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Being a Guest in Your Own Home: Political Situation of South Tyrol and Its Inhabitants in the Years 1918–1945

Być gościem we własnym domu. Sytuacja polityczna Tyrolu Południowego i jego mieszkańców w latach 1918–1945

• Abstract •

The end of the Great War led to the annexation of German-speaking South Tyrol to Italy. Italian efforts to culturally subordinate its German-speaking inhabitants clashed with their sense of strong regional patriotism. As a result, the population of South Tyrol was subjected to a strong and multi-dimensional Italianization, especially during the period of Italian fascism and the times immediately before it. Tyroleans had to bear a huge burden on the road to autonomy, still feeling like guests and not hosts in their local homeland. However, even in the reborn democratic state of Italy after World War II, the problems did not go away. The difficult history of interwar years turned out to be the first stage of the struggle for the right to self-determination of the regional community in South Tyrol.

Keywords: Italy; South Tyrol; Alto Adige; Italianization; ethnic minority

• Abstrakt •

Koniec I wojny światowej doprowadził do przyłączenia niemieckojęzycznego Tyrolu Południowego do Włoch. Wysiłki Włoch zmierzające do kulturowego podporządkowania sobie niemieckojęzycznych mieszkańców terytorium od samego początku napotkały opór ze strony panującego wśród nich silnego poczucia regionalnego patriotyzmu. W związku z tym ludność Tyrolu Południowego poddano intensywnej i wielowymiarowej italiaizacji, szczególnie w okresie włoskiego faszyzmu oraz w czasie bezpośrednio go poprzedzającym. Na drodze do autonomii Tyrolczycy zmuszeni byli dźwigać brzemię wyobcowania, czując się ciągle gośćmi, nie zaś gospodarzami swojej lokalnej ojczyzny. Jednak nawet w odrodzonym, demokratycznym państwie włoskim po II wojnie światowej problemy nie zniknęły. Trudna historia lat międzywojennych okazała się pierwszą odsłoną walki o prawa do samostanowienia społeczności regionalnej w Tyrolu Południowym.

Słowa kluczowe: Włochy; Tyrol Południowy; Górna Adyga; italiaizacja; mniejszość etniczna

Introduction

The history of border communities is often quite turbulent. It was no different in Trentino-Alto Adige. Nowadays the autonomy of this region as a part of Italian state is considered as democratic standard but it was a complete opposition when the region became a part of Italy as a result of the Great War. South Tyrol can be considered as a good example of how different periods of political history and political changes can influence not only the state but also local communities in a microsphere.

South Tyrol is a border area; therefore, it has been and is the subject of research and consideration in two scientific circles: Italian and Austrian, more broadly German speaking. Hence, when analyzing the existing literature, the emphasis is primarily on this type of publication, but not excluding other sources. The current literature in the field of social sciences and humanities focuses on particular stages of the history of South Tyrol, from the time after World War I (Burgwyn, 1997; Low, 1974), going through the period of fascist rule in Italy and World War II (Di Michele, 2014; Steininger, 2003; Motta, 2012), ending with description of post-war times (Grote, 2012; Bonusiak, 2013). Along with the historical aspect, there can be found publications relating to the categories of law, political science, or administration (Markusse, 2012; Pallaver, 2014; Wolff, 2005).

The aim of this research was to describe the political situation of South Tyrol in the years 1918–1946. Due to this, the focus was on specifying the administrative stages in South Tyrol and examining political decisions and the feedback they led to in relations with the population. The adopted time frames were based on events that had an important impact on the studied region in terms of mainly political science but also sociology and history. The analyzed period of almost three decades provided an opportunity to look at various events that were created in many socio-political environments. The functioning of the region, which has undergone such radical changes over the period of 28 years, was a useful tool to learn about the impact of regimes in regional or local terms. South Tyrol was all the more appropriate for the analysis, as during almost three decades the region has witnessed diverse systemic solutions and a redefinition of its local subjectivity: starting in the Kingdom of Italy immediately after World War I, through Italy of the fascist era, the times of World War II and German occupation, ending as a part of rebirthed Italian state.

Due to the description of the past, reference was made to the historical method that combines elements of history and political science, and therefore aspects that are extremely relevant to the description of such a complex subject as the border territory and the society functioning there. To make a comprehensive description

of individual events, an analysis of existing data in both Italian and German was used, which helped to outline the most important historical episodes and to better understand the problems of given issues. The comparative method was used in the field of understanding the issues from the political science point of view. Comparative studies were adopted mainly because they relate to research in the field of competences and functioning of regional and central administration bodies. This was important in the context of the best possible presentation of the political nature of the Tyrolean problem in years 1918–1945.

Military occupation 1918–1919

In the first stage of the Great War, the Italians belonged to the Central Powers, but they remained neutral and did not take part in the fights. Over time, adopting an increasingly conformist stance, they decided to change sides. Convinced by the territorial guarantees included in the London Pact in 1915, in which the territories of South Tyrol, Trento and the Austrian Littoral were provided by Western powers, Italy took up the fight against Austria-Hungary (Barker, 1973, pp. 10–11). When the war ended, the Italians came to Versailles as representatives of the victorious party (Burgwyn, 1997). The efficient arguments of the Italian government and Prime Minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando resulted in the approval of the accession of Trento and South Tyrol to Italy (Low, 1974, pp. 297–311). On September 10, 1919, a peace treaty with Austria was signed in Saint-Germain-en-Laye. In point 4 of that treaty, territorial transfers from Austria to the Kingdom of Italy were included. The geographical area of Tyrol was divided into two parts. The northern part (German: *Nordtirol*) was left in the territorial structures of the Austrian state. The southern part (German: *Sudtirol*) including the territory of Trento was transferred to the Kingdom of Italy (Moss, 2017, pp. 35–39).

Since the signing of the ceasefire with Austria-Hungary on October 3, 1918, the Italian army was present throughout the geographical territory of Tyrol as occupation forces. The provisional governor of the occupied territory was General Guglielmo Pecori Giraldi. There was a visible division in the administration of the territory of Tyrol. In the northern part, it was realized that the Italian presence was temporary and aimed at forming a defense line in case of potential offensive by German troops. In the southern part of Tyrol, the situation was somewhat different. It was related to the belief that the temporary, military nature of the rule would eventually turn into a permanent Italian civil administration (Steininger, 2003, pp. 4–5).

The formation of public administration in the lands of Trentino and South Tyrol (Italian: *Alto Adige*) began with the start of the post-war Italian occupation. The first experience already showed the contrast between the two parts. Trento was seen as the mainstay of Italianness in the Habsburg monarchy. For this fact, the Italian troops entering the city were greeted with enthusiasm by the inhabitants. For the purposes of more effective management, it was decided to appoint a special council (*Consulta trentina* – 1919), which in the executive structures was subordinate to the governor – General Pecori Giraldi. This one was responsible to the Supreme Command in Padua. The Italians from Trento were helpful from the very beginning and expressed their willingness to cooperate in the formation of Italian statehood in the region (Motta, 2012, pp. 19–38).

Things were different in the northern part of the occupied territory. South Tyrol was almost entirely inhabited by German-speaking people. In addition, in its south-eastern part there was a Ladin minority, which also spoke a separate language – Ladin. When the region was still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, 223,913 people living in South Tyrol spoke German on a daily basis (89% of the entire population) (data from 1910). For comparison, Italian was spoken by 2.9% (7,339), and Ladin was used by 3.8% (9,429) (ASTAT, 2008, p. 19). While Italians entered Trento as liberators, in South Tyrol they were treated with visible reserve or dislike of the civilian population. However, the Tyroleans could not be denied the usual respect for the soldier and the hardships of the war. It was decided to take no radical actions in the field of local administration. German officials – in some instances – were permitted to keep their jobs. The same case was with municipal and city councils, which were allowed to continue operating regardless of the nationality factor. The exceptions were positions of high political or administrative importance, which were filled with Italian officials, most often brought from the neighboring Trento. Their efficient operation led to the suppression of pro-German propaganda in larger cities such as Bolzano and Merano. Initial liberal politics also made German-speaking officials, teachers, policemen, etc., decide to learn even the basics of the Italian language to have a better chance of retaining their positions or get a promotion (Motta, 2012, pp. 39–51).

In the Kingdom of Italy 1919–1922

Luigi Credaro, a civilian commissioner, and former minister of education was appointed to replace the former military governor. From the beginning of his stay – that is, from July 20, 1919 – he focused on the continuation of the activities of his

military predecessor. He tried to balance between the national interests flowing from the Roman headquarters and the fate of the local community. Italian nationalists, especially people like Ettore Tolomei, did not like this type of action. Representatives of the ultra-nationalist trend believed that it was unacceptable to approach the issue of the national minority so lightly and that much tougher behavior was needed. Credaro, however, continued to argue that it is easier to treat the German minority as equal citizens instead of punishing them for past events (Di Michele, 2003, p. 108).

At the turn of 1919 and 1920, a new nomenclature was introduced and the integration of two neighboring territories was carried out. Trento and South Tyrol have been merged into a single administrative entity under the name *Venezia Tridentina*. These activities were aimed at emphasizing the fact that these are now the territories of the Italian state. It was manifested not only by nomenclature. Trento, city dominated by Italians, known as a center of Italian culture, became the capital of the whole region. It was a clear message to the German-speaking population. On the other hand, there was a visible lack of coordinated action and cooperation between the government in Rome and the local administration in Trento. This was due to several factors. One of them was the personal attitude of Commissioner Credaro, who tried not to force the German minority to make an immediate mental change. Another was the passivity of the central government caused by governments instability in the period between 1919 and 1922. Due to this, the first years of the Italian presence in Tyrol could be considered relatively moderate. Although some incidents happened, especially in education. It was mainly about placing Italian lessons in schools. As it turned out, this was mostly problematic in primary education due to the vast majority of native German-speaking children, whose families would not accept the imposition of Italian language education. The turning point both in Italian politics in these lands and in the attitude of Credaro himself – who was increasingly succumbing to nationalist pressure – turned out to be the so-called “Corbino’s law” (Italian: *Lex Corbino*) (Grote, 2012, pp. 31–33; Motta, 2012, pp. 67–68).

Strengthening nationalism and growing Italian fascism

Already at the end of 1921, in the declining period of Luigi Credaro’s administration, the nationalists’ influence on the shape of policy towards the German-speaking minority was becoming more and more visible. This began on April 24, 1921, when Bloody Sunday (German: *Blutsonntag*) happened in Bolzano. On that day, a referendum was held in the Austrian Tyrol on whether to separate from Austria and

join these lands to Germany. At the same time, in South Tyrol in Italy an opening of the Bolzano spring fair took place. Combining these facts, the Italian nationalists came to the conclusion that the fairs in Bolzano could be a cover for South Tyrol's annexation to Germany too. Credaro was warned by the authorities from neighboring regions about the possible intervention of a nationalist and fascist militant, but he ignored this information. Sadly, the predictions turned out to be correct. Italian fascists came to Bolzano and together with local militants in an organized group of 400 people decided to brutally attack the local people. It turned into a blatant attack on defenseless inhabitants. The total of 50 people got injured and the local teacher Franz Innerhofer was shot to death. All this happened with the passive behavior of the Italian authorities. As a result, there was a sharp tightening of the nationalist course. Fascists were more and more active in South Tyrol and created their structures in large urban areas. They already had influence not only on local authorities, but also on Commissioner Credaro himself (Domanegg, 2010, pp. 137–138).

After the attack of the fascist militias on April 24, 1921, it was clear that the issue of South Tyrol had become a much wider subject and that fascists would not forget about this region. In addition, *Lex Corbino*, named after the then minister of education, was constantly making things worse. This law assumed that every family recognized as Italian was obliged to send their children to an Italian school. In theory, however, the harmless document has become a severe weapon for the local community. This led to a negligent assessment of families in terms of their ethnicity. As a result, many families with an Italian surname but using German language on a daily basis were forced to send their children to Italian schools. Because of that, the German schools were closed, and the students were wrongly transferred to their Italian counterparts (Steininger, 2003, pp. 9–10).

Italian fascists, who felt increasingly bold throughout almost the entire country, decided to use South Tyrol as a testing ground for their main plan. Before the famous March on Rome took place, there was the March on Bolzano. At the end of April 1922, fascists decided to introduce their own rules in these lands: from changing street names to only Italian and displaying Italian flags on public buildings to outright interference in staffing of local offices. When these goals were achieved, the fascists “turned south” and, on their way to Trento, forced the resignation of the incumbent Commissioner Credaro. Moreover, these actions gained legal legitimacy. A royal decree was adopted to liquidate the offices of commissioners in *Venezia*, *Zadar*, and *Venezia Tridentina* (Di Michele, 2014, pp. 51–53). Another blow to the Tyroleans was the actual march, the one that ended in Rome and led Mussolini to undertake the mission of creating a government on October 30, 1922 (Gierowski, 1985, pp. 569–572).

Fascist rule period

Ettore Tolomei was a figure considered to be the main architect of state policy in South Tyrol. He was a political activist and, above all, a nationalist from nearby Rovereto, who developed a comprehensive 32-point Italianization plan for the area, known as *Provvedimenti per l'Alto Adige*. As a symbol of the Italian presence, the name of the region was changed to *Trento*. Words like 'Tyrol' or 'South Tyrol' have been banned. In their place, the Italian name, so far used alternately, i.e., *Alto Adige*, was used. First of all, the idea was to completely eliminate the German language from public space. It was a complex plan on how to make life difficult for the German-speaking community through the pretext of helping the Italian minority. It was not only about the broadly understood toponymy. Names and surnames of Tyrolean citizens were Italianized. Italian was ordered to be the only language in public offices, courts, police stations, etc. The self-government of cities and communes was abolished, and in their place the nominees of the central government were introduced. It was also connected with the complete exclusion of the Tyroleans from political and social life. Repression, although sometimes loosened, also reached the Catholic clergy, who were seen as an ally of the German-speaking part of society (Von Hartungen, 2002, pp. 5–7).

There was a visible resistance in schools, where the new administration, under the so-called *Lex Gentile* of September 17, 1923, ordered teaching only in Italian, at all levels of education. The reform affected 360 educational institutions. School Italianization was not only about students. A severe system of reprimands or disciplinary dismissals was applied to teachers who did not want to cooperate. In local administration or law enforcement forces, the focus was on replacing the current staff with the native Italians brought to South Tyrol from nearby Trento or southern parts of Italy (Sternalski, 2013, pp. 55–56). To prevent the cultural degeneration of young people and children, the German-speaking community decided to run its own education system, the so-called catacomb schools (German: *Katakombenschulen*). It was a well-organized, secret teaching network build by ordinary people, teachers or even priests and other clergy members. Due to constant repressions and controls, catacomb schools were placed mostly in private houses' cellars or attics. The main goal was to promote the knowledge of Tyrolean history and culture (Grote, 2012, pp. 38–39).

When the resistance of the Tyroleans was constantly visible, it was decided to use a combination of demographic and economic methods. From the very beginning of the Italian presence in these lands, the German-speaking working class was attacked, in order to prevent them from making high profits, which they could then use to

increase their influence in the region. For this purpose, agricultural unions and trade unions were liquidated. Agricultural law was reformed to the detriment of local farmers, especially in terms of inheritance of agricultural property (Steininger, 2011). In the mid-1930s, an action was launched to encourage Italians from other regions to come to Bolzano for work and housing purposes. More and more native Italians have settled in the region. As a result, the number of the Italian-speaking population grew steadily. Efforts related to industrialization and the migration of people from the south of Italy resulted in an increase in population and a change in ethnic proportions. In 1939, South Tyrol had a population of 335,000 people compared to around 250,000 when the region passed into Italian hands. Ethnic proportions have also changed. The German-speaking population made up 72% of the total population (compared to 89% before World War I and 86% after the war). Italian was spoken by 24% of people (almost 3% before the war and 8% after). The Ladin language accounted for 3% (around 4% before and after the war) (Janke, 1992, p. 1; ASTAT, 2008, p. 19). The fascists wanted to make the Tyroleans feel like guests, not hosts. Their goal was to invert the proportions and create the image of the Italian Bolzano with the German minority.

The Third Reich and Tyrol issue

Tyroleans saw Hitler's rise to power as an opportunity to fight for their self-determination again. They saw pan-Germanic slogans in National Socialism and hoped that the idea of a great German nation would also apply to them. From the very beginning, these hopes seemed to be greatly overestimated by the Tyroleans (Pallaver, 2014, pp. 59–60). Moreover, after Hitler came to power in 1933, the state rapprochement between Italy and the Reich was noticeable. However, this did not mean that the Tyroleans abandoned the liberation idea altogether. Especially among young people, there was an interest in the National Socialist ideology and the belief that it could help in regaining the right to self-determination. It led to a certain kind of interest in NSDAP militants or organizations such as Hitler Youth. In 1933, the *Völkischer Kampfring Südtirol – VKS* – was founded. An organization closely resembling its German counterparts like Hitler Youth for example. It was not only about maintaining and cultivating Tyrolean traditions. VKS organized various training camps and courses. The organization actively supported the efforts of teachers and educators from catacomb schools by helping to smuggle scientific materials. The long-term goal of VKS leaders was, of course, to join the lands of South Tyrol to the Reich. However, with each subsequent

year, starting in 1933, these plans became more and more utopian (Egger, 2018, pp. 46–74).

However, a different solution to the Tyrolean population question was decided. On October 21, 1939, the Italian and German sides agreed to hold a local plebiscite. It was dubbed the “Option” because it referred to the choice of two options of future existence. The first of them assumed expatriation. Those who chose it were to be relocated to the Reich. Choosing the second option meant staying in Italy and living in the current place of residence. The “Option” created a very large psychological taint on the people of South Tyrol. The choice that they had to make was extremely difficult for many families and often required great mental or material sacrifice. The time to make the choice ended on December 31, 1939. Estimates of the percentage of people who chose to expatriate vary in historiography. The averaged values assume that out of over 200,000 German-speaking people, about 86% voted for relocation to the Reich (Sternalski, 2013, p. 57; Peterlini, 2000, pp. 70–71). Such a high percentage made this plan more difficult than it was assumed at the beginning. Resettlement action started in 1940. However, it was noticed that the closest places of relocation which were the German (former Austrian) parts of Tyrol, were not enough. This created a considerable problem in the Third Reich, the solution of which turned out to be a difficult task. As a result, the “Option”, started at the end of 1939, ended in 1943. Over 75,000 people were relocated away, of whom about 20,000 who lived in temporary camps returned to their former lands in South Tyrol after the end of the war (Grote, 2012, pp. 67–69).

German occupation 1943–1945

During the first period of the war, that is from September 1939 to September 1943, South Tyrol and Trento remained as a part of the Kingdom of Italy. After 1943, South Tyrol and the area of Trento and Belluno were incorporated to Germany (Gierowski, 1985, pp. 614–627; Steininger, 2003, pp. 68–73). In administrative terms, South Tyrol was within the *Reichsgau Tyrol-Vorarlberg*. The local population has regained some kind of cultural freedom, as the rules of Italianization prevailing in the times of fascism have been withdrawn. On the other hand, there were new rules implemented by the Nazi authorities. Due to the restoration of the region’s German character, it was decided that its male inhabitants would be incorporated into the Wehrmacht. Those who opposed the conscripts were sentenced to imprisonment or even death. The repressions against the opponents of National Socialism also intensified. Political police were looking for citizens who, during plebiscite in 1939,

chose to stay over resettlement, or agitated to do so (Peterlini, 2000, pp. 75–76). Much more severe repressions against the Jewish population were visible than those introduced in Italy in 1938, i.e., deportations to labor or concentration camps (Mayr, 2017).

At the same time, the negative attitude towards the occupant grew. Two main groups of resistance arose. The first was organized around the National Liberation Committee (CLN, *Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale*) and covered urban areas, mainly the city of Bolzano. Resistance in rural areas was created under the auspices of *Andreas-Hofer-Bund* (AHB). Even in the case of armed resistance, there were fundamental differences in the interests of the two groups. The CLN was the party committee of Italian politics from Christian Democrats to Communists. The main goal was to fight for the liberation of the country from the hands of fascism and Nazism. In the area of South Tyrol and Trento, the CLN also fought to defend the future of the Italian border at the Brenner Pass. AHB had a strongly regional character. Their leaders were local activists who, a few years earlier, had actively opposed the fascists and their policy of Italianization. As the end of the conflict neared in the spring of 1945, both resistance movements sought to mark their presence in South Tyrol and Trento. The opening move went to the CLN, which immediately took over the administration of Bolzano and the key Brenner Pass at the time of the Wehrmacht's withdrawal from South Tyrol. On May 8, 1945, AHB established the South Tyrolean People's Party – SVP (German: *Südtiroler Volkspartei*; Italian: *Partito Popolare Sudtirolese*). The main goals of the SVP were efforts for the self-determination of the Tyroleans and the possible post-war territorial transfer to Austria. These actions were met with dissatisfaction and opposition from the CLN (Grote, 2012, pp. 70–71; Golemo, 2019, p. 102).

After the end of the war, the people of South Tyrol came up with the idea of holding a plebiscite to determine whether the region should change its belonging from Italy to Austria. This idea gained support from SVP and from Austrian government. Neither Italy nor the allied powers supported that idea so South Tyrol stayed as a part of Italy (Peterlini, 2000, pp. 73–77). As a result, the focus was on developing solutions to guarantee greater freedoms for the German-speaking population in South Tyrol. Conclusion was the agreement between the Prime Minister of Italy, Alcide De Gasperi, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Austria, Karl Gruber, of September 5, 1946, known as the De Gasperi-Gruber Agreement. It defined the initial characteristics of the bilingualism of the region and was an introduction to the First Autonomy Statute adopted on February 26, 1948, for the region of *Trentino-Alto Adige* (Bonusiak, 2013, pp. 124–125). However, as it turned out, despite the promising ideas that accompanied the statute, its formal assumptions

were not respected by the Italian administration. And in the eyes of many Tyroleans the period of another Italianization started. This led to subsequent decades of misunderstandings, which in the following years renewed antagonisms, and another struggle for self-determination awaited the Tyroleans (Alcock, 2001, pp. 5–8).

Conclusion

The territory of South Tyrol was a place subjected to strong Italianization in the years 1918–1945. At each stage of the functioning of this territory, starting from the times of military administration, then civilian rule in the first years of the post-war Kingdom of Italy, and finally the times of fascism, an ever-stronger growth of antagonisms between central government and local community was visible. On the one hand, the Italian administration sought to displace the sense of regional identity. Tyroleans in response to these found solutions in many fields to prevent it. The measures used especially in fascist times were diverse, as they concerned not only political, but also economic, educational, and social aspects. In response to this, the population tried to overcome barriers, prohibitions or orders, wanting to save the spirit of regional identity. It must not be forgotten that the Tyroleans had to unite not only to overcome Italianization, but also to survive the period of wartime occupation, when South Tyrol was briefly under German administration at the end of World War II. Stripped of the role of being hosts in their own homeland, they remained convinced that the fight for their *heimat* could not be abandoned. The end of the war and the beginning of functioning as one of the territorial entities of the newly created Italian Republic gave hope for favorable political changes and the departure of repressions identified with the Kingdom of Italy. As later showed, it was not so obvious, and the Tyroleans had to wait a long time to receive real guarantees and their actual observance.

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