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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

The "Second Cyprus": South Tyrol

Bozen (Bolzano)  
Südtirol, Italy  
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

What's in a name? Outside my window is one of the most beautiful countries I have ever seen, a land of green valleys and ancient villages, of snow-capped mountains and a thousand fairy-tale castles. I have learned at least five names for it, and to be very careful which name I use in whose company. The penalty for a mistake is a quick look of suspicion that says, "Ah, so you belong to the other side!", and an immediate drying up of a source of confidences.

This is the Südtirol, or the Alto Adige, or Tiroler Etschland, or Oberetschland, or, rarely, il Tirolo del Sud. Only a few years ago it was also Venezia Tridentina, but that name, at least, has retired to the history books - along with a Nazi designation, Alpenvorland, in use only two years. In a moment of caution, one may also be reduced to speaking of "the Province of Bozen (Bolzano)". This is neutral, but unhelpful to the American and British public, largely accustomed to hearing the area referred to in their press as the South Tyrol - a usage that may reveal a pro-Tyrolean prejudice, or merely convenience.

The "South Tyrol question" has been drawing world attention periodically for forty years, ever since the district was separated from Austria and given to Italy. The most recent disturbances were in February and March of this year. At that time the Südtiroler Volkspartei (South Tyrolese People's Party, SVP) ended fourteen years' cooperation with the Christian Democratic government in Rome, and walked out of the Trentino-Alto Adige regional government in Trento. Neo-Fascist youth demonstrated all over Italy, bombs were exploded at the Austrian Institute in Rome, there was trouble at the Austrian Consulate in Trieste, an Italian monument in the South Tyrol was damaged, guards were placed at the Italian Embassy and Italian Institute in Vienna, representatives of the government of the Austrian province of Tyrol were stopped and turned back by Italian officials at the Brenner, the Austrian government protested and recalled its Ambassador from Rome for "consultations". The press spoke ominously of "a second Cyprus."

The crisis passed without loss of life or serious injury to property or people. The Austrian Ambassador returned to Italy, and the thread of bilateral talks on the South Tyrol between Vienna and Rome was taken up again. Passions in Bozen returned to just below the boiling point, their standard temperature.

\* The first of a series of seven newsletters.

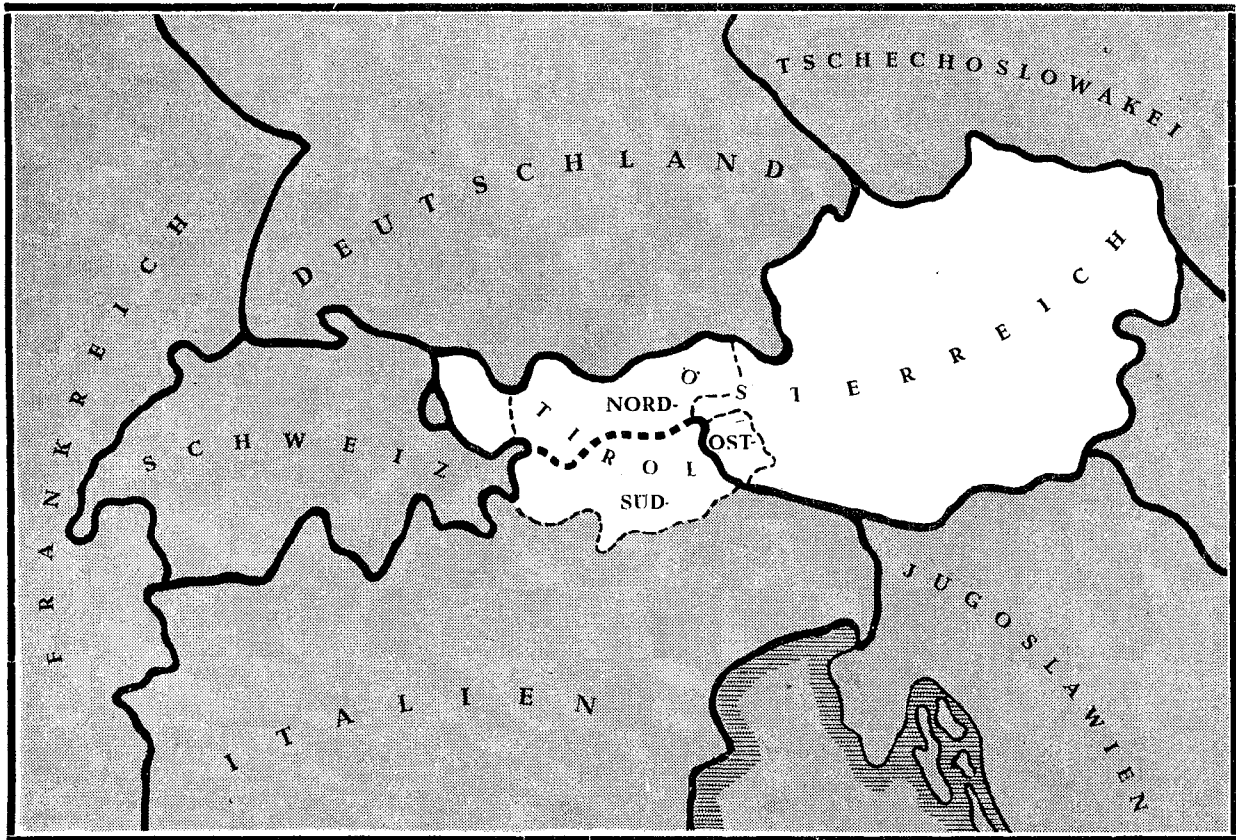
The double detonator of the latest explosion was new legislation for public housing in Bozen Province (originating in Rome and highly unsatisfactory to the South Tyroleans) and the beginning of celebrations in North and South Tyrol of the 150th anniversary of the Tyrolese rising (against Napoleon) of 1809. Neither of these raised any new issues. In fact, there have been no real new issues in the South Tyrol question for over ten years, and this itself may be the underlying cause of the latest upsurge of vocal dissatisfaction in the Province: the Italians are playing for time to solve their problems, and the South Tyroleans believe firmly that time is against them.

The South Tyrol's basic problem is that it is one of those areas - the Sudetenland is another - where geographic and ethnic facts are contradictory. The rivers empty into the Mediterranean and the valleys open into Italy. So the Italians have long claimed that their land is indefensible unless their borders are at the top of the Brenner, beyond which the rivers flow toward the Danube. But on the Mediterranean side of the Brenner, as far as Salurn (75 miles south of the pass) the people and the culture have been German for fifteen hundred years. The provincial border with Trento Province to the south follows the real "language border" between German and Italian - except in the Dolomites to the south-east, where the country of the Ladins is split among three provinces.

The South Tyrol is a mountainous district of some 7400 square kilometers and 350,000 inhabitants. It consists primarily of three connecting valleys with their tributaries: the Vintschgau (Val Venosta) and Etschtal (Adige) running from the Swiss and Austrian borders in the northwest east to Meran and south toward Trento; the Pustertal from the Austrian border on the east westward to Brixen; and the Eisacktal from north to south, linking the Brenner Pass, the Pustertal (at Brixen) and the Etsch (at Bozen). Since the Brenner is both the lowest major pass in the Alps and the shortest route from the German north to the Latin south, the strategic position of the South Tyrol has been of great importance since Roman times.

This strategic position accounts for the marvelous collection of ancient castles rimming the major and minor valleys, for the blending of cultures that happily exists despite both German and Italian efforts to deny the other's existence, and for the flourishing of flatly contradictory folk-myths about the district's early history.

These myths are worth a study in themselves, and one, at least, seems to have been swallowed by no less an authority than the Encyclopedia Britannica, which states that the South Tyroleans are ethnically different from the North Tyroleans. The former, one reads here, are descended from the Ostrogoths who did their vanishing act from world history in these valleys, while the inhabitants of the districts north of the Brenner and in the upper Eisacktal are the Bajuvarii (Bavarians) who descended from south Germany a century later.



A favorite Fascist myth, carefully cultivated between 1922 and 1939, maintained, on the other hand, that the South Tyroleans were really the Rhaeto-Romans of Caesar's time, subsequently Germanized and now to be "reclaimed" for Italianita.

Since neither of these "histories" is quite true, but both are partially true, I found it worthwhile to ask nearly everyone I talked to here, from politicians to farmers: "By the way, where did your people come from?" The answers involved good stories, much variety, and some significance.

Most South Tyroleans seem to believe themselves to be Bajuvarii, descendants of the South German tribes that migrated up the Inn Valley (North Tyrol) and across the Brenner in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries. Some spoke of the Ostrogoths, whose disappearance from history after their brief occupation of Italy in the Fifth Century provides a marvelous foundation for folk-history in many areas. But the variants of this theme I heard here were somewhat more restrictive than that of the Encyclopedia Britannica. "Most of the people in South Tyrol are Bajuvarii, but the people of this valley are descended from the Ostrogoths. It's a secluded area, you see. You'll notice that the people are taller and fairer, and it's well known that the women are better

looking." I gathered that the people of the Sarntal, a completely enclosed valley north of Bozen connected with the outside world through a carriageable road for the first time in 1935, and the people of the area just above Meran believe themselves to be Ostrogothic. The theory was upheld by the generally knowledgeable editor-in-chief of the Dolomiten, the Province's German-language newspaper, but it was laughed at by the even more knowledgeable press officer of the Provincial government.

The most fascinating bit of folk-history was told me by the representative for Kaltern in the provincial legislature, who had come from one of the small German-speaking islands in the Italian province of Trentino, to the south. "We are actually distinct from any of these other people," he said. "We are the remnants of the Cimbrians with whom the Romans fought in the second century before Christ. They apparently retired into our hills, above Trento, where you will find, even today, the Italians refer to us as 'i Cimbri'."

Dr. Mumelter, the scholarly provincial press officer, explained this one away. "It is popularly believed down there, but I can find no historical substantiation, nor does it seem likely that the Cimbrians, who vanished from history over 2000 years ago, would have survived at all. What seems to have happened is this: German settlers found their way into that area a thousand years ago, and were proficient at woodworking, by which many of them still make their living. They were referred to by other Germans as 'the carpenters' ('Zimmermann' in German) and the Italians living around picked this up, mispronounced it and referred to these people as 'the Cimbri up there in the hills.' The Germans in turn heard themselves talked of in this way and concluded: 'We must be the Cimbrians of ancient history.'"

Such is the origin, one suspects, of much folk-history.

The story of the Rhaetians, the inhabitants (probably Celtic) of these valleys when Drusus and Tiberius conquered them for Rome in 14 B.C., is happily clearer. Romanized, they were divided and driven into remote valleys by the Fifth Century barbarian invasions - Ostrogothic, Bavarian and later Longobardic. They survive in part of Swiss Graubunden, and in three valleys of the South Tyrol area, two of which have been administratively included in neighboring Italian provinces since the 1920's. They preserve their own language and customs and, while in both they are much closer to the Italians than to the Germans (Ladin, their language, is the sixth Romance language of Europe), they have tended to side with the German South Tyroleans in nationality disputes since 1919. The present governor of German-dominated Bozen Province, Engineer Alois Pupp, is a Ladin. He is said to have no political future, and appears to be there as a symbol of Ladin unity with the German cause.

With the exception of these Ladin enclaves, then, all of Tyrol (meaning here the present North and East Tyrol, which

are Austrian, and South Tyrol, which is Italian) was German before the time of Charlemagne - one of the earliest recorded events in German history being a battle between the Bavarians and the Slavs (Wends) near the present South Tyrol-East Tyrol border for the control of the Pustertal. Because of the importance placed on it by the present inhabitants of these mountains, this fact is worth noting. It seems possible that the Longobards - a German tribe in the process of being absorbed by the Italian population of Lombardy - had extended their Duchy of Trent along the right bank of the Adige, opposite Bozen, as far as Meran, but no more. "This land, which was always German..." is part of the preamble of every South Tyrol political speech.

Tyrol, by that name, was born here in the south in the Twelfth century, when a family whose seat was at the Castle of Tyrol, just above Meran (18 miles northwest of Bozen), was entrusted by the Bishop of Trent with control of the Vintschgau and its neighborhood - the Bishop's authority, in turn, being derived from the German Emperors. By 1271 this family, which took the name of its castle, had consolidated control over the entire Tyrol, including the Italian county of Trent. When Margaret Maultasch, the last and most famous member of the Tyrol family, died in 1363, the country passed to Rudolph IV of Habsburg, and remained in Habsburg possession until 1918.

The present South Tyrol problem dates from that year, and South Tyroleans are fond of reminding an American visitor of America's responsibility (i.e., Woodrow Wilson's) for their present fate. During the negotiations that ended in Italy's entry into the World War in 1915, Austria had offered to give Rome the Italian province of Trent if Italy would remain true to her Triple Alliance partners. In the famous secret Treaty of London the British and French outbid Vienna by offering the southern part of Tyrol proper, up to the Brenner Pass, as well. These southern Tyrolean valleys then contained 235,000 Germans and Ladins and 7,000 Italians, but Italy had long been urging a "watershed theory" of national boundaries that left the Brenner as the "natural" border between Italy and the German-speaking world. The Austrians came to St. Germain in 1919 armed against this cession with Wilson's Fourteen Points, but Italy, France, and Britain held to the terms of the Treaty of London and Wilson reluctantly acceded to the cession of German South Tyrol to Italy, without a plebescite. (The local version of this story, by the way, is far less kind to the American president.) The Italians promised the South Tyrol local autonomy, and the first years were marked by some co-operation.

Then came Fascism and Mussolini's frank determination to Italianize the Brenner borderland. The German language was forbidden, German mayors of towns were replaced by imported Italian ones, the German schools were closed and those teachers

who wanted to continue in their profession were transported to the south of Italy to teach Italians. The South Tyroleans were forced to Italianize their names, and squads of Fascist youth had a fine time scratching German names off tombstones in village churchyards.

In the 1930's the pace was increased, partially by the establishment of a thoroughly artificial industrial zone south of Bozen, the provincial capital. Subsidized industries were brought there - because of transportation costs, lack of raw materials and of a local market they could not have survived without support - and with them an army of Italian workers. By 1939 the Italian population of the province had jumped from the 3% of 1910 to 24%, and in the three principal towns (Bozen, Brixen and Meran) had advanced from 5% to 51%.

South Tyrol resistance looked in vain for outside support. In the 1930's Austria became increasingly dependant on Mussolini for support against German Anschluss ambitions and was therefore in no position to protest. Hitler paid scant attention to this distant fragment of Germanism, although a small Nazi group looked forward to the absorption of Austria in the Third Reich as a first step toward the return of the South Tyrol.

Only in the field of education did the South Tyroleans take partially effective action. Under the direction of Canon Gamper, a political cleric who was one of the most remarkable figures in recent Tyrolean history, clandestine "Catacomb" schools were organized for instruction in German language and literature. Money for these schools was collected privately in Austria and Germany, and during the summer priests and ex-teachers wandered through the mountains from village to village giving instruction. A few were caught and sent to prison. "Those of my generation who did not go to these classes in the church crypt grew up speaking dialect but unable to read or write German," an alumna of a Catacomb school, now a village shop-keeper's wife, told me. "Later, when they went away to the army or to work, they could not even write to their parents in their native language, but had to write in Italian, which the parents could not understand."

In Meran a Catholic gymnasium survived as the only German-language secondary school in the country, but its leaving certificates were not recognized.

The Anschluss in March, 1938, brought the South Tyroleans a moment of hope, but Hitler had already written to Mussolini (March 11th) assuring him that the Brenner border was "eternal", and in May, during Hitler's visit to Rome, this German policy was publically announced. To underline it, the East Tyrol, the existence of which (separated from the rest of the Austrian province by Italian-controlled South Tyrol) had made maps and administration untidy and served as a reminder to irridentists, was detached from Innsbruck by the Nazis and made part of Carinthia, to the east.

The Italians were unconvinced, and Ciano entered into complicated negotiations with the Germans for a "definitive solution" of the South Tyrol problem - the transfer of the German inhabitants to Germany. Arrangements were completed only after the war began, but in October, 1939, the South Tyroleans were told they had until the end of the year to declare themselves: they could opt for German citizenship and move to Germany, or they could opt to retain Italian citizenship and remain in Bozen Province. 213,000 German- and Ladin-speaking South Tyroleans, 86% of the total, opted for German citizenship. (These figures are from a recent Austrian source; Italian calculations are not quite the same.) But only 70,000 had actually moved across the Brenner before the transfer came to an end with the Italian surrender in September, 1943.

The subject of the Option is still a tender one in South Tyrol today, and a piece of information one is often supplied about a prominent figure is that he was "Optant" or "Nicht-optant". At the time, the Italian government seems to have been surprised by the size of the Optanten figure. One prominent Nicht-optanter, Dr. Toni Ebner, now Director of the German-language newspaper Dolomiten, offered what seems the fairest and most complete explanation. There was, to begin with, much understandable bitterness after seventeen years of Fascist efforts to Italianize the region by force. Then before the Option, the Germans made an intensive propaganda drive, while the Italian authorities remained passive. It was widely believed that all those who opted to remain Italian would be required to move to southern Italy or Sicily, although this was not in fact the Italian intention. (Many farmers, shopkeepers and local officials I talked to told me they had opted for Germany in 1939 because the alternative was to go to Sicily, and they preferred to be among people whose language and customs they understood - in Germany.) According to Dr. Ebner, the then Prefect of Bozen had actually made a suggestion to this effect in a speech in Eppan (Appiano), a town in the Bozener Unterland, south of Bozen. This was eagerly seized and used by the German propagandists. The Italian authorities planned to have Mussolini receive a delegation of South Tyroleans to assure them that no such forced migration was planned, and the first half of this delegation had departed for Rome, when orders came that the Duce would not see them and the other half need not leave Bozen. The German officials in Rome had persuaded the Italians that such a confrontation would be unduly influencing the option!

German agents also spread the word in South Tyrol that if a large enough majority voted for Germany, no one would have to move, but instead the province would be annexed to the Reich. This brought many other doubters over to the German side: better the devil that spoke their own language than the Italianizing one they knew too well.

One additional chapter of this story bears mentioning: the 1943-45 interlude when South Tyrol was once again, briefly, under German control. With the collapse of Italy in the summer of 1943, Bozen, Trento, and Belluno provinces were detached from the rest of German-occupied Italy (still under the formal control of Mussolini's Fascist Republic at Salo) and made into the "Operational Zone Alpine Foreland" under the direct control of Gauleiter Hofer in Innsbruck. The Bozener Unterland, a tongue of Bozen Province reaching down the Adige valley as far as the German-Italian "language border", which had been cut off and given to Italian Trento by the Fascists, was returned to Bozen, German was recognized again for official uses, and German schools began to reopen. Then came the German collapse, roaming bands of Italian Partisans, and a brief Anglo-American occupation from May, 1945, until the end of that year.

The drawing up of the Italian Peace Treaty in 1946 in Paris seemed a propitious moment to press for the return of South Tyrol to Austria and a "correction of the error" of 1919. Austria's voice, weakened by the four-power occupation of her own homeland, was represented by her Foreign Minister, Karl Gruber. His claims were one by one rejected by the Allies, who then - under British leadership - urged Italian Foreign Minister Alcide de Gasperi to sit down with Gruber and work out a separate Austro-Italian agreement on Italian treatment of the German minority. The result of this effort, the "de Gasperi-Gruber Accord" that has been at the center of the South Tyrol dispute ever since, was then incorporated as an annex to the Italian Treaty, and the South Tyrol settlement became permanently internationalized.

The de Gasperi-Gruber Accord assured the German-speaking inhabitants of Bolzano Province equal rights with their Italian-speaking compatriots, and specified that they should be granted: "a) elementary and secondary teaching in the mother-tongue; b) purification of the German and Italian languages in public offices and official documents...; c) the right to reestablish German family names which were Italianized in recent years; d) equality of rights as regards the entering upon public offices, with a view to reaching a more appropriate proportion of employment between the two ethnical groups." The province was also to be granted "the exercise of autonomous legislative and executive regional power", within a framework to be worked out in consultation with the German-speaking group. There were also other provisions for the revision of the 1939 citizenship option, for mutual recognition of University diplomas, and for facilitating traffic and transport between North Tyrol and East Tyrol.

The Accord seemed to satisfy both sides, but when the Italians set about establishing an Autonomous Region, in accordance with the Paris Treaty, the South Tyroleans and their



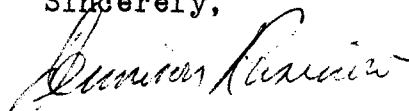
Austrian supporters began calling foul, and they have continued to do so ever since. The Autonomous Region, as ultimately constituted in 1948, included both Bozen Province and Trento Province to the south, and so the German majority in Bozen (already reduced by the Fascist and war years to 66% of the total) was turned into a regional minority by the overwhelming Italian majority in the Trentino. Although the Italians could claim historical precedents (the two areas were united under the Austrians and then under the Italians until 1926 - as Venezia Tridentina), the South Tyroleans have maintained that the combination was a trick to circumvent the de Gasperi-Gruber Accord, which was intended to protect the German minority in Bozen. Eleven years have not dimmed the bitterness on both sides, and the arguments concerning intention and legality have reached the length of lawyers' briefs.

All of this is history, but the South Tyrol problem is a matter of history. Nothing new has been added since the Autonomy Statute came into effect in 1948, except that each side has become increasingly exasperated with the intransigence of the other. The latest disturbances are one more minor explosion from a people who, rightly or wrongly, feel their ethnic and social existence threatened.

It makes what the popular press calls a "powder keg". The present leaders of the Südtiroler Volkspartei (the only party of the Germans here) without exception demur the idea of their land as "a second Cyprus", but they add hastily: "Of course, we cannot vouch for the future, if the Italians do not give us satisfaction."

Examining this complicated background, it seemed to me that three questions needed answering: Is Italianization still being attempted here, and, if so, how? Do the South Tyrolean people feel oppressed or threatened, or do only their politicians and journalists and North Tyrolean friends? What will happen next? Underlying these is another question: Does it matter if a German-speaking province of 350,000 inhabitants is Italianized? But I am not sure this last is a proper question to ask here.

Sincerely,



Dennison Rusinow

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