

The Ossola Republic and its fall

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In the autumn of 1944 the border of Ticino witnessed one of the episodes of the Italian resistance. Partisan formations liberated the Val d'Ossola, north of Lake Maggiore, and on 10 September 1944 proclaimed a provisional government under the physician Ettore Tibaldi. The free zone comprised about 1,600 square kilometres and 32 municipalities with more than 80,000 inhabitants. Its government included Umberto Terracini and Gisella Floreanini, the first woman to hold a government function in Italy.¹ Switzerland, and Ticino in particular, supported the population. The Swiss Red Cross sent the first train with food and medicines on 22 September 1944, and more than 2,000 children from the Ossola were taken in by Swiss families.² When German and Fascist forces reconquered the valley on 23 October 1944, a large part of the population fled across the border into Switzerland.³ The Ossola episode showed the border at its most open, five months after the most restrictive practice had been abandoned.

1 The Bergier findings and the southern border

The Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland – Second World War, chaired by Jean-François Bergier, examined the refugee policy as one of its three central subjects, together with the gold transactions and the dormant accounts. Its work rested on archives that had been closed for half a century, including the files of the federal police, the cantonal authorities and the army.⁴ For the southern border its findings confirm what Brogginini and other Ticinese historians had shown from local sources: the decisive period began only in September 1943, when the wave of Italian soldiers and civilians reached the canton, and the practice of admission and rejection depended heavily on the instructions in force at the time, on the attitude of local commanders and on the cantonal authorities' room for negotiation with Bern.⁵ The Ticinese government pressed for more generous admission in September 1943, as its meeting with von Steiger shows, while

the federal instructions of December 1942 remained formally in force until July 1944.

The commission's work also connects the refugee question with the financial history treated in this chapter. Refugees who were admitted had to deposit their money and valuables with the authorities or with banks, and the fate of the assets of those who died, emigrated further or were turned back became part of the later question of dormant accounts. The commission's mandate, created by the Federal Assembly at the height of the controversy over these accounts, reflected the insight that refugee policy, banking secrecy and the treatment of assets after 1945 formed a single historical complex.⁶ The final section of this chapter returns to the legal rules that grew out of that complex.

Essentials. The Swiss refugee policy of the Second World War combined generous internment of soldiers under the law of neutrality with restrictive treatment of civilian refugees. The circular of 13 August 1942 excluded refugees "only on racial grounds" from political asylum. On the southern border the decisive period began with the armistice of 8 September 1943. More than 20,000 Italian soldiers were interned in the autumn of 1943, about 45,000 Italian refugees were in Switzerland by the end of the war, and only on 12 July 1944 were all civilians in danger of life and limb admitted. Estimates of the number of civilians turned back in the whole of Switzerland range from 10,000 to at least 24,000.

2 Notes

1. Wikipedia (Italian), "Repubblica partigiana dell'Ossola", https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Repubblica_partigiana_dell%27Ossola (consulted as a last resort). ↩
2. Wikipedia (Italian), "Repubblica partigiana dell'Ossola" (above). ↩
3. Wikipedia (Italian), "Repubblica partigiana dell'Ossola" (above). ↩
4. Senn et al., "Weltkrieg, Zweiter" (above), on the commission's investigation of economic relations, dormant accounts and refugee policy and its 25 studies and final report of 2002. Wikipedia (English), "Bergier commission" (above, consulted as a last resort): the commission "was to have unimpeded access to the archives held by Swiss private companies including banks, insurance companies, and enterprises; the companies were prohibited from destroying any files relating to the period being examined". ↩
5. Brogini, "Frontiera sud" (above). ↩

6. Perrenoud, "Accord de Washington" (above), on the link between banking secrecy and the post-war handling of the assets of victims. ↩

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