

The exodus of August 1848

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The Sardinian army was defeated at Custoza in late July 1848, and Radetzky re-entered Milan in early August. The return of the Austrians set off a mass flight. Martinola speaks of about 100,000 Milanese, two thirds of the city's population according to the calculation he reports, who fled before the returning Austrians.¹ Most went to Piedmont, but thousands crossed into Ticino. Among them were Carlo Cattaneo, who arrived in Lugano in November, the writer Tommaso Grossi, who found a temporary refuge, and the painter Antonio Fontanesi, who worked in Lugano before moving to Turin.² Garibaldi, feverish after the fight at Morazzone, crossed the frontier on 27 August and spent nearly a week as Vicari's guest at Agno.³

For a canton of about 117,000 inhabitants, the arrival of several thousand refugees, many of them armed and determined to resume the fight, was a heavy burden.⁴ They needed food and housing, spent money that some had brought and others had not, and drew the attention of an Austrian army of tens of thousands of men a few kilometres away. In October 1848 Mazzini, together with Arcioni and General Domenico D'Apice, attempted a rising in the Valle d'Intelvi, launched from Ticinese territory. It failed within days. Among the participants arrested were Achille Jauch, Vittorio Lurati, an official of the cantonal finance administration from Lumino, and three brothers Stoppani.⁵

1 Federal representatives and the first internments

The Valle d'Intelvi rising came at the moment when the new federal state was being constituted. The Federal Constitution had entered into force in September 1848, two months before the election of the first Federal Council in November. Austria held the Confederation responsible for the conduct of the canton. Under pressure from Radetzky the outgoing federal executive, the *Vorort* of Bern, had sent federal representatives to Ticino, among them the young Zurich politician Alfred Escher and the Solothurn

radical Josef Munzinger. They demanded the removal of the Italian refugees. The cantonal government resisted a general expulsion and agreed only to remove those directly involved in hostile acts against Austria.⁶ Friedrich Engels, then a refugee in Switzerland, reported in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* of 6 December 1848 that "all Italian refugees of military age have been removed from Tessin into the interior of Switzerland", and that the Federal Council had appointed new representatives, Colonels Stehlin and Briatte.⁷

The measure set the model for the following decades. Internment in the interior of Switzerland, away from the frontier, was the federal answer to the problem of refugees who used Ticino as a base of operations. It respected the principle of asylum, because the refugee remained in Switzerland and was not handed over, while it met the security interest of the neighbour, because the refugee could no longer cross the border at night. The same logic governed the deployment of federal troops on the frontier when war resumed in March 1849, discussed below in the context of neutrality.

The canton also bore the costs of other refugees. Between 1848 and 1855 Austrian deserters, most of them Hungarians, crossed into Ticino. Desertions rose sharply in the summer of 1850. In the largest single case some 120 *honvéd*, Hungarian soldiers forcibly enrolled in the Austrian army after the fall of Budapest, deserted from the camp at Somma and reached Lugano under the command of Colonel István Türr. They lived "nella più perfetta miseria" until their departure in April 1851 for Le Havre and New York. The Confederation charged the canton 25,000 francs for their escort through France, a sum that Ticino accepted as a moral debt.⁸

2 Notes

1. Martinola, "Ticinesi volontari" (above), "Si è calcolato infatti che circa centomila milanesi, due terzi di quanti ne contava la città, fuggissero". Martinola places the flight "al ritorno degli austriaci". ↩
2. Martinola, "Ticinesi volontari" (above); Daniele Mariani, "Cattaneo, un capofila del Risorgimento in Ticino", *swissinfo.ch*, 28 July 2016, reproduced at <https://www.marzorati.org/?p=726> (consulted 4 October 2026), for Cattaneo's arrival in Lugano in November 1848. ↩
3. Martinola, "Ticinesi volontari" (above). ↩
4. "Ticino (cantone)", in DSS, version of 24 October 2022, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/007394/> (consulted 5 October 2026), demographic table, giving a resident population of 117,759 in 1850. The

number of refugees present at any time in 1848 is not known with precision. ↩

5. Martinola, "Ticinesi volontari" (above); Moos, "Mazzini, Giuseppe" (above), on the Val d'Intelvi rising of October 1848. ↩
6. Friedrich Engels, "The Federal Council and the Foreign Ambassadors. The Federal Council in Tessin ...", *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, 6 December 1848, in Marx/Engels Collected Works, vol. 8, <https://read.19491007.xyz/en/mecw/8/mecw08-051> (consulted 4 October 2026); Engels, "Les personnalités du Conseil fédéral", *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* no. 155, 29 November 1848, <https://www.marxists.org/francais/engels/works/1848/11/fe18481129.htm> (consulted 4 October 2026), on Escher and Munzinger; Giuseppe Martinola, "Fraternità con gli Ungheresi raminghi", *Scuola ticinese* no. 94, PDF, https://m4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DS/Rivista_scuola_ticinese/ST_n.94/ST_94_Martinola_fraternita_con_Ungheresi_raminghi.pdf (consulted 4 October 2026), on Escher and Munzinger as federal representatives. On Escher's later role in the Gotthard railway see Chapter C.III. ↩
7. Engels, "The Federal Council and the Foreign Ambassadors" (above). Engels wrote as a hostile observer of the Swiss liberals, but his account of the measures agrees with the Ticinese sources. ↩
8. Martinola, "Fraternità con gli Ungheresi raminghi" (above). ↩

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