

The Tipografia Elvetica di Capolago

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The most important of the exile presses was founded at Capolago, at the southern end of Lake Lugano, on 9 October 1830, a few weeks after the liberal revolution in the canton. Its principal partner was Vincenzo Borsa of Melano. His associates included the Piedmontese exiles already mentioned: Carlo Modesto Massa, who worked for the firm without interruption for seventeen years and became a co-owner, Francesco Romagnoli, who took over the administration, and the priest Francesco Tubi, who sought permission to return home in 1839.¹ In 1847 the Genoese Alessandro Repetti became sole proprietor. A bookshop was attached to the press, which also published periodicals.²

The programme of the Elvetica was ambitious. It published series of ancient classics (Horace, Lucian, Apuleius), economists such as Melchiorre Gioja, Italian literature from Parini, Foscolo, Monti and Carlo Porta to the complete works of Silvio Pellico and the tragedies of Giovanni Battista Niccolini, and historians from Machiavelli, Guicciardini and Pietro Colletta to Carlo Botta, together with translations of Michelet and Sismondi.³ On the advice of Giovanni Battista Passerini, an exile in Zurich, it printed Hegel in Italian. In 1844 it reprinted Cesare Balbo's *Delle speranze d'Italia*, the manifesto of the moderate liberals. The *Dizionario storico della Svizzera* notes that many of these works were forbidden in Italy by the censorship.⁴ Viganò counts more than 350 titles for the whole life of the firm.⁵ Several of these books are standard texts of Italian literature today. Their first uncensored Italian editions were printed in a village on the Swiss side of the lake.

1 Ciani's Tipografia della Svizzera Italiana

In 1842, the year Ruggia closed, Giacomo Ciani founded the Tipografia della Svizzera Italiana in Lugano. Unlike the commercial Elvetica, it was a political enterprise financed by a wealthy man. From 1843 to 1847 it

published the weekly *Il Repubblicano della Svizzera Italiana*, the organ of the radicals of Ticino, while its book list included authors as different as Mazzini, Massimo d'Azeglio, Cesare Balbo, Cesare Correnti, Vincenzo Gioberti and Carlo Cattaneo.⁶ After the defeat of 1848 Cattaneo entrusted to Ciani his account of the Milanese insurrection, *Dell'insurrezione di Milano nel 1848 e della successiva guerra*, which had first appeared in French in Paris in the autumn of 1848 and which he enlarged considerably for the Italian edition of 31 January 1849.⁷ The press was liquidated at the end of 1851. Viganò gives two reasons: the Austrian seizures of its products and the fact that, after 1848, the Kingdom of Sardinia allowed a moderate freedom of the press, so that Italian authors no longer needed Lugano.⁸

The economics of these presses deserve attention. Viganò stresses that they were commercial enterprises founded with private capital, which had to survive in the ordinary book market as well as in the political one. Printing for a forbidden market meant producing at Swiss costs and selling through smugglers and booksellers who took large risks, while the patronage of rich exiles such as the Ciani helped to bridge the gap. The firms were small partnerships of Ticinese and Italians, with capital contributed in money, in type and paper, or in labour, as in the case of Massa. Their accounts and correspondence survive in part: the statutes, acts and correspondence of the Società Tipografica Elvetica from 1834 to 1852, including its letter-books from February 1847 to October 1852, are kept with the Cattaneo papers in the Archivio di Stato di Palermo, where they were transferred in 1929.⁹

2 Notes

1. Carlo Agliati, "Tipografia elvetica", in DSS, version of 25 October 2012, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/024484/> (consulted 4 October 2026), for the date and the founders; Martinola, "La tipografia Elvetica di Capolago" (above), for the roles of Borsa, Massa, Romagnoli and Tubi. ↩
2. Agliati, "Tipografia elvetica" (above). ↩
3. Martinola, "La tipografia Elvetica di Capolago" (above), on the series. ↩
4. Martinola, "La tipografia Elvetica di Capolago" (above), on Passerini, Hegel and the reprint of Balbo; Agliati, "Tipografia elvetica" (above), on the prohibition of many titles in Italy. ↩
5. Viganò, introduction (above). ↩

6. Viganò, introduction (above); Agliati, "Ciani, Giacomo" (above), on Ciani's ownership of the press from 1842 to 1851. ↩
7. Viganò, introduction (above): Cattaneo "affida a Giacomo Ciani il suo pamphlet dedicato all'Insurrezione di Milano nel 1848". Ernesto Sestan, "Cattaneo, Carlo", in Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani, vol. 22 (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1979), [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/carlo-cattaneo_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/carlo-cattaneo_(Dizionario-Biografico)/) (consulted 5 October 2026), on the pamphlet L'insurrection de Milan en 1848 , which "il 22 sett. era già in corso di stampa", and on the Italian version, which "uscì, notevolmente ampliata", on 31 January 1849. ↩
8. Viganò, introduction (above): the press was "liquidata a fine 1851". ↩
9. Archivio di Stato di Palermo, Inventario n. 139: Carte Cattaneo, PDF, <https://saassipa.cultura.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/139-Carte-Cattaneo-1.pdf> (consulted 4 October 2026), box 1; Viganò, introduction (above), describing the presses as "imprese commerciali, costituite con capitali privati". ↩

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Online version: helveticaregister.com/lugano-the-tipografia-elvetica-di-capolago