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Alessandro Celi

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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- ¹ Valgrisenche is a secondary valley on the southern side of the Aosta Valley. It runs for some 40 kilometres in a north-south direction from its opening at Arvier, in the major groove of the region, to the ridge on the border of Tarentaise.

Photo 1. Panorama of Arvier today: The black square indicates the castle of La Mothe and the white square the village of Leverogne, from both sides of the gorge shaped by the Dora di Valgrisenche River



PHOTO ALESSANDRO CELI

- 2 In civil and religious terms, it comprises a single municipality and one lone parish, today divided into 16 villages. Its identity is marked – both in the minds of the people and in scientific literature – by a paradox: Valgrisenche is a poor and isolated valley, rich only “de berrio et de rocs” (“in stone and rocks”), but its inhabitants are very wealthy. According to a saying that Bernard Janin (1991) recorded and that is reminiscent of the anti-Semitic background in which our Western civilisation is steeped, they are “the Jews of the Aosta Valley”. This contradiction is related to other factors, identified by several authors during the 19th century who praised the population’s “fair reputation of honesty” (Gorret-Bich, 1877) and described them as “laborious and efficient” (Bethaz 1877) and as having the “most active arms [and] the most religious hearts” throughout the region (Fénoil, 1887).
- 3 Although Valgrisenche is comparable to the surrounding valleys regarding morphology and the conditions of their traditional economy, it has retained a particular identity that has spanned three centuries, and even today, the *Valgriseins* have a reputation – sometimes positive and sometimes negative – that distinguishes them from other inhabitants of the Aosta Valley.
- 4 We can compare Valgrisenche with the Rhêmes Valley on its eastern border because they both are very long and separated from the main valley by a very narrow gorge at their entrance. Actually Valgrisenche is less closed than Rhêmes, as the Col du Mont provides easy access to the Isère Valley and thus favoured favouring trade in years past.

Photo 2. The Col du Mont**PHOTO ALESSANDRO CELI**

- 5 Valgrisenche is different from La Thuile on its western side because access to the Little St-Bernard Pass (2,188 m.) is much easier than to the Col du Mont (2,646 m.). Moreover, the valley has never experienced a tourist boom comparable to the one that led to the creation of the La Rosière–La Thuile ski resort. It also differs from Sainte-Foy-Tarentaise, the village at the foot of the French side of the Col du Mont, which until the end of the Second World War “was the real centre of gravity of the upper [Isère] valley, owing to both its agricultural and pastoral resources (...) and the absolute and relative weight of its population in the upper valley” (Bozonnet - Bravard, 1984). Valgrisenche never reached this level because it lies 20 kilometres far from the main axis of the Aosta Valley.
- 6 However, the history of Valgrisenche has some points in common with Tignes, a second site in Savoy. Some families of Tignes-based clothes merchants, like that of Bishop Joseph-Auguste Duc (1835-1922), came to settle in the Aosta Valley in the 18th century, while the Col du Mont was the preferred route for relatives to travel between the two sides of the Alps. Tignes and Valgrisenche are also similar by virtue of having built a dam on their territories after the Second World War. Construction forced the local population to abandon some of their native hamlets. The controversies and protests between the inhabitants and the companies building the dams, which sometimes turned violent (Fournier, 2000), as well as the memories of the evicted families, put the experiences of these two communities on an equal footing. Valgrisenche differs from the French case because the resistance of its inhabitants never reached the level of violence in Savoy. However, it firmly opposed the building company’s proposals, obtaining some significant compensations for the people forced to move from their home to seek a new one in other villages in the Aosta Valley. Even though they were

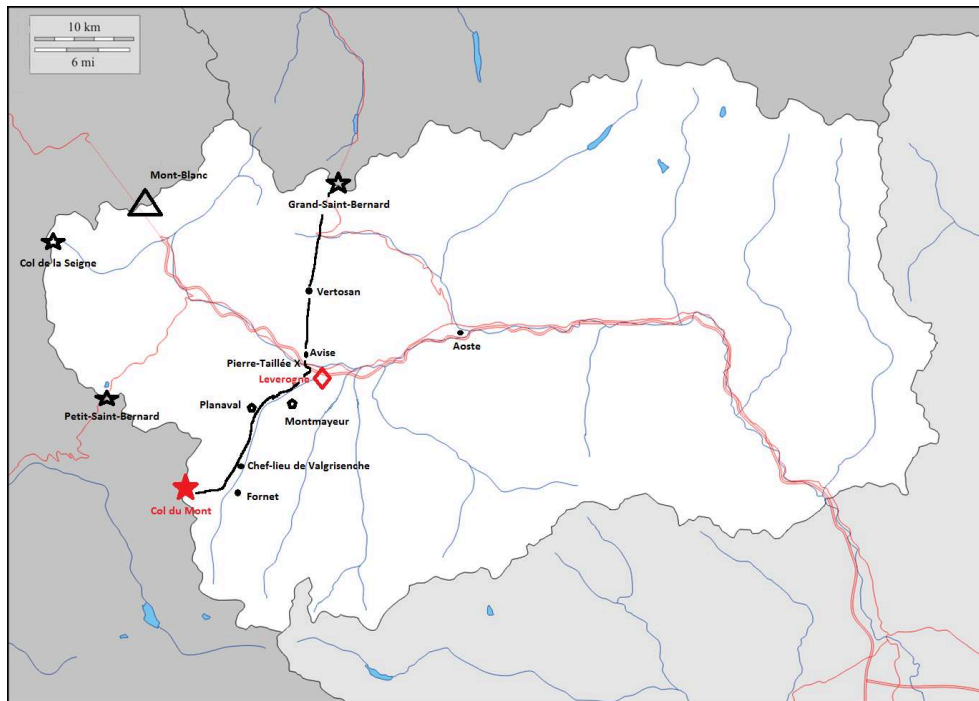
forced to move elsewhere, the people maintained their own identity and their love for their birthplace. Every year, on the day of Saint-Grat (September 7), most of them take part in the traditional pilgrimage to the lake named after this saint who is also the symbol of the community.

- 7 The endurance of a sense of identity is so strong that it also enables people living elsewhere to recognise the ones coming from Valgrisenche. This article focuses on the causes of this endurance. It will examine the founding elements of this identity and their origins according to the rules of social psychology, which acknowledges “a common history and present” as elements defining a social identity and, at the same time, as the basis for “shared social action” (Wetherell-Mohanty, 2010). The article will focus mainly on changes in the borders, along with their effects on the territory, between the 16th and 18th centuries, and the contrasts that garnered strong opposition from the people against the central national power as well as the acknowledgement of a diversity jealously kept till today.

A territory defined by shifting boundaries

- 8 As mentioned in the introduction, the identity of Valgrisenche is based on a set of elements that include isolation, poverty and, more generally, some delay in economic development, which contrasts with the honesty and laboriousness of the residents and their strong Catholic faith. These elements allowed the establishment of a shared thought narrative attributing the poverty of Valgrisenche to the State, which allegedly would have abandoned the valley in the early 1950s. It was the time of building the dam that submerged five of its villages, among them Fornet, the seat of a rectory, founded in 1759, that made it the second centre of the valley, at least from a religious point of view. The rising waters forced part of the population to leave their homeland and prevented the growth of tourism in the area, while the rest of the Aosta Valley grew thanks to winter sports.
- 9 This explanation, though supported by several authors in the Aosta Valley (Viérin, 1987; Bois, 2000; Bétemps, 2002), seems to be primarily the product of both contemporary political debate and nostalgia. In fact, the reputation of “Jews” attributed to Valgriseins is based on their ability to work and on the relative affluence of the population, due to trade relations, which since ancient times have used the path of the Col du Mont. This passage, though situated at a higher altitude than the Little St-Bernard Pass, has several advantages for a wayfarer. The route is easy – even in the 17th century it was utilised “easily and in almost every season by chariots loaded with goods from Saint-Foy” (De Tillier, 1968) – but above all it is closer to Aosta, the regional capital, and to the road leaving from Avise and joining the Great St-Bernard Pass across the Vertosan Valley and the Citrin Pass.

Map 1. The route between the Col du Mont and the Great–St-Bernard Pass



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- 10 Thus, in Antiquity and in the Middle Ages, the Col du Mont was a very busy trade route, as evidenced by the Roman literature and medieval archaeological remains. By contrast, in modern times Valgrisenche became an important military target because of its opening at Arvier, which allowed French troops to avoid the blockade at the *Pierre Taillée*, the gorge that separates Valdigne and the road to the Little St-Bernard Pass from the central part of the Aosta Valley. As a result, since the 18th century, Valgrisenche has undergone a decisive transformation: Instead of a passage, it became a barrier meant to repulse any attempt at invasion from the French side. It thus became very isolated because of the new geopolitical conditions.
- 11 This change, which permanently marked the local history and identity, is proved by many fortified sites, whose ruins are still around today. They indicate how both the military and the fiscal borders moved over the centuries. In fact, during the Middle Ages, control over Valgrisenche was secured by four castles: La Mothe, Leverogne, Montmayeur and Planaval.

Photo 3. La Mothe castle



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Photo 4. Rochefort



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- 12 Built on the territory of Arvier, at the entrance to the valley, they were supposed to block access to Valgrisenche from the side of Aosta, not from Savoy. Therefore, their function was linked to the collection of tolls rather than to a logic of defence, using an approach also followed on the borders of the Aosta Valley with Piedmont. There, the Susa duty, which was levied on goods from Savoy, was collected in Carema, the first village in the Canavese, the area around Ivrea. By contrast, the military border with Piedmont was marked by the Bard Fort, a few kilometres west (Celi, 2013).
- 13 In Valgrisenche, between the 16th and 18th centuries, military borders grew in importance, and the old castles were abandoned while several new fortifications were constructed between the main village of Valgrisenche and the Col du Mont.

Photo 5. The fortified house of Planaval



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Photo 6. The Planaval Chapel



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- 14 The French invasion of 1536 caused the occupation of Savoy and the Canavese, leaving the Aosta Valley being completely surrounded by enemy forces. The first contingent from the Aosta Valley was sent to Valgrisenche to stand guard at the Col du Mont. No battle was recorded, but the situation was very tense. The continual state of war in the lands of the Dukes of Savoy between 1580 and 1642 caused the continuous presence of soldiers in Valgrisenche. In 1597, a detachment was sent to the pass (Duc, 1993); in 1628, men were mobilised for war, and the lack of workers prevented agricultural work, so the famine struck all of Valgrisenche; two years later, “the inhabitants found themselves urged by a detachment of Prince Thomas’s army who, upon returning from Savoy, stopped at this parish” (Duc, 1995). This time, 1,200 men occupied the houses, forcing the population to live “in the rock caves like savages”. A similar situation occurred in 1692, during the War of the League of Augsburg, when the duke sent a regiment of *religionnaires* to defend the country after the French raid, which saw the Leverogne Bridge mined and demolished. It was not until 1748 that Valgrisenche, like other regions of Italy, could enjoy a period of peace. However, a decisive modification occurred. During this long period of tension, the arrangements of fortifications had changed. Indeed, a topographic map from the State Archives of Turin (1703 Map), dated 1703, indicates the presence of fortifications in Col du Mont and on the Sachère Pass (Bois, 1995). It is worth emphasising this point because it shows the beginning of the confinement process of Valgrisenche, which ceased to be a place of passage and became a place of defence.
- 15 Instead of medieval castles located at the mouth of the valley, the line of defence shifted to the mountain tops, despite an average temperature lower than in previous centuries. These fortifications finally reached the Col du Mount and other passage ways

used by the troops. An interesting example in this regard is the remains of a redoubt built on a rocky outcrop overlooking the trail between the side valleys of Saint-Grat and of the Alp Vieille.

Photo 7. The Montmayeur Castle



PHOTO ALESSANDRO CELI

Photo 8. Redoubt on the rocky outcrop



PHOTO ALESSANDRO CELI

- 16 Its structure, although little is known about it because it is not mentioned on maps, recalls the fortifications of the modern age, and its position fits perfectly with the logic of this period. At this time, not only was direct access to the pass defended but so, too, were the secondary roads leading to the border, according to a design from the principle of the watershed line, along with military considerations. From 1792 onwards, the military forces gave increasing attention to the paths of the right side of Valgrisenche, which surrounded the main village, and avoided the fortifications situated between it and the Col du Mont. A map dating from the War of the Alps reflects these concerns, which led to the building of a real *vallum* bisecting the valley. Composed of a ditch and a dry wall of 2 km, with redoubts for the artillery, it stretches along the right side of Valgrisenche, from the main village to Maison-Forte.

Photo 9. Maison-Forte

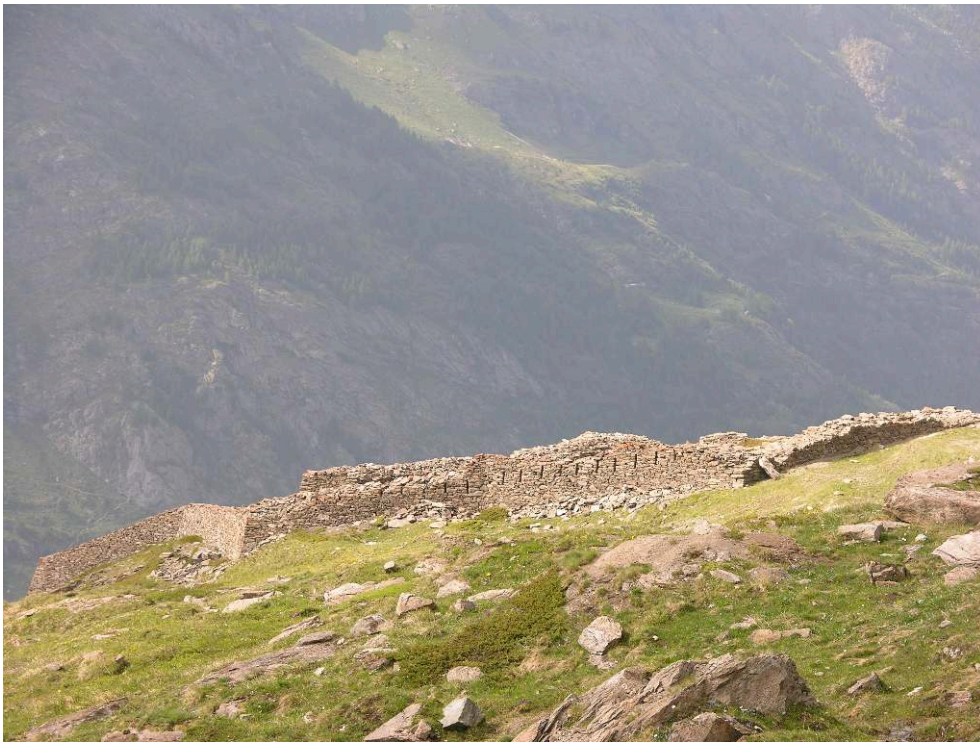


PHOTO ALESSANDRO CELI

Photo 10. Maison-Forte, western side: The arrow indicates the second redoubt for the artillery



PHOTO ALESSANDRO CELI

- 17 This name comes from the stone fort that was supposed to block any attempt to outflank the right side of the valley (Brocherel 1900; Bois, 1995) that was easier to reach. On the left, the passages were steeper, but it still had to be monitored. To this end, 3,000 soldiers were stationed in Valgrisenche in October 1792.

The story in common: the defence of the Col du Mont and the myth of Captain Chamonin

- 18 The revolutionary and Napoleonic period left an indelible mark on the local identity because of the exploits of the local troops. These were organised by Captain Jean-François Chamonin (1762-1828), a native of the valley. When the regular troops of the King of Sardinia abandoned their position, Chamonin, refusing to deliver his homeland to the revolutionary armies, took over the weapons depots and equipment left behind by the royal army, organised his compatriots and opposed the French so effectively that they could not get off the Col du Mont for three years (Bois, 2000-2). This veritable popular defence – in which some see the origins of the Italian Alpini (Pelazza, 1990) – still marks the collective memory as evidence of Valgriseins' ability to self-organise and face challenges without help from the State.

Photo 11. Maison-Forte



PHOTO ALESSANDRO CELI

- 19 In fact, Chamonin had not held any military command before the war, but through their exploits his hunters showed their skill at using weapons and in self-defence, which is typical of the entire Aosta Valley but particularly well-developed in Valgrisenche. This feature derives from the position of the whole region, bordering on the Valais under the hegemony of the Confederates (mostly Protestants after the

Reformation) over Savoy, easy to conquer by France, and on Piedmont, for a long time shared between the Savoy family, the Visconti of Milan and the Palaeologi of Monferrat. The need to hinder invasions favoured the practice of weapons; therefore it was no coincidence that the Count of Savoy authorised the first target-shooting on the southern side of the Alps in the city of Aosta (Angelucci, 1864). Target-shooting was also practised in Valgrisenche, whose inhabitants were best placed to fear a French invasion and knew the strategic importance of the Col du Mont. Consequently, they used to train regularly with their weapons. This is why the troops of Captain Chamonin held the Col du Mont and continued to provide trusty men to the army and the authorities of the kingdom. For example, in 1862, the Police Officer in Morgex asked for the National Guard of Valgrisenche to intervene to check the crossings in the main valley (Celi, 2013).

- 20 The importance of weapons and the skills of the local troops are deeply rooted in the history of the Aosta Valley. They bring this area closer to other countries in the Alps: In the Vaud, *Abbeys* are still a very important identifying practice, and in Tyrol, the resistance against Napoleon's armies became a cornerstone of the local identity thanks to the leader of the *Schützen* and the country's national hero, Andreas Hofer. This parallel has only recently been outlined (Celi, 2013), but it is worth noting here. As a matter of fact, the figure of Captain Chamonin, rediscovered in the late-19th century by the abbés Bethaz (1877) and Fénoil (1887), became the symbol of the independent spirit of the Valgriseins, if not of the whole Aosta Valley. This symbolic function was officially celebrated in 2000, when the regional government inserted the name and the name biography of Chamonin into a list of most important Aosta Valley people since year 1000, in the book "Les Cent du Millénaire" (Millénaire, 2000), while the city of Aosta had already honoured the captain's memory by dedicating a street to him a few decades earlier. The importance of war in the history of Valgrisenche came to represent the people of this valley as one of the most combative of the Aosta Valley.

The story in common: the militarisation of the territory since the Union of Italy

- 21 For Valgrisenche, the central role of the military experience continued after the Napoleonic Era. The proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, and in particular the signing of the Triple Alliance (1882) with the Austro-Hungarian and German empires, finally transformed Valgrisenche into a closed military border. During the government of Italian Prime Minister Francesco Crispi (1887-1896), the valley saw the construction of several barracks and fortified structures meant to block all crossings towards and from France. This same type of defence was also set up between Valgrisenche and the Rhêmes Valley, and between the various side valleys of Valgrisenche. Massive militarisation of the area began in 1872, when France, after its defeat at Sedan, was not yet a threat.

Photo 12. The small barracks granted to captain Ricci at 2,800 m



PHOTO ALESSANDRO CELI

- 22 According to the journal of the rector of Fornet, Father Joseph-Bernard Gerballaz (1984), between 1872 and 1914, with the exception of 1894, Valgrisenche became the scene of summer manoeuvres of the Italian Alpine troops. Every summer, hundreds or thousands of soldiers – there were 8,000 in 1892 – trained with mules and guns to get ready to repel an invasion. The manoeuvres added to the construction of fortified barracks in the main village and many other structures: A powder magazine north of the barracks was built around the same time; then some “*barracons* and huts almost all [...] furnished with beds, wood, stoves” at the Plan de l’Ours, below the Grand Seinllia, at Plontaz; another one halfway, then one on the Quatre-Dents Peak, and another, smaller, at the *caro* (at the end) of the same edge (...) then at the Forcllia Dou Bré and another over the [Lake of Saint-Grat]. Four others in various parts of Mount Pellà; then one on the Italian side of the Col du Mont”, defined as the “true barracks” because it could house 300 men. There were still others at Alp Vieille and on Mount Ormelune. Below the Quatre-Dents Peak, the army decided to dig “a basement to keep dynamite that they would have blown up in case the French passed by [...] to crush the enemy” (Gerballaz 1984). Between 1894 and 1896, there was still “a hut that was located above the mountains of Alp Vieille, the fortified barracks [...] of the Morion” (Bois, 1995) and another fort “below the Plan Rochex at the bottom of Champigny”.
- 23 All structures were connected by a network of mule tracks and military roads: In 1890, a path between the main village and the Petites-Laures was dug in the rock; in 1893, a cart track from Vercognée to Borègne, a road between Lauves and Mont Pellà, crossing the Alp Vieille, another one from Prarion to Merlo and a “path from the Bethaz and up to Miolet, and from there, to Lucé, passing behind the Becca de l’Aouille”. The next year, a path opened that went through Plan Petey down to Planaval, and in 1897 a trail

from Lauves to Alp Vieille, above the village of Bonne. Along with these infrastructures, the telegraph arrived as well, reaching the main village in 1890. That was certainly a service able to open up Valgrisenche after isolation, but it mainly served the army and the agents of the “Guardia di Finanza”, the military corps responsible for checking the border to prevent French spies and, above all, Italian smugglers.

Photo 13. The left slope of Valgrisenche, with the Col du Mont indicated by an arrow. Numbers 1 to 6 show the location of military installations



PHOTO ALESSANDRO CELI

- 24 This strong military presence certainly had consequences for the local population. Unfortunately, the documents looked up for this research do not make it possible to draw up a general framework of the attitudes of the population towards the military forces. Some elements, including burglaries at military buildings, still deliver interesting clues. This phenomenon is also known in the neighbouring valleys, Valsavarenche and La Thuile, but the massive presence of military plants in Valgrisenche is the reason why they are more numerous than elsewhere. In particular, in 1893, the doors and the wood were stolen in the Col du Mont barracks, which had just been completed: The commandant of the garrison had to send a detachment of 10 men to monitor the structure until the snow arrived. It is certainly possible that the burglary had been organised by the French, but it is more likely that it was the act of the local population, in order to get wood for heating and for their buildings more easily. It is possible to identify a second form of resistance in the habit of increasing the price of groceries when the army arrived. This practice is the subject of an article published in 1888, when the weekly *L'Echo du Val d'Aoste* denounced the “civilian cut-throats” among the population of Valgrisenche who took advantage of the training soldiers. A second magazine, the Catholic *Duché d'Aoste*, in 1896 reported on the protests of the peasants facing the requisition of 40 mule saddles on the occasion of the Italian expedition to Ethiopia by the anticlerical Prime Minister Crispi. Furthermore, despite the constant presence of the soldiers, there was no marriage between Valgrisenche

women and the newcomers: The community retreated and refused to mingle with the State representatives. Among the motivations of these behaviours, it should be noted that a long quarrel carved an important division between the people and the central government. In fact, even though the soldiers were building hundreds of kilometres of trails and military paths in the upper part of Valgrisenche, for over 50 years the Italian general staff refused to open a carriage road between Leverogne and Valgrisenche. This refusal weighed heavily on the development of the valley, which was definitively changed into a place “of stones and rocks” and amplified the local people’s distrust towards the State.

The long road to Valgrisenche

- 25 The issue of the construction of a carriage road started in 1878, when the municipality of Valgrisenche asked the War Department to build one between Arvier and the valley’s main village. This was the beginning of a story that was to play out over almost 50 years. The general staff refused to grant final permission to the projects submitted by the local administration in 1890, 1903, 1907, and 1909. In some cases, military reasons or lack of money were alleged to justify the refusal. Yet the benefits that a carriage road would have represented for the army were evident to both local administrators and some military officers. In fact, in 1890 the Division of Military Engineering in Novara, which depended on the Aosta Valley, sent an officer to draw this road project (Celi, 2011). In the 1903 application, it is well noted that:
- 26 The state would be most interested in this building because of the strategic position that the municipality occupies on the border with France. Indeed, at the summit of Valgrisenche, the military administration built 15 alpine refuges as supply stores and local cantonment and, furthermore, defensive barracks in the main village (...) Obviously, if a mobilisation event occurred, such a path [the mule track connecting Valgrisenche and Leverogne] would make it impossible to supply the troops responsible for defending the border, and the disadvantage that our troops would have against those of the enemy would constitute a real danger to the national defence, considering that on the French side small carts are widely used for private transport to La Motte, a cottage two kilometres away from the frontier on the way from Col du Mont.
- 27 The same request was also intended to question the strategy of the general staff, who wanted the borders of the kingdom to be without roads in order to hinder invasions:
- 28 They claimed that a good road between Valgrisenche and Arvier would make it easier for the enemy to descend into the Aosta plains. This absurd assertion hardly merits a response because it is important above all not to allow the enemies to cross the border. It is useful even to surprise them at home and especially to occupy high positions promptly. That’s why a good road is absolutely necessary. Even assuming that the stranger manages to cross the border, nothing would be easier than to make the road impassable by means of blasting the mines at appropriate points.
- 29 The obstinacy shown by the War Department could not be justified by the intrigues of France, whose defence system was not based on the same logic. Instead, the French brought the railway lines to the foot of the main passes, as evidenced by the station at Bourg-Saint-Maurice, which was oversized to allow the arrival of several trains in case

of mobilisation. Moreover, the events that occurred during the Second World War proved the Valgriseins right. After the campaign of June 1940, the Italian general staff acknowledged the strategic importance of a road, especially for the construction of new bunkers for the “Vallo Alpino del Littorio” (Boglione, 2012), or the Alpine Wall defending Italian borders, and finally they decided to open a roadway on the basis of special wartime legislation (Celi, 2011). The construction started in 1941, but the road was not completed until after the war.

Photo 14. The remains of the Col du Mont barracks



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- 30 It is still remarkable that, at the time when the general staff in Rome refused to construct the road in Valgrisenche, a decision was taken to build one between Saint-Pierre and Saint-Nicolas, opposite Leverogne on the left slope of the main valley. This choice was determined by the need to carry field artillery, with heavy guns drawn by horses, to positions overlooking both the gorge of Pierre Taillée and the opening of Valgrisenche. The inauguration of the road – in June 1914, just a few weeks before the outbreak of the First World War – subsequently allowed the development of tourism in Saint-Nicolas. Valgrisenche had this opportunity only after the Second World War, but the road, while it contributed to the opening up of Valgrisenche, also favoured the depopulation of the same valley and the construction of a dam that changed the landscape and the lives of the community (Bois, 2000-1).
- 31 The cost generated by the military presence, as well as the isolation to which the War Department had condemned Valgrisenche, also had an impact on the political and religious orientation of the population. It should be noted that the clergy of the Aosta Valley retained great political influence throughout the 19th century and had quite a special position, always showing great respect for the royal dynasty but still opposing

the governments – both Liberal and fascist – that were in power between 1849 and 1945 (Merlo, 2012; Celi, 2013). Valgrisenche was not an exception to the rule. The priests there had a profound influence and continued to preach in French during the regime of Mussolini, who worked for the forced *italianisation* of the Aosta Valley (Celi, 2008). After the war, this influence assured the Catholic party of the Christian Democracy the votes of an absolute majority of the inhabitants of Valgrisenche, from 1948 until 1978, when the autonomist movement of the Union Valdôtaine became the majority party in the municipality. The loyalty to the Catholic party was the result of passive resistance against the State, which was interested in Valgrisenche only in order to repress smuggling or hunting, two activities essential to the survival of the population. This new paradox – loyalty to a dynasty or a political party holding the power but opposition to the State – led to the last change in the history of Valgrisenche. The loss of influence of the Church produced the electoral fall of the Christian Democracy and the growth of the autonomist movement, even with hints of separatism. Placards asking for the “indipendance” or a “free Aosta Valley” at the entrance of the snow shed on the road to Valgrisenche proved the persistence of the ideal of autonomous government in the valley and the importance of the road as a venue to show support for the people’s political demands (photos 15 and 16).

Photo 15, photo 16





PHOTOS ALESSANDRO CELI

Today's conflicts

- 32 The conflicts once manifested against the State are less evident today, as many elements of discontent have gradually disappeared or decreased, owing to the changes in recent years. In particular, we can highlight three major events, all promising a boost to Valgrisenche without forgetting its past.
- 33 The first concerns the idea of restoring military structures for tourist purposes. Thanks to the European Commission's Konver funds, the fortress that controlled Valgrisenche, which had been abandoned since 1945, was converted into a restaurant with a dormitory in 2004. With the name of "Vieux Quartier" ("the Old Barracks"), the structure has become an important tourist attraction for the main village in the valley. The path to the Col du Mont, meanwhile, has been the subject of intervention thanks to the Alcotra funding 2007/2013, which has enabled the creation of a "trace trail" supposed to lead the tourist to discover the history of the pass. Today, there is a project to restore the Captain Mathieu barracks on top of the Col du Mont and make it a refuge. This would provide a meeting place for the communities of Valgrisenche and Sainte-Foy and enable them to develop the ancient existing contacts that had declined because of the turmoil related to the establishment of the border in 1861.
- 34 The second event is the partial destruction of the dam. Because of the instability of the slope, the artificial lake was never completely filled. Thus, the dam could not reach its full potential. Out of economic and tourism considerations, this situation led to the decision to reduce the height of the dam. Since 2013, significant work has been carried out, and the imposing dam no longer cuts through the Valgrisenche panorama. This event provides a new comparison with Tignes. As noted above, the municipality in Savoy also had a dam that flooded the original location and forced the population to move. Most recently, the dam has become a central element of the television series *Les revenants* (2012), while the mountains of Valgrisenche were the background for the

remake of the famous film *Point Break*: Could the two valleys' future possibly lie in their exploitation by cinema and television?

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ABSTRACTS

Although Valgrisenche, a side valley of the Aosta Valley, is considered to be a poor and isolated valley consisting of stones and rocks, its inhabitants are widely known to have considerable wealth. This contradiction is due to the historical trials and tribulations of the area. In particular, the presence of the Col du Mont, which provided easy passage to Tarentaise, encouraged the development of trade that, during the Middle Ages, granted the valley a measure of wealth. By contrast, numerous conflicts since the 16th century caused the progressive closure of Valgrisenche. The valley became an important military target because of its location, which allowed invaders from France to avoid the bottleneck of the Pierre Taillée that encloses the upper part of the Aosta Valley. This article highlights the times of closure and describes the fortifications that marked the different historical periods. In particular, it demonstrates how the decisions of the War Department, which for 50 years prevented the construction of a motor road, led to a delay in the tourist development of Valgrisenche.

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Keywords: border, Aosta Valley, fortifications, war, identity

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