

Irredentism and italianità

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

Olivetti's expulsion points to a new sensitivity of the federal authorities. Italian nationalism after unification looked chiefly at Trento and Trieste, which remained Austrian, and occasionally also at the Italian-speaking valleys of Switzerland. The *Dizionario storico della Svizzera* finds no significant irredentist movement in Ticino in the nineteenth century, after the failed attempt of 1798 to join the Cisalpine Republic described in Chapter C.I.¹ In the years before the First World War, however, minority positions of strong pro-Italian sentiment appeared, and Italian writers such as Giuseppe Prezzolini in 1912 intervened in the debate on the identity of Italian Switzerland. The concern of many Ticinese was the defence of their *italianità* against what the dictionary calls the "penetrazione demografica ed economica alloglotta", the demographic and economic penetration by German-speaking Swiss after the opening of the Gotthard railway.² The periodical *L'Adula*, founded on 4 July 1912 by Teresa Bontempi and Rosetta Colombi with the support of the linguist Carlo Salvioni, expressed the most radical pro-Italian positions until the Federal Council ordered its closure in 1935.³ For the Confederation the lesson was that the Italian-speaking border, which had once been a refuge for Italians fleeing their governments, could also become a channel of influence for an Italian state that claimed to speak for all Italians. Chapter D.I follows the story into the fascist period, when Mussolini's irredentist pressure and the presence of Italian anti-fascist exiles in Ticino recreated, in reverse, the pattern of the 1850s. By 1914 the refuge had come full circle. Ticino still received political exiles from Italy, but they were now socialists, anarchists and later anti-fascists, whom the Swiss authorities treated with a caution shaped by six decades of diplomatic experience.

Period Exiles in Ticino Typical federal response 1821–1847 Carbonari, Piedmontese, Cantonal tolerance, *Fremdenkonklusa Giovine Italia* 1823 and 1836 1848–1859 Lombard democrats, Internment away from the frontier, volunteers, deserters expulsions after 1853 1860–1870 Mazzinians,

republicans Surveillance, limited intervention 1869–1914 Anarchists, socialists Surveillance, expulsions 1881, 1895, 1898, 1912

Sources: as cited in this chapter.⁴

1 Notes

1. Silvano Gilardoni, "Irredentismo", in DSS, version of 21 August 2008, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/017428/2008-08-21/> (consulted 4 October 2026). ↩
2. Gilardoni, "Irredentismo" (above). ↩
3. Gilardoni, "Irredentismo" (above), on L'Adula as an example of "posizioni minoritarie di forte italo-filia"; Silvano Gilardoni, "Adula, L'", in DSS, version of 7 March 2003, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/024590/2003-03-07/> (consulted 5 October 2026), on its foundation, its editors ("fondato e redatto da Teresa Bontempi e da Rosetta Colombi"), its publication from 4 July 1912 to 3 August 1935 and its suppression by the Federal Council. ↩
4. The table summarizes the sources cited in the preceding sections; the years of expulsion refer to Malatesta (1881), Gori and his companions (1895), the measures after the assassination of Empress Elisabeth (1898) and Olivetti (1912). ↩

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-irredentism-and-italianita