

After 8 September 1943

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The armistice between Italy and the Allies, announced on 8 September 1943, transformed the situation on the Ticinese border overnight. German troops occupied northern and central Italy, disarmed the Italian army and, after Mussolini's liberation, installed the Italian Social Republic. Thousands of Italian soldiers who refused to serve the Germans or the new Fascist State fled towards Switzerland. In the night of 16 to 17 September 1943 alone, about 10,000 disbanded Italian soldiers arrived at the Ticinese border.¹ In the autumn of 1943 more than 20,000 Italian soldiers were interned in Switzerland.² Over the whole war the country interned 104,000 foreign military personnel, of whom 24,400 were Italians.³ Military internees were treated under the law of neutrality, which obliged Switzerland to intern them and permitted it to do so. Their admission was therefore largely uncontroversial. The treatment of civilians was a different matter.

With the soldiers came civilians: political opponents of the regime, Jews threatened with deportation, young men avoiding conscription by the Social Republic, families fleeing the war. The historian Renata Brogginì describes the wave of political refugees that poured into the canton from the autumn of 1943. Reception centres were set up in Bellinzona and Lugano, in schools such as the Francesco Soave and la Nocca, at San Biagio in Ravecchia and in the Ala Materna at Rovio, in the hotels Majestic, de la Paix and Flora in Lugano and in the Grand Hotels of Locarno and Brissago, and in barrack camps at Gudo, Magliaso, Mezzovico and Pian San Giacomo.⁴ The empty hotels of the tourist economy thus became refugee centres. On 24 September 1943 the Ticinese authorities met the head of the Federal Department of Justice and Police, Eduard von Steiger, to obtain changes in the asylum procedure and a greater say for the canton in decisions on admission and rejection.⁵

1 Jewish refugees from Italy

For the Jews of Italy, the German occupation ended the relative security they had known despite the racial laws of 1938. Deportations began in the autumn of 1943. The routes to Switzerland ran over the mountains of the Valtellina and the Ossola, across the hills of the Mendrisiotto and Malcantone and along the shores of Lake Lugano and Lake Maggiore. Smugglers who knew the paths became guides, often for payment. Whether a family was admitted depended on the place and the time of the crossing, on the instructions in force and on the individual border guard or officer. Many were admitted, others were turned back into the hands of the Germans and the Fascist militia.⁶ Only on 12 July 1944 did the Federal Department of Justice and Police instruct the border authorities to admit all civilians whose life and limb were in danger, and with this instruction the Police Division withdrew its directives of December 1942 and recognized Jews as refugees in need of protection.⁷

Among the Italian refugees in Ticino were many who later shaped the Italian Republic. Broggin lists, among others, the socialists and men of letters Franco Fortini and Giorgio Strehler, the liberals Luigi Einaudi and Tommaso Gallarati Scotti, the Catholic politicians Amintore Fanfani and Piero Malvestiti and the federalists Ernesto Rossi and Altiero Spinelli.⁸ Einaudi, an economist, returned to Italy to become governor of the Bank of Italy in 1945 and was elected President of the Italian Republic in 1948.⁹ In May 1944 the castle of Trevano near Lugano became a secondary school camp, in particular for Jewish refugee teachers and pupils.¹⁰ By the end of the war Switzerland was sheltering about 45,000 Italian refugees.¹¹

2 Notes

1. Renata Broggin, "Frontiera sud: il Canton Ticino. La Svizzera italiana negli anni di guerra 1939– 1945", Scuola ticinese no. 232, https://m4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DS/Rivista_scuola_ticinese/ST_n.232/ST_232_Broggin_frontiera_sud_Canton_Ticino.pdf: "10.000 militari italiani sbandati giunti nella notte fra il 16 e il 17 settembre". ↩
2. Senn et al., "Weltkrieg, Zweiter" (above); de Weck, "Internierungen" (above) (20,000 men, chiefly Italians, across the Ticino border). ↩
3. de Weck, "Internierungen" (above). The HLS article on the Second World War gives a rounded figure of 103,000. ↩
4. Broggin, "Frontiera sud" (above). ↩
5. Broggin, "Frontiera sud" (above). ↩

6. Renata Brogginì, *La frontiera della speranza. Gli ebrei dall'Italia verso la Svizzera 1943–1945* (Milan: Mondadori, 1998). ↩
7. Portmann-Tinguely and von Cranach, "Flüchtlinge" (above): "Am 12. Juli 1944 erteilte das EJPD die Weisung, alle an Leib und Leben gefährdeten Zivilpersonen aufzunehmen"; Senn et al., "Weltkrieg, Zweiter" (above), on the withdrawal of the instructions of December 1942. ↩
8. Brogginì, "Frontiera sud" (above). ↩
9. Treccani, Enciclopedia on line, "Einaudi, Luigi", <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/luigi-einaudi/>: "Dopo l'8 settembre 1943 riparò in Svizzera"; "governatore della Banca d'Italia (1945-48)"; "presidente della Repubblica Italiana (1948-55)". ↩
10. Brogginì, "Frontiera sud" (above). ↩
11. Cerutti, "Antifascismus" (above). ↩

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