

Routes, techniques and people

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The smugglers used the paths across the hills of the Mendrisiotto and the Malcantone, the passes of the Val Colla and the Monte Generoso, and above all the lakes. Lake Lugano, whose shores belonged partly to the bailiwicks and partly to the Duchy, and Lake Maggiore, whose northern end belonged to the Confederates, offered routes that were difficult to control. Goods were carried on the back or loaded into boats that crossed at night. The carrier's sack, the *bricolla*, became the symbol of the trade in its later form: a coarsely sewn jute bag stiffened with cardboard and carried by two shoulder straps, which held some 35 to 40 kilograms and was used by the *spalloni* on the Italian-Swiss border, above all for cigarettes and tobacco until about 1980.¹ The carriers were peasants, fishermen, boatmen and day labourers who earned in a night what a farm paid in a week. The organizers were merchants, innkeepers and shopkeepers who bought the goods, paid the carriers and sold on the other side. Behind them stood creditors who advanced the capital and absorbed the losses when a load was seized.

The authorities of the bailiwicks and the Milanese customs guards were not always adversaries of the smugglers. Guards could be bribed. The fines imposed on smugglers who were caught were a source of revenue that the *landfogti* shared. The Confederate cantons tolerated a trade that brought money into their bailiwicks and that harmed only the revenue of a foreign monopoly. Smuggling served above all the needs of the local population. For many families on both sides of the border it was an indispensable source of income, which the communities regarded as a legitimate supplement to a poor agricultural yield and had little reason to suppress.² This tolerance created a culture in which the crossing of the border with undeclared goods was normal, in which discretion was a virtue and in which the handling of cash, goods and information outside official channels was a practised skill.

1 The long continuity of the border trade

Smuggling did not end with the old regime. In the nineteenth century the Austrian government of Lombardy-Venetia and after 1861 the Kingdom of Italy maintained high duties and state monopolies on salt and tobacco, whereas the Swiss Confederation, which took over the customs in 1848, had a lower tariff. Until the middle of the twentieth century the preferred goods of the smugglers were, according to prices and demand, everyday articles such as oil, salt and sugar, together with tobacco and alcohol. Before the Second World War tobacco and coffee were smuggled from Switzerland into Italy, often with the consent of the local authorities. In Ticino and the Grisons some smuggling still took place with the agreement of the border guard commands until the 1990s.³ Stefano Franscini, the Ticinese statistician, described it in the 1830s as a social evil that corrupted the young and kept the border communities in poverty. He called for a lower Italian tariff as the only remedy.⁴

After the Second World War the direction of the most profitable trade changed. The goods that crossed the border on the backs of the *spalloni* were no longer only coffee and cigarettes going south but banknotes going north, as Italian savers moved capital out of reach of their tax authorities and their currency controls. Chapter D.II describes this lira economy and its role in the growth of Lugano's banks. The continuity with the old contraband trade is visible in the techniques, the routes and the people. It is documented in the Swiss Customs Museum at Cantine di Gandria on Lake Lugano, which opened in 1949 in a border guard post built in 1835 and which tells the history of smugglers and refugees on the Italian-Swiss border.⁵

2 Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Bricolla", <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bricolla> (consulted as a last resort): "una sacca di juta cucita grossolanamente, irrigidita da cartone, con due bretelle per il trasporto", holding 35– 40 kg, "di solito usata dagli spalloni per il passaggio del confine (il più comune quello italo-svizzero)", mainly for cigarettes and tobacco until about 1980. FOCBS, Museo delle dogane svizzero (brochure, 2017), https://www.bazg.admin.ch/dam/it/sd-web/KYDqZH4XOhDY/broschuere-schweizer-zollmuseum_it.pdf, on the smugglers ("La fantasia dei contrabbandieri non conosce limiti") and on the goods smuggled in earlier times ("riso, sale, prosciutto, scarpe, tabacco e polvere da sparo").



2. HLS, art. "Schmuggel" (as above): "Der Schmuggel befriedigte primär die Bedürfnisse der lokalen Bevölkerung und bedeutete für manche Familie diesseits und jenseits der Grenze eine unabdingbare Einnahmequelle", and on smuggling "oft mit Zustimmung der lokalen Behörden" before the Second World War. The attitude of the communities under the old regime is the author's inference. ↩
3. HLS, art. "Schmuggel" (as above): "Bis Mitte des 20. Jahrhunderts stellten je nach Preisniveau und Nachfragekonjunktur vor allem tägliche Gebrauchsartikel (Öl, Salz, Zucker) sowie Tabak und Alkohol bevorzugte Schmuggelgüter dar"; "So wurde vor dem Zweiten Weltkrieg — oft mit Zustimmung der lokalen Behörden — Tabak und Kaffee nach Italien geschmuggelt"; "Im Tessin und in Graubünden fand Schmuggel zum Teil bis in die 1990er Jahre im Einverständnis mit den Grenzwachtkommandos statt." See Chapter C.I. ↩
4. Franscini, La Svizzera italiana (as above). ↩
5. Federal Office for Customs and Border Security (FOCBS), Museo delle dogane svizzero (brochure), https://www.bazg.admin.ch/dam/it/sd-web/KYDqZH4XOhDY/broschuere-schweizer-zollmuseum_it.pdf, for the building of 1835, its use as a border guard post until 1921 and the opening of the museum in 1949; FOCBS, "Museo doganale svizzero a Cantine di Gandria (Lugano)", <https://www.bazg.admin.ch/it/museo-doganale-svizzero-a-cantine-di-gandria-lugano>, on the exhibition on smugglers and refugees. ↩

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