, the Empress of Austria and the Helvetian League.

While the first demarcation of the boundary appears to have taken place as early as 1559, this so-called Treaty of Varese is considered to be the first serious attempt at methodical and systematic border delimitation. It was followed from 1754 - 1755 by mixed commissions which documented and described the boundary in detail. Certain minor agreements followed.

**B. Declaration of the 8 powers on the Affairs of the Helvetic Confederacy**, signed at

Vienna on March 20, 1815.

In adding Geneva, Valais, and Neuchatel to Switzerland and parts of Sardinia (Savoy) to Switzerland (Geneva) (Article LXXX of the Congress of Vienna on June 9, 1815) and to France (General Treaty of Peace of May 30, 1814), the current French tripoint was established in principle.

Many minor acts followed over the next 50 years.

**C. Lugano Convention** signed at Lugano on October 5, 1861.

This convention resolved eleven disputes on the Ticino boundary on the basis of the provisions of the Treaty of Varese.

**D. Convention of August 27, 1863.**

This convention led to the demarcation (1863 - 1868) of the Graubünden (Grisons) boundary and the resolution of the disputes on the Splügen (mountain), the Val di Lei, the Torrente Lovero near Cartasegna and the Brusio - Tiano - Umbrail sector.

Delimitation and demarcation work followed in 1867, 1873, 1874, 1880, 1882, and 1886 fixing in detail many of the points in the alpine areas. Little territorial transfer was involved.

**E. Treaty of Berne** signed on November 25, 1895, for the construction of the Simplon Pass Railroad and boundary line required by the construction.

During the same period the entire Ticino boundary was redemarcated (1891 - 1895).

**F. Exchange of Notes**, November 17, 1908, and December 28, 1908.

This exchange of notes supplemented the three Rome conventions: 1) May 16, 1903, made certain concessions to Italy in the Simplon; 2) November 23, 1904, on arbitration including boundary arbitration; and 3) January 18, 1906 - March 24, 1906, which settled the boundary dispute in the Val Vedro (Simplon) and the Great St. Bernard pass. Additional conventions followed on October 13, 1909, November 16, 1909, and February 8, 1911, on the same subjects.

**G. Treaty of St. Germain** signed September 10, 1919.

This peace treaty with Austria transferred the South Tyrol to Italy thereby increasing the length of the Italo - Swiss boundary by 33.5 miles (53.5 kilometers). The Austrian tripoint was moved, as a result, from Cima Garibaldi (Run Do) to Piz Lad.

The change in the boundary was followed by almost eight years of feverish activity until by June 1927 the following stretches of the Italo - Swiss boundary had been redemarcated: 1)

Cima di Cugn to Monte Boglia, 2) Val Mara to Monte Gengroso, 3) Chiasso to Lake Lugano, 4) Campione enclave.

**H. Exchange of Notes** dated October 3, 1927, and August 22, 1928.

This exchange of notes accepted the 1920 to 1927 demarcation work.

**I. Declaration of March 22, 1929.**

Declaration of March 22, 1929, resolved the three areas of dispute involving differing water divide concepts. Immediate demarcation of the stretches was authorized and the field work was completed in 1935. Italy received concessions in the Val Orsera and Balniscio Pass and Switzerland in the Stretta Pass and the Val di Lei. Demarcation protocols were signed on March 29, 1940.

**J. Convention between the Swiss Confederation and the Kingdom of Italy on the determination of the Italo - Swiss Frontier between Run Do or Cima Garibaldi and Mont Dolent** signed in Bern on July 24, 1941.

This convention and a supplemental one signed on the same day are the most important recent acts on the frontier. Not only did they place into force the changes mentioned above but they established a mixed commission providing for the upkeep of the border, work vital and necessary in an area of landslides, avalanches, glaciers and other destructive forces of nature. Although the war interrupted the activities of the group, by 1947 it was again an effective force in the maintenance of the frontier.

Sixteen large scale maps illustrate the rectifications of the frontier involving, for the most part, substitutions of conventional lines for stretches of the watershed.

**K. Accord between Italy and Switzerland on the subject of cession of water power from the Reno di Lei (Val di Lei) with additional protocol** signed in Reno on June 18, 1949.

Article 1 of the supplemental protocol provided for an exchange of territory of approximately 1 sq. kilometer (.5 from each country) in the Lei Valley. This action was formalized in (O) below.

**L. Agreement between the Italian Republic and the Swiss Confederation concerning the rectification of the border along Roggia Molinara between the communes of Como and Chiasso** signed at Chiasso on April 5, 1951.

This agreement led to the tracing and marking of a new frontier along the axis of a new canal. The new segment was 800 meters long.

**M. Agreement between the Italian Republic and the Swiss Confederation concerning the rectification of the frontier along the road at Ponte Chiasso** signed at Chiasso on April 5, 1951.

This very minor rectification resulted from an effort to speed up traffic on the road and to permit the separation of truck and automobile traffic.

**N. Agreement between the Italian Republic and the Swiss Confederation concerning boundary modifications at Cornera Pass or Kriegalp Pass** signed at Martigny on July 4, 1952.

A shift in local land forms required a new demarcation of the frontier. The change is illustrated on the lower inset of Map No. 35409 attached.

**O. Agreement between the Italian Republic and the Swiss Confederation concerning a modification of the frontier in the Lei Valley (Val di Lei, Reno di Lei) with additional protocol** signed at Bern on November 25, 1952.

The accord of June 18, 1949 (K above) was implemented by this agreement. The new boundary resulting from the two acts is shown on the upper inset of Map No. 35409 attached. The total area involved was 1 square kilometer.

**P. Agreement between Italy and Switzerland on the regulation of Lake Lugano with additional protocol signed at Bern on September 17, 1955.**

To standardize the regime of Lake Lugano a dam was to be built at Rocchetta and the Tresa River was to be canalized. The engineering work would destroy adjacent boundary markers. In order to restore the boundary after the completion of the work supplemental reference points were established. The existing boundary was not altered.

**Q. Agreement between the Italian Republic and the Swiss Confederation for the utilization of the water power of Spoel (River)** signed at Bern on May 27, 1957.

Two and one-half kilometers of the boundary were submerged by a reservoir built on the Spoel. Reference points were established at higher elevations to permit the identification of the boundary in the water. Again the location was not altered.

**R. Agreement between the Italian Republic and the Swiss Confederation on the construction and operation of a highway tunnel under the Great St. Bernard Pass** signed at Bern on May 23, 1958.

The agreement provided for the demarcation of the boundary within the new tunnel. No change occurs to the surface representation.

### III. SUMMARY

The modifications established by the listed protocols, agreements, and other acts have not basically altered the Italo - Swiss boundary. With the exception of the lengthening resulting from the Treaty of St. Germain the boundary has, in fact, been virtually stable for nearly a century and a half. In spite of the handicaps of harsh natural forces, the two governments through constant maintenance, surveillance, and mutual cooperation have been able to maintain the boundary with a minimum of difficulty.

The adjustments, while many in number, have resulted in very minor transfers of territory. Two principal types of changes are noted: 1) substitution of straight line segments for the sinuous curves of the watershed and 2) for development of roads, canals, and reservoirs. Simplification of administration has also been involved.

With the exception of the changes at Kriegalp Pass and at Val di Lei, official Italian and Swiss maps accurately represent the de jure boundary and they are recommended for compilation source. Commercial maps from reputable firms (Agostini, Kummerly and Frey, etc.) are also accurate.

This International Boundary Study is one of a series of specific boundary papers prepared in the Office of the Geographer, Department of State, in accordance with provisions of Bureau of the Budget Circular No. A-16, Exhibit D.

Government agencies may obtain additional information and copies of the study by calling the Office of the Geographer, Room 8744, State Department Building, Department of State, Washington 25, D.C. (telephone: Code 182, extension 4507).