

Diplomacy: Bern, Vienna, London and Milan

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The conflict became an international affair. The British chargé d'affaires in Bern, William Dougal Christie, wrote to the Federal President Wilhelm Naef that "the blockade of the Tessin has not been justified by any conduct of that Canton" and that "the expulsion of upwards of six thousand Tessinois has been an immoderate and cruel retribution".¹ He urged the Federal Council to send a special envoy to Vienna and suggested that the expelled monks might be housed in convents in the Kingdom of Sardinia. Britain had its own reasons: it sympathized with the liberal cause in Italy, it valued Swiss neutrality as a part of the European order and it distrusted Austrian pressure on small states.

The Federal Council tried to separate the two questions. In its dispatch of 1854 it recommended that the compensation of the Capuchins be treated independently of the blockade and suggested that progress on the regulation of the Rhine, another Swiss-Austrian matter, might help a political settlement.² In January 1855 the head of the Political Department, Jonas Furrer, proposed instructions for two Swiss delegates, Georg Josef Sidler and Sebastian von Beroldingen, who were to negotiate with the Austrian authorities in Milan. Their task was to obtain as soon as possible permission for Ticinese to reside and settle in Lombardy as before. Furrer stressed the "enormous difference" between the expulsion of a religious order and the reprisal of expelling all Ticinese from Lombardy. He authorized the delegates to raise compensation claims for the expelled Ticinese and to use them, if necessary, as a counterweight to the Austrian claims for the Capuchins.³ The negotiations led in 1855 to an agreement on pensions for the friars and to the lifting of the blockade.⁴

1 The lessons of 1853

The crisis of 1853 to 1855 showed the limits of the canton's sovereignty. Ticino could expel monks, abolish teaching orders and shelter exiles, but it

could not prevent a powerful neighbour from making its population pay for these decisions. The Confederation, which conducted foreign relations, used the crisis to assert its authority over the canton, both by expelling refugees and by negotiating on the canton's behalf. The settlement followed the Swiss pattern described in the previous section: concessions on persons and money, compensation for the expelled friars, and no concession on the principle of sovereignty.

The episode also left a lasting impression on the Ticinese view of the border. The southern frontier, which had for centuries been the canton's main economic lifeline, could be closed by a political decision taken in Milan or Vienna. Families who had lived from work in Lombardy learned that income and property on the other side were exposed to the political risk of a foreign state. The Austrian sequestration of exiles' property in the same year, discussed in the next section, taught Lombard families the reverse lesson: assets kept in Lombardy could be seized, while assets kept in Switzerland were beyond the reach of the Austrian administration. Both lessons pointed to the same conclusion, which later generations of Italian and Ticinese clients would draw for themselves.

Common misconception. The Austrian blockade of 1853 is often described as a response to the expulsion of the Capuchins alone. The diplomatic record shows two causes. The expulsion of the mostly Lombard Capuchins in 1852 was a longstanding grievance, but the immediate trigger for the closure of the frontier and the expulsion of more than 6,000 Ticinese was the failed Mazzinian rising in Milan of 6 February 1853, which had been prepared in Lugano. Swiss diplomacy treated the two questions separately and used compensation claims for the expelled Ticinese as a counterweight in the negotiations.

2 Notes

1. W. D. Christie, British chargé d'affaires in Bern, to the Federal President W. Naef, DDS, vol. 1, doc. 190, <https://dodis.ch/41189> (consulted 4 October 2026). The full names and the date fit Wikipedia, used here as a last resort: "William Dougal Christie", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Dougal_Christie (secretary of legation to the Swiss Confederation, "frequently acting as chargé d'affaires", 1851 to 1854), and "Wilhelm Matthias Naef", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilhelm_Matthias_Naef (President of the Confederation in 1853), both consulted 5 October 2026. ↩
2. Federal Council, dispatch of 1854, DDS, vol. 1, doc. 201 (above). ↩

3. J. Furrer, head of the Political Department, proposal to the Federal Council of 15 January 1855, DDS, vol. 1, doc. 216, <https://dodis.ch/41215> (consulted 4 October 2026). The first names of the delegates. ↩
4. On the settlement of 1855 see Giuseppe Martinola, *Gli esuli italiani nel Ticino*, vol. 2 (Lugano 1994), and the further documents in DDS, vol. 1. The terms of the agreement. ↩

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