

Refuge of the Risorgimento: Exiles, Printing Presses and Political Asylum — overview and summary

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Between the Restoration of 1815 and the capture of Rome in 1870, the young Canton of Ticino lived next door to one of the most closely policed territories in Europe. The Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia, ruled from Vienna and garrisoned from Milan, began a few kilometres south of Lugano, at Chiasso, Ponte Tresa and on the far shore of the lake. Whoever fled the Austrian police, the Sardinian courts or the papal gendarmes, and wanted to stay within reach of home, came to Ticino. Exiles printed there what could not be printed in Italy, collected money, stored weapons, planned risings and waited. The canton thereby acquired a role that it had neither sought nor could easily control: it became the first refuge of the Italian Risorgimento. Its liberal government then had to defend that role against Austrian diplomacy, Austrian blockades and, at times, against the federal authorities in Bern.

This chapter asks what that role consisted of, what it cost and what it left behind. Its argument is that the Risorgimento turned Ticino into a working laboratory of asylum under pressure. Three elements of the later financial centre took shape in these decades. The first is a set of legal habits: a liberal canton protecting foreigners against a powerful neighbour, a federal government that decided how far that protection could go, and a diplomatic practice of separating what was owed to the refugee from what was owed to the neighbouring state. The second is a set of channels across the border for books, letters, couriers, weapons and money, which the Austrian police regarded as contraband and which the exiles regarded as patriotic duty. The third is a reputation. By 1870 Lugano was known in Milan, Turin and London as a place where persons, papers and funds were safe from the reach of the Italian states. That reputation did not create the banks of Chapter C.IV or the flight capital of Chapter D.II, but it prepared the ground on which they grew.

Refuge of the Risorgimento

The chapter follows on from Chapter C.I, which describes the liberal revolution of 1830, the radical regime after 1839 and the Federal Constitution of 1848. Those events are presupposed here. It begins with the first exiles and the printing presses of Lugano and Capolago, follows the smuggling of books into Lombardy, the revolution of 1848 and the life of Carlo Cattaneo in Castagnola, and then turns to Giuseppe Mazzini, to the federal law of asylum and to the Austrian reprisals of 1852 to 1855. A section on the finance of the Risorgimento examines subscriptions, loans, couriers and the Austrian sequestration of exiles' property in 1853. After a survey of the period from Italian unification to 1914, when anarchists and socialists replaced the patriots of the earlier generation, the final section draws the line from political refuge to financial refuge and sets out the modern legal frame: the law of asylum, banking secrecy under Art. 47 of the Banking Act, international mutual assistance and the limits that the concept of refuge meets today. The Gotthard railway, which Cattaneo promoted from Lugano, is treated in Chapter C.III.

1 Conclusion

From the 1820s to 1870 Ticino was the nearest safe place for Italians whom the governments of Lombardy-Venetia, Piedmont and the Papal States wanted to silence or punish. The canton offered them a common language, a free press, a long border with old paths across it, and a liberal government whose own leaders had worked with them since the revolution of 1830. The exiles used these advantages to print, smuggle, raise money, collect weapons and plan risings. The Tipografia Elvetica of Capolago and the presses of Ruggia and Ciani in Lugano gave Italy uncensored editions of its classics and the documentary record of 1848. Carlo Cattaneo, from his house in Castagnola, taught at the new Liceo cantonale, promoted the Gotthard railway and the reclamation of the Magadino plain, and became a citizen of the canton by honour. Mazzini returned again and again and found, in the last years of his life, a hiding place at Sara Nathan's villa in Lugano.

The refuge had a price. Austria answered the expulsion of the Capuchins in 1852 and the Milanese rising of February 1853 with the closure of the frontier and the expulsion of more than 6,000 Ticinese from Lombardy. The Federal Council, for its part, used its power under Art. 57 of the Federal Constitution of 1848 to intern and expel refugees whose activity endangered Swiss relations with the neighbouring empire. The resulting practice, which protected the person of the refugee, restricted his political activity and offered the neighbour information and cooperation on request, became a template for later conflicts. After 1861 the patriots went

home, and anarchists and socialists took their place in Lugano and Locarno until the expulsions of 1895, 1898 and 1912 showed that the federal authorities now weighed the asylum tradition against the demands of European security and the sensitivities of a unified Italy.

The financial history of the period has left fewer traces than its political history, yet it can be reconstructed. Exile politics required money, which moved through Ticino: the private wealth of the Ciani, the monthly contributions collected by Ercole Porro, the bonds of Mazzini's national loan, the funds and weapons for the volunteers of 1848. The Austrian sequestration of the exiles' property in 1853 taught a generation of Lombard families that assets at home could be seized for political reasons and that assets abroad could not. The modern legal frame keeps the protection of persons, under the Asylum Act and Art. 3(1) IMAC, apart from the transparency of assets, which is shaped by Art. 47 BankA with its reservations, by mutual assistance for tax fraud and by the automatic exchange of information. The next chapter turns from the exiles' paths across the frontier to the railway through the mountains that Cattaneo had called for, and to the capital that built it.

2 In five sentences

Between the 1820s and 1870 Ticino became the first refuge of the Italian Risorgimento, sheltering Piedmontese and Lombard conspirators, Mazzini and his followers, the democrats of 1848 and, after the Austrian return to Milan, Carlo Cattaneo, who lived at Castagnola from 1849 until his death in 1869. The presses of Lugano and Capolago, above all the Tipografia Elvetica (1830–1853) and Giacomo Ciani's Tipografia della Svizzera Italiana (1842–1851), printed the books and documents that censorship forbade in Italy and sent them across the frontier along smuggling routes, until the execution of the courier Luigi Dottesio in 1851 and the new press freedom in Piedmont ended their role. Austria answered the expulsion of the Capuchins in 1852 and the Milanese rising of February 1853 with a blockade and the expulsion of more than 6,000 Ticinese from Lombardy, while the Federal Council interned and expelled refugees under its federal powers and negotiated the dispute on the canton's behalf. The Risorgimento was financed in part through Ticino, by rich exiles, monthly subscriptions, Mazzini's national loan and couriers, and the Austrian sequestration of exiles' property in 1853 showed Lombard families the value of keeping assets beyond the reach of their own government. Modern Swiss law preserves the protection of persons against political persecution under the Asylum Act and Art. 3(1) IMAC, but it treats assets differently, so that banking secrecy under Art. 47 BankA now operates within mutual assistance for tax fraud, anti-money laundering rules and the automatic exchange of information.

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