

From rhetoric to military planning

Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)

In the late 1930s the Fascist rhetoric hardened. On 30 November 1938 Mussolini told the Fascist Grand Council: "We shall carry our frontier to the Gotthard." The claim to the "median chain of the Alps" that circulated in Fascist circles covered some 15,500 square kilometres with 430,000 inhabitants, including Ticino, parts of the Grisons and the Valais, Uri and parts of St Gall.¹ After Italy entered the war in June 1940 the claim acquired a military dimension. A directive of General Mario Roatta of 7 June 1940 contemplated the occupation of the "Ticinese salient", and an operational study of 15 July 1940 considered a "radical solution" of the Swiss question. The same study noted the difficulty that Italian speakers made up only about seven per cent of the Swiss population.² No attack followed. Italy's military weakness, its dependence on the Gotthard transit for German coal and the value of Swiss credits and industrial supplies, discussed below, all argued against it.

Common misconception. Ticinese irredentism is sometimes described as a mass movement that brought the canton close to secession. The evidence points the other way. *L'Adula* was a review with a small circle of editors and contributors, the Federazione fascista ticinese had at best a little over 500 members, and the "march on Bellinzona" of January 1934 mobilized about sixty armed men against some 400 counter-demonstrators. The significance of irredentism lay in its use by the Italian government as an instrument of pressure on Bern, above all on the treatment of Italian anti-fascist refugees, and in the reaction it provoked: the patriotic front of the 1930s, the federal subsidies for Italian culture and the provisions of the Criminal Code against attacks on the independence of the Confederation.

1 Notes

1. Cerutti, "L'Italia fascista e la Svizzera" (above): "Noi porteremo il nostro confine al Gottardo"; "15'500 kmq con 430'000 abitanti". ←

2. Cerutti, "L'Italia fascista e la Svizzera" (above). ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/lugano-from-rhetoric-to-military-planning