

Deserters, internees and the general strike in Lugano

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The border brought people as well as goods. From the beginning of the war deserters and draft evaders from the belligerent armies crossed into Switzerland. The Federal Council allowed them to remain, and on 30 June 1916 it prohibited their deportation across the border.¹ Their number rose from 701 in April 1916 to 15,278 at the end of September 1917 and to 25,894 in May 1919. Italians formed the largest group, with 11,818 persons, followed by 7,203 Germans, 2,463 Austro-Hungarians, 2,451 French and 1,129 Russians.² Many of the Italian deserters lived in Ticino, where they found work and lodging within the large Italian community. In 1910, foreigners made up 43.6 per cent of the population of the municipality of Lugano, which then counted 14,988 inhabitants.³ Switzerland also received sick and wounded prisoners of war for internment. From early 1916 more than 12,000 prisoners of various nationalities were housed in health resorts, mainly in French-speaking and German-speaking Switzerland.⁴ The social tensions of the war reached Ticino as well. In July 1918 Lugano saw a general strike led by Guglielmo Canevascini, the secretary of the cantonal Chamber of Labour and founder of the socialist daily *Libera Stampa*.⁵ Canevascini, who became the first socialist member of the cantonal government in 1922 and remained in office until 1959, will reappear in this chapter as the protector of the Italian anti-fascist exiles.⁶ The strike of Lugano preceded the national general strike of November 1918, from which, in the words of the Historical Dictionary, the so-called bourgeois bloc of radicals, conservatives and farmers emerged victorious.⁷

1 Smuggling as a war economy

The war turned the frontier with Italy into a zone of permanent smuggling. Italy prohibited or restricted the export of many goods and rationed others, while Switzerland imposed its own export bans in order to secure supplies. The differences in price and availability on the two sides of the border created profits for anyone willing to carry goods across the mountains or

the lakes at night. The Swiss Customs Museum at Cantine di Gandria on Lake Lugano summarizes the long history in one sentence: on the border with Italy illegal trade remained flourishing until the middle of the twentieth century, and smuggling, very widespread in time of war and in the post-war period, concerned above all coveted and scarce goods such as cigarettes, sugar, coffee, rice and salt.⁸ The museum building itself, constructed in 1835, served as a post of the Swiss border guards until 1921.⁹

The legal position of this trade was asymmetric. A smuggler who carried coffee or tobacco from Ticino into Italy violated Italian customs law and, during the war, Italian wartime regulations. In Switzerland he committed no offence as long as he did not evade Swiss export controls or Swiss customs duties. This asymmetry, which treats a breach of foreign fiscal and economic law as a foreign matter, became one of the structural features of the Ticinese border economy. After 1945 it applied to banknotes and securities as much as to coffee and cigarettes, as Chapter D.II shows. Its origins lie in the old customs economy of the frontier, but the First World War gave it a modern form, since it was in these years that the Italian State began to restrict the movement of foreign exchange and capital.

2 Notes

1. Albert Portmann-Tinguely and Philipp von Cranach, "Flüchtlinge", in HLS, version of 7 January 2016, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/016388/>. ↩
2. Hervé de Weck, "Diserzione", in DSS, version of 23 October 2006, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/008595/2006-10-23/>. ↩
3. Negro, "Lugano (Gemeinde)" (above). ↩
4. Hervé de Weck, "Internierungen", in HLS, version of 13 May 2008, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/008704/>. ↩
5. Gabriele Rossi, "Canevascini, Guglielmo", in DSS, version of 28 August 2003, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/003499/>. ↩
6. Rossi, "Canevascini, Guglielmo" (above): secretary of the Camera del lavoro 1907–1922, founder of Libera Stampa in 1913, member of the State Council 1922–1959 as the first socialist in the cantonal government. ↩
7. Fuhrer et al., "Guerra mondiale, Prima" (above). ↩
8. Federal Customs Administration, Museo delle dogane svizzero (brochure, April 2017), https://www.bazg.admin.ch/dam/it/sd-web/KYDqZH4XOhDY/broschuere-schweizer-zollmuseum_it.pdf:
"Al confine con l'Italia, il commercio illegale rimase fiorente sino alla

metà del XX secolo. Il contrabbando, molto diffuso in tempo di guerra e nel dopoguerra, riguardava soprattutto merci ambite e carenti come sigarette, zucchero, caffè, riso e sale." ↩

9. Federal Customs Administration, Museo delle dogane svizzero (above). ↩

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