

Fonjallaz, Rezzonico and the march on Bellinzona

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A second current was organized Fascism of Swiss nationals. In 1933 Colonel Arthur Fonjallaz, a former instructor of the Swiss army and a professor at the Federal Institute of Technology, founded in Rome the *Federazione fascista svizzera*. Research based on Italian archives shows that Mussolini supported him with about CHF 600,000 in at least fifteen personal transactions.¹ In October 1933 the engineer Nino Rezzonico became Fonjallaz's deputy for Italian-speaking Switzerland and head of the *Federazione fascista ticinese*. At its peak the Ticinese organization counted, according to the Historical Dictionary, little more than 500 members.² On 25 January 1934 its members attempted a "march on Bellinzona" on the model of the march on Rome of 1922. About sixty armed Fascists faced some 400 anti-fascists, and apart from a few scuffles nothing happened. The government buildings were not occupied.³ The Historical Dictionary describes the failure as a bitter defeat that marked the beginning of the decline of Ticinese Fascism.⁴ Fonjallaz himself was arrested in 1941 for espionage and served three years in prison.⁵

The Italian regime used other channels as well. Mauro Cerutti's research in the Italian archives revealed that in 1930 and 1931 Rome paid subsidies to Angiolo Martignoni, a member of the Ticinese cantonal government, in order to influence the cantonal elections.⁶ The Fascist government thus treated a Swiss canton as a field of political investment, much as it did in other regions with Italian-speaking minorities. The response in Ticino was the formation of what the Historical Dictionary calls a patriotic defensive front in the 1930s, which silenced the voices that had spoken of a threat to the cultural integrity of Italian-speaking Switzerland.⁷ On the left, Canevascini and his allies founded the movement *Liberi e Svizzeri*, whose name recalled the motto of 1798, "free and Swiss", which Chapter C.I discusses.⁸

1 The Confederation's response and Giuseppe Motta

The federal response combined firmness on public order with caution in foreign policy. In 1923 the Federal Council prohibited the wearing of the Fascist black shirt in Switzerland.⁹ It allowed the Italian Fascist organizations among Italian residents to continue, under police surveillance, while it acted against Swiss citizens who conspired with a foreign power. The man responsible for foreign policy throughout the period was a Ticinese. Giuseppe Motta, born in Airolo in 1871, educated at the Collegio Papiro in Ascona and at the universities of Fribourg, Munich and Heidelberg, was elected to the Federal Council on 14 December 1911 with 184 of 199 votes. He first headed the Department of Finance and Customs and from 1920 until his death in Bern on 23 January 1940 the Political Department, the Swiss foreign ministry. He was President of the Confederation five times.¹⁰

Motta's Italian policy has been judged severely. The Historical Dictionary notes that he maintained official cordiality with Italy although Switzerland harboured anti-fascist refugees. When Italy invaded Ethiopia, Switzerland took part in the League of Nations sanctions only in a very limited and almost symbolic fashion, and in December 1936 it became the first neutral country to recognize Italian sovereignty over Ethiopia *de jure*.¹¹ Ticinese tradition remembers Motta differently, as the statesman whose prudence kept Mussolini from acting on his claims. At the commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of his death in Airolo in 2010, the president of the cantonal government recalled a sentence that Motta had spoken in 1931: "Ticino without Switzerland would be discriminated against and denatured. Switzerland without Ticino would mutilate its own national ideal."¹² Both assessments contain truth. Motta's caution protected the canton from open conflict, but it was bought with concessions to the regime on asylum and on the Ethiopian question. In 1940 another Ticinese, Enrico Celio, succeeded him in the Federal Council.¹³

2 Notes

1. Yves H. Schumacher, "The 'March on Bellinzona' and the failure of Swiss fascism", [swissinfo.ch](https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/culture/the-march-on-bellinzona-and-the-failure-of-swiss-fascism/48149328), 22 December 2022, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/culture/the-march-on-bellinzona-and-the-failure-of-swiss-fascism/48149328>. ↩
2. Schumacher (above); Cerutti, "Fascisme" (above): "Au Tessin, sous l'impulsion de l'ingénieur Nino Rezzonico, il ne comptera, au mieux, qu'un peu plus de 500 membres". ↩

3. Schumacher (above). ↩
4. Cerutti, "Fascisme" (above): "L'échec cuisant de la prétendue 'marche sur Bellinzone' de janvier 1934, marque le début du déclin pour le fascisme tessinois". ↩
5. Schumacher (above). ↩
6. Mauro Cerutti, "L'Italia fascista e la Svizzera nella Seconda guerra mondiale", Scuola ticinese no. 232, reprinted from La Svizzera e la Seconda guerra mondiale (Nuova Società Elvetica, 1991), https://m4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DS/Rivista_scuola_ticinese/ST_n.232/ST_232_Cerutti_italia_fascista_e_Svizzera_nella_seconda_Guerra_mondiale.pdf. See also Mauro Cerutti, Fra Roma e Berna. La Svizzera italiana nel ventennio fascista (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1986), <https://www.reteparri.it/wp-content/uploads/publicazioni/86/fraromaeberna.pdf>, whose table of contents treats the subsidies to Martignoni and Fonjallaz. ↩
7. Gilardoni and Zala, "Svizzera italiana" (above). ↩
8. Cerutti, Fra Roma e Berna (above), table of contents (Canevascini and the foundation of "Liberi e Svizzeri"). ↩
9. Cerutti, "Fascisme" (above). ↩
10. Mauro Cerutti, "Motta, Giuseppe", in DSS, version of 25 March 2010, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/003524/2010-03-25/> (presidencies 1915, 1920, 1927, 1932 and 1937). ↩
11. Cerutti, "Motta, Giuseppe" (above). ↩
12. Luigi Pedrazzini, President of the State Council, speech at Airolo on the seventieth anniversary of the death of Giuseppe Motta, 22 August 2010, <https://www3.ti.ch/DI/discorsi/22-08-2010-discorso-240964164920.pdf>: "Il Ticino senza la Svizzera sarebbe discriminato e snaturato, la Svizzera senza il Ticino mutilerebbe il proprio ideale nazionale". The speech dates Motta's death to February 1940. The Historical Dictionary gives 23 January 1940, which is followed here. ↩

13. Pedrazzini (above). On Celio's term in the Federal Council (22 February 1940 to 15 October 1950) see Wikipedia (English), "Enrico Celio", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enrico_Celio (consulted as a last resort). ↩

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