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The South Tyrol - Conclusions

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Dear Mr. Rogers:

The basic issue in South Tyrol is quite simply the Italian refusal to grant the area a genuinely special status within the Republic. The Italians say, in effect: why should we? This is one nation, democratic, with equal justice, and equal opportunity for all. Why should the South Tyroleans, merely because they speak another language, have a right to demand special privileges and immunities? All the regions of Italy have had different histories and different customs and laws, but they are learning to live together to the advantage of all. Why should the South Tyroleans be a special case? So each instance of special status that has been granted - and there have been many, especially in deference to the language problem - is treated as a magnanimous concession, the necessity for which the Italians do not really understand.

The fundamental Tyrolean answer is, in effect: this land was included in Italy through injustice in 1918, and the injustice was compounded by being confirmed in 1946. If the injustice is to be continued, and South Tyrol is to continue to be a part of Italy, then special status is a minimum demand that must be met. We, alone of the regions of Italy, did not ask to be here and do not want to be here. So each concession is treated as a fractional grant of what the South Tyroleans have a right to ask.

There seems to be no bridge between these views, as long as the Italians continue to believe themselves to be a unitary nation and as long as the South Tyroleans continue to regard themselves as outside of that nation. That is the tragedy of South Tyrol. As President Magnago said in Kaltern, "there will be no peace," and battles over public housing, over the use of the German language, over Provincial autonomy and over the sharing of civil service jobs will continue to be fought, and variously won or lost, until the South Tyrol really becomes the Alto Adige, or until the map of Europe is changed.

This is now the view of wiser heads on both sides. In this light, the Tyroleans are right in fearing that the Italians will continue, slowly, perhaps unconsciously, to Italianize, and the Italians are right in viewing the Tyroleans as, in one degree or another, seditious.

If, in writing these many pages about specific issues in the South Tyrol, I have seemed to come down on the side of the Italians, it is because of the way the South Tyroleans have framed their complaints. They have complained that the Italians are encouraging immigration into the Province to overwhelm the German-speaking community. So far as I can determine, the Italians have not done this since the end of Fascism. The South Tyroleans have demanded control over public housing in order to stop building. This is a peculiarly unprogressive way to solve a problem, when new housing is genuinely needed. They have complained that their people are discriminated against in public employment. This is not true; they are poorly represented because their qualified men and women, few in number, can do better elsewhere and are not interested, while their interested men and women are not qualified and are either unwilling or unable to prepare themselves to compete on equal terms for the jobs they say they want. They complain that the use of the German language is restricted, but I know of no western land having one official language in which more concessions are made to the use in official places of a second language. Realists, their spokesmen have concentrated on these practical issues, but in each case they are on weak ground.

If they were to say, "We want a closed living space in these valleys, from which all further Italian immigration and activity is restricted and within which the existing Italian minority must adapt itself to our way of life or live under our terms," and if they were to prove their right to make this demand, the argument would take a very different direction. A few of them have done this, but they are correctly accused of being unrealistic. World politics dictate that South Tyrol will remain part of Italy, and Italian public opinion precludes the granting of such an extraordinary status within Italy by any democratic Italian government. World politics are beyond the control of 240,000 South Tyroleans, and their chances of convincing Italian public opinion, peacefully or violently, within the foreseeable future are too small to be measurable.

They must, psychologically, reject this pessimistic view and make the effort.

But if they fail, as I think they must, their ethnic extinction is not then pre-ordained. As long as they continue to want to exist as an ethnic group, and as long as the Italians continue to be indifferent to their existence or disappearance (and not actively interested in destroying them, as was the case under Mussolini), there is no reason why the South Tyrol should not continue indefinitely to be a land of Italo-German towns and Tyrolean valleys.

Believing (with an increasing number of exceptions) in the fundamental ill-will of the Italians, they will also reject this optimistic view.

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The South Tyrol is a very small country, and I have spent a great many pages discussing its problems. If this needs to be excused, I would do it on the ground that these Alpine valleys provide a modern and available case study for an old and serious Central European disease - what historians like to call the Nationalities Question.

Of this disease the old Austro-Hungarian Empire died, and for it the Soviet Union claims to have found a final cure in the form of Socialist brotherhood imposed by the Red Army. Whether this last claim will be made good in the end is impossible to judge, but the nationalist elements in the Polish and Hungarian stirrings of 1956 and rumors circulating in Vienna again last week of anti-Czech disturbances in Slovakia suggest that Socialist brotherhood is not a wonder drug.

The South Tyrol, where the East-West conflict plays no role, is a classic case. In the old Empire the dispute had always ranged around the use of language in public administration and the schools and the distribution of civil service jobs. A.J.P. Taylor writes of Franz Joseph's Austria: "The appointment of every school teacher, of every railway porter, of every hospital doctor, of every tax-collector, was a signal for national struggle." He could have been writing of South Tyrol under the Italian Republic.

There is one significant difference, and it is an ironic one. In Old Austria the town-dwelling, literate German middle classes controlled the bureaucracy and ran the schools, and against their monopoly the "subject peoples" - Slavs for the most part - coming to town and school from the countryside, clamored and fought, demanding their own language and a share of jobs. In the South Tyrol it is the Germans who are the peasants, the "subject people", now crying for a share in administration and for recognition of their language. The student of history cannot help feeling a little *Schadenfreude* at this local humbling of one of Europe's most arrogant "master races", but it is an unworthy emotion.

There is another difference. In Old Austria the towns of the outer provinces had historically been German in a Slav hinterland, and in the Nineteenth Century the urbanization of these Slav peoples was overwhelming the urban Germans and turning Prague, Zagreb or Ljubljana into Slav towns. In South Tyrol the towns have historically been German in a German hinterland, and are now being Italianized.

But the similarities are more striking than the differences. If the Nationalities question is obscured for the historian of the Habsburg Empire by the passage of time and for the journalist studying the Soviet Empire by the thickness of the Iron Curtain, it can be examined with profit-for journalist and historian-in the South Tyrol.

Sincerely,