

Couriers, arms and the cantonal war commissioner

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Arms followed money. In 1848 the volunteers needed rifles, powder and ammunition, which were bought in Switzerland or brought from Piedmont and stored near the frontier. Leone Stoppani coordinated the smuggling of weapons with the patriots of Como.¹ Giacomo Ciani, the principal financier of the exiles, was also the cantonal war commissioner from about 1841 to 1850, the official responsible for the canton's military supplies.² The combination of offices was not unusual in a small canton where the same few families held most public posts. It shows, however, how closely the cantonal administration and the exile movement were intertwined, and why Austria regarded the cantonal authorities as accomplices. In October 1848 a cantonal finance official, Vittorio Lurati, was among those arrested after the failed Valle d'Intelvi rising.³

The couriers who carried money, letters and weapons across the frontier were drawn from the same population that carried smuggled goods. Their services had a price, and personal trust was the only guarantee of their reliability. Chapter D.II describes the *spalloni* of the twentieth century, who carried banknotes from Italy into Ticino on their backs. Their methods were older than the currency controls they circumvented. The paths, the knowledge of the customs posts and the networks of trust that served the patriots of 1848 and 1853 served the smugglers of salt and tobacco before them and the carriers of flight capital after them.

1 The sequestration of 1853 and the safety of assets abroad

The most important financial consequence of the rising of February 1853 did not concern Ticino directly. Radetzky responded to the rising by ordering the sequestration of the property of all political émigrés from Lombardy-Venetia, including those who had settled in the Kingdom of Sardinia and in some cases acquired Sardinian citizenship.⁴ The Austrian administration, in the words of Giacomo Girardi's study of the measure,

set itself slowly in motion and took temporary possession of their fortunes. The sequestration deprived the exiles of their usual income and affected the families who had remained in Lombardy. It also supplied new arguments to the "black legend" of Austrian misgovernment in the Italian provinces.⁵ The government of Turin protested, but its diplomacy proved insufficient: according to Ester De Fort, the sequestration was lifted only when the Austrian cabinet decided to do so on its own initiative.⁶

For the history of Lugano as a financial centre the sequestration of 1853 has a significance that goes beyond its political context. It demonstrated to the Lombard propertied classes that land, houses and bank deposits in Lombardy were exposed to confiscation by a hostile government, and that neither foreign citizenship nor the protests of a friendly state could protect them. Movable wealth held abroad, in Turin, Geneva, London or Lugano, was beyond the reach of the Austrian administration. The lesson was learnt by a generation and passed on. Later Italian governments, from the liberal state after 1861 to the fascist regime and the Republic, gave Italian families further reasons to keep part of their wealth outside the reach of the state: currency controls, wealth taxes, kidnappings, inflation and political instability. Chapters D.I and D.II follow these flows. Their prehistory lies in the 1850s, when the first Lombard families experienced the confiscation of their property for political reasons. In figures. The Tipografia Elvetica di Capolago published more than 350 titles between 1830 and 1853, among them the twenty-eight volumes of the *Documenti della guerra santa d'Italia*.⁷ The *Carte secrete* of the Austrian police drew on about 8,000 documents.⁸ Mazzini's national loan of 1850 had a nominal amount of ten million lire, in bonds of twenty-five francs and more.⁹ In 1853 Austria expelled more than 6,000 Ticinese from Lombardy.¹⁰ The Liceo cantonale di Lugano began in 1852 with twenty-three students.¹¹ Ticino paid 25,000 francs for the escort of Hungarian deserters through France in 1851.¹²

2 Notes

1. Martinola, "Ticinesi volontari" (above). ↩
2. Agliati, "Ciani, Giacomo" (above): "commissaire cantonal des guerres" around 1841–1850. ↩
3. Martinola, "Ticinesi volontari" (above). ↩
4. Ester De Fort, "La questione dei sequestri austriaci del 1853: echi e reazioni nel regno sardo", *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome – Italie et Méditerranée* 129/2 (2017), 387–398, abstract at <https://iris.unito.it/handle/2318/1659629> (consulted 4 October 2026). ↩

5. Giacomo Girardi, I beni degli esuli (Roma: Viella, 2022), open access, <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/92032> (consulted 4 October 2026): the administration "si mise lentamente in moto, impossessandosi temporaneamente delle loro fortune"; the sequestrations "fornirono nuovi argomenti alla leggenda nera del malgoverno austriaco". ↩
6. De Fort, "La questione dei sequestri austriaci del 1853" (above). ↩
7. Viganò, introduction (above); Martinola, "La tipografia Elvetica di Capolago" (above). ↩
8. Martinola, "La tipografia Elvetica di Capolago" (above). ↩
9. Museo del Risorgimento "Aurelio Saffi", catalogue record (above). ↩
10. Bauer, "Royaume lombard-vénitien" (above); Bianchi, "Ticinesi a Milano" (above). ↩
11. Snider, "La scuola media pubblica" (above). ↩
12. Martinola, "Fraternità con gli Ungheresi ramminghi" (above). ↩

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