

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DR 38

Terrorism in the South Tyrol, 1961
I. The events

Bolzano (Bozen), Italy
16 September 1961

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

At nine o'clock on the morning of the 12th of June, one Giovanni Postal, age 65, an employee of the Italian State Highway department, making his normal inspection of his bit of the Brenner Highway just at the border between Bolzano and Trento provinces, spotted a mysterious object at the side of the road. As he approached the object, it exploded, decapitating him. This was the last of an amazing series of 47 detonations that weekend, aimed at destroying power lines and communications connecting the Alto Adige (South Tyrol) with the rest of Italy. Estimated damage: between three and four billion lire (\$5 to \$6,500,000).

On the 24th of June an angry and bitter Italian Foreign Minister Segni faced Austrian Foreign Minister Bruno Kreisky at Zurich, in Switzerland, and the Austro-Italian bilateral talks on the South Tyrol question, ordered by the United Nations last autumn, broke down. In the South Tyrol, at the height of the tourist season, the hotels were half empty.

During the night of the 10th of July a second major wave of explosions moved the sphere of terrorist action out of the Alto Adige into the rest of northern Italy with attacks on Italy's international railway connections near Verona, Como, Luino and Domodossola (the Brenner, St. Gotthard and Simplon lines).

On the 16th of July Dr. Hans Stanek, General Secretary of the South Tyrol People's Party, the unity party of all the German-speaking South Tyroleans, was arrested by the Italian authorities after incriminating correspondence and 250 copies of terrorist leaflets were found in his Brixen house. On the 11th of August Alois Oberhammer, Innsbruck provincial boss of the Austrian People's Party (the majority party in the Austrian Federal Government), resigned under fire from Austrian Socialists and the Italian press, which charged him with being the organizer of terrorism in the Alto Adige.

And on the 9th of September the terrorists attempted a "Third Offensive Wave" with Molotov cocktails deposited in the left-luggage rooms of railroad stations in Trento, Rovereto, Verona, Rome, Rimini and Monza.

Meanwhile, in the South Tyrol itself, sporadic attacks on high tension and rail lines continued throughout the summer, and toward the end of August gunfire was exchanged several times between Italian police units and mysterious "shadows" in side valleys near the Austrian border. No casualties.

A petty quarrel perhaps, an old quarrel surely, but significant as the most important (or most violent) quarrel to involve two non-Communist European states since the end of the Second World War. How had it come to such a pass, that 42 years after annexation to Italy the German-speaking South Tyrolese should have taken up bombs and guns? Pan-Germanism loose in the world again, in the year of the Berlin Crisis? Or patience run out after four decades of Italianization efforts? Who stands behind the terrorists, supplying plastique and money? How much support, active or passive, do they find among the South Tyrolese peasantry? Where do we go from here?

For the remote background to the present situation I can only refer (a little smugly) to my letters written from Bolzano two years ago and last Christmas (DR-14 to 20 and DR-35), and to the United Nations General Assembly debate last autumn. This little country (310,000 inhabitants) continues to live under the enduring shadow of an annexation carried out in 1919 against the loudly explicit wishes of the entire population and in contradiction of the principles for which the Allies said they had fought the First World War, and the darker shadow of twenty years of vicious Fascist oppression and efforts to Italianize the district by force. An entire generation here will never trust the Romans, even bearing gifts. The rulers of democratic Italy, failing or refusing to recognize this basic psychological problem, are impatient with Tyrolese refusal to be satisfied with a degree of local autonomy and legal protection that is among the most liberal granted to a national minority in the non-Communist world. For this and internal political reasons the Italians have refused to grant more. The Tyrolese peasantry, obsessed by their consciousness of the old struggle to preserve their German national character, fail to see that their real present problems are social and economic, not national. Their leaders, most of whom know this, lack the courage to tell them.

The struggle, as I wrote two years ago, centers around the question of local autonomy, promised the South Tyrolers in an Austro-Italian accord (the Gruber-Degasperi Agreement) appended to the Italian Peace Treaty of 1946 - the Italians maintaining that the 1946 agreement was fulfilled when the Trentino-Alto Adige Autonomous Region was created, the Tyrolers insisting that they were cheated by the lumping of the Alto Adige (German-speaking majority) with the purely Italian Trentino, which made them into a minority even within the region. (For the details of this dispute, DR-15). The South Tyrol People's Party continues

to demand separation from Trento, the establishment of the Alto Adige as a distinctive autonomous entity, administratively virtually independent of Rome in matters of education, public employment, public housing, local economy, etc. The Italians have continued to insist that the province, within the regional framework, already has considerable autonomy, and that to grant more would deliver up the Italian minority in the Alto Adige (now one third of the total population) to the dubious good will of the South Tyrol People's Party (SVP), which many Italians view as neo-Nazi at worst, authoritarian and nationalistic at best. The Italians have also claimed that the demand for full autonomy is only a prelude to the demand for self-determination, which would mean a vote in favor of union with Austria but how seriously the wiser among the Roman politicians really take this argument has always seemed to me doubtful.

All of this is an old story and serves to explain the continuing tension in the province since 1946. It is a cliché to speak of the South Tyrol as a meeting ground between Germanic and Italian civilizations; nowhere in fact are the two spiritually more segregated, and either Rome or Vienna is a better meeting place. But 45 years of tension and lack of communication between national communities do not adequately explain the turn to violence this summer. For that one must look outside the borders of the troubled province, and enter a sphere of speculation, opinion... and darkest intrigue.

The threat of terrorism goes back at least to 1957. That year the "moderate" leadership of the SVP (Chairman Dr. Toni Ebner, General Secretary Dr. Otto von Guggenberg, et al), in charge since 1946 on a platform of cooperation with the Italians, was overthrown by the party Young Turks, impatient and convinced that a "harder line" of threats and non-cooperation would win more results. Dr. Silvio Magnago (DR-18), a one-legged Wehrmacht war veteran with a Trentino father and a Vorarlberg mother (born here but no drop of South Tyrol blood), became Party Chairman, and Dr. Hans Stanek, mayor of Brixen under the Nazi occupation of 1943-45 and a native of the Sudetenland (no South Tyrol blood), became General Secretary. Not even Magnago's strongest political enemies in the Tyrolean community have ever doubted his personal integrity and sincerity - he occupies an Eisenhower-like position of personal untouchability among his people - but even fellow "radicals" have expressed doubts about Dr. Stanek, whose brown shirt undoubtedly shows from time to time.

With the new leadership an underground extremist organization, called "BAS" and supposedly modeled on the Cypriot Eoka terrorists, also put in an appearance, with leaflets and threatening letters (DR-35). No one took BAS seriously, except for a few Italian nationalists eager to sound the alarm of a new pan-German danger. South Tyrolean leaders themselves pooch-pooched the idea, reminding enquirers that there was no tradition of violence among the peaceful peasantry of South Tyrol, even under

the worst Fascist oppression of the 1920's and 1930's. Bombs went off, at the modest average of ten a year, doing little damage, and the Italian Government treated the incidents (as Interior Minister Scelba said this summer) as the acts of a few irresponsible individuals not of an organization.

Last winter there were more specific references in the West German press - specifically in the weekly Der Spiegel - to terrorist groupings at the ready, with allegations that they were being armed and trained by Vienna publisher Fritz Molden (Die Presse and family) and Tyrol OeVP boss Oberhammer. In December the SVP "radicals" tightened their grip by making Magnago governor of the Province. In the spring, as the Austro-Italian talks over the South Tyrol recommended by the United Nations began, the tempo of bombings increased slightly. A good start was made in the blowing up of a 1936-vintage double-life-sized equestrian statue in the Imperial Roman style, made of aluminum and with Mussolini's unmistakable face on the mounted Emperor, which had stood outside the Montecatini works beside the Brenner Highway south of Brixen; only a philistine neo-Fascist could regret the passing of the "Aluminum Duce". (It was later said that the terrorists had wanted to begin with the 1931 "Victory Monument" in Bolzano, a huge and unsightly triumphal arch that still bears the fasces, but that the permanent guard mounted there and the solidity of the construction discouraged them. Pity.)

None of this seemed too serious, but the Italian authorities arrested an official of the (Austrian) Tyrol provincial government, Frau Dr. Stadlmeyer, whose vaguely incriminating correspondence with a Sarntal SVP leader implicated in the bombings had been intercepted. In Innsbruck the well-known north Tyrol irredentist agitator Wolfgang Pfaundler, close personal friend of Fritz Molden, Alois Oberhammer, and Friedl Volgger (vice-chairman of the SVP and then responsible editor of the Bolzano daily Dolomiten), was caught with an apartment full of weapons and explosives, which he lamely explained were his hobby; the Austrian police made no arrest, but did start a criminal investigation which has never come to an end and looks increasingly like an effort to forget the whole thing.

At the same time, the Austrian Government lodged an official protest over the arrest of Mrs. Stadlmeyer. Tension reached a level similar to that of the spring of 1959, when SVP representatives walked out of the Regional government in Trento and went into opposition in Rome over a public housing bill, and the Italian police closed the border to Oberhammer and his associates from Innsbruck. The only hopeful sign was the dropping of Franz Gschnitzer, best-known of the Innsbruck irredentists and hitherto Assistant Foreign Minister for South Tyrol affairs, from the Austrian Government when it was reshuffled after Chancellor Julius Raab's retirement.

Meanwhile, the Italian and Austrian governments, after months of delay, had begun the bi-lateral talks on the basis of the Gruber-de Gasperi Accord recommended by unanimous vote of the United Nations General Assembly last autumn. A first tentative meeting in Milan was inconclusive, but when Foreign Ministers Segni and Kreisky met for a second time on the 24th and 25th of May in Klagenfurt, real progress was reported. After an initial, formal exchange of polemics, the two men retired to an inner room, leaving their more nationalist-minded advisers (representatives of Innsbruck, in Kreisky's case) to cool their heels elsewhere. It was agreed that technical commissions should be ordered to neutral Zürich in advance of the third foreign ministers' meeting there in June, to prepare specific proposals. The Klagenfurt meeting ended on an optimistic note, and on the 10th of June Mrs. Stadlmeyer was released from jail by the Italians.

That was the weekend of the 47 attacks on power stations, high tension lines and rail lines in the Alto Adige. Italian police estimated that 200 men must have been involved. There could be no further doubt that a well-financed organization of extremists with at least some local support was determined to sabotage any Italo-Austrian agreement based on minor Italian concessions made within the framework of the existing Regional Autonomy Statute.

The first official Italian reaction was to reach for the police. Reinforcements of Carabinieri and soldiers were rushed north, and to house the newcomers German South Tyrolean-owned hotels were requisitioned on 12-hour notice - with some evidence that the known political sympathies of hotel-owners provided the basis for selection. The inhabitants of Bolzano Province were ordered to deliver up all arms and ammunition, whether they had permits or not, the first of a series of ineffective police measures which only served to annoy the local peasantry and to imply that they were all at least passively in league with the terrorists. After another series of explosions on 16 June, a dusk-to-dawn curfew was imposed in the vicinity of power plants and lines, reservoirs, railroads, factories and similar installations, enforced by patrols of armed soldiers or police, with orders to shoot. Some such surveillance was undoubtedly necessary under the circumstances, but the strictness of the rules and the use of inexperienced army conscripts in a land of primitive mountain farmers was asking for trouble. The almost-inevitable followed within forty-eight hours: two Tyrolean youths (one in the Sarntal and the other in the upper Vinschgau, 60 miles away), both quite innocent and on their way home by their normal routes, were shot and killed by nervous soldiers. Meanwhile, as arrests began (usually ending in release after a week, when Italian law requires that a prisoner must be formally charged or set free), stories began to appear in the German-language press of the

province concerning alleged police brutality in the course of examinations. (My own enquiries since arriving in Bolzano suggest that these reports were exaggerated, but basically correct; however, I have not actually talked to any detainee who was "tortured".)

Other more or less inane government measures included an order that the provincial Tyrolean red-white flag could no longer be flown unless accompanied by the Italian national flag in a position of greater honor. And in Rome, the Chamber of Deputies discussed a right-wing proposal for a law to withdraw Italian citizenship from South Tyrolean ex-Optanten (see DR-14) who might be accused of anti-national activities - a law very similar to Fascist legislation of 1924-5, and a splendid propaganda weapon with which the German extremist party could play upon the anxieties of the 85% of South Tyrolers who had been Optanten.

The initial reactions of the Italian, the South Tyrolean and the Austrian Tyrolean press were also illuminating. Even the great liberal newspapers of Italy, La Stampa of Turin and Corriere della Sera of Milan, found the explanation disturbingly simple: the "Bolzano racists" and "South Tyrol Nazi Terrorists" (favorite phrases of La Stampa headline writers in June and July) were responsible. A well-known Italian liberal of the calibre of Luigi Salvatorelli produced an editorial for La Stampa applauding Government repressive measures and urging the breaking off of negotiations with Austria in the vocabulary of unashamedly nationalist rhetoric. Thus encouraged (or was it the other way around?) an embittered Segni, once considered a friend of the Tyrolean, was rude to Austrian diplomats and foreign journalists at the Zurich foreign ministers' meeting on 24 June, which collapsed the day it began. Was this not precisely what the terrorists had desired?

The Austrian, and especially the Innsbruck, conservative and liberal press knew equally well where it stood: terrorism is regrettable and in principle condemned, but the Italians are really responsible, since sixteen years of "denationalization in the name of democracy" have driven the South Tyrolers to desperation. One Innsbruck paper, the Tiroler Nachrichten, close to Oberhammer and later to show an interesting tendency to pre-announce new terrorist attacks, hardly bothered to denounce terrorism in principle. Under such pressure, Kreisky adopted a hard line: full autonomy or nothing, and Austria would appeal to the United Nations General Assembly again this autumn. Only in July, as it became increasingly evident that the terrorist organization was being directed from Austrian soil, did the Austrian Foreign Minister's own Socialist Party press begin to question the wisdom of Austrian policy and to open a major attack on Oberhammer.

In the South Tyrol itself the German-language press - the daily Dolomiten and the weekly Volksbote, official organ of the SVP - developed schizophrenia, after an initial period of shock. Terrorism was strongly condemned and appeals for negotiation and peaceful settlement issued; but on alternate days Italian policy was sharply attacked, police efforts treated with sarcasm (which they sometimes surely deserved), and the arrested South Tyrolers individually and collectively defended. The Berlin and Biserte crises were allowed to crowd local terrorist attacks onto inside pages, while in the rest of Italy they remained front page news. (An example: when Italian soldiers on patrol near Bolzano were stoned from ambush, the Dolomiten suggested on page seven that they were really only the victims of ripe chestnuts falling from nearby trees.)

About the beginning of August everyone started having second thoughts. Police investigations here had bagged only one important South Tyrolean - Party Secretary Hans Stanek - although another, Georg Klotz, commander-in-chief of the para-military Schützen, had fled to Austria to avoid capture. Otherwise, all threads seemed to lead across the Brenner to Innsbruck. Impressed by sharp condemnation of Austrian police inactivity by influential foreign journals (including especially the highly respected Neue Zürcher Zeitung) and by Austrian Socialist Party attacks on Oberhammer, intensified after the arrest of his friend Stanek, part of the Tyrolean section of the Austrian People's Party rebelled against their provincial party boss, and Oberhammer resigned. Chancellor Gorbach was reportedly relieved at this development, and the Federal Government in Vienna showed signs of regretting its haste in appealing to the United Nations. On 27 August the Austrian police arrested Norbert Burger, an instructor in political science at the University of Innsbruck, on charges connected with the Austrian laws on traffic in explosives; significantly, the arrest was made while Burger was on holiday in Styria, where it could be carried out by Styrian rather than Tyrolean police.

In Rome, Interior Minister Scelba seems to have stood for a more constructive approach to the problem from the beginning, and his views (assuming they were his) now began to prevail. He had met with the South Tyrol representatives to Parliament on the Monday after the terrorist first wave, had made a statement warning against the assumption that the German-speaking South Tyrolers as a group were supporters of terrorism, and promised an investigation of allegations of police brutality, and as early as 18 June, visiting Bolzano for talks with SVP leaders, had suggested direct negotiations between Rome and the representatives of the South Tyrolers to resolve all outstanding problems. On 14 August the formation of a Parliamentary Special Commission under Scelba's sponsorship, to study the situation and recommend changes in the Autonomy Statute, was announced along with an SVP agreement to participate. By 1 September the 19 members of the Commission had been named, including the five

South Tyrol representatives in Parliament (Senators Tinzi and Sand and Representatives Ebner, Mitterdorfer and Riz), Provincial Governor Magnago, and Bolzano Chamber of Commerce President Walter von Walther.

Among the "radicals" of the SVP there were signs of dismay. Magnago, although he had agreed to be a member, made statements designed to depreciate the value of the Commission, and an editorial in the Volksbote written by Party Vice-Chairman Friedl Volgger was openly critical of its composition and skeptical of its prospects. The Bolzano Italian-language newspaper Alto Adige reported that threatening letters had been received by the five SVP parliamentarians, warning them: "He who negotiates with Rome betrays South Tyrol! Our arm is long and will reach these traitors. This is our last warning and, alas, this time it must be directed to South Tyrolers. The participation by South Tyrolers in the Wops' Commission forces us to strike again, and this time harder. (signed) The South Tyrol Freedom Fighters."

Three days after the Commission was first announced, a new outburst of attacks on high tension towers had taken place in the Tauferertal, between Bruneck and the nearby Austrian border. A week after the composition of the Commission was announced, on 9 September, the terrorist "third wave" was launched against railroad stations in six Italian cities, from Rovereto to Rome.


In this third wave, however, there were several important differences. It was most incompetently executed. In Rome the suitcase containing the Molotov cocktails intended for the left-luggage room of the Stazione Termini blew up in the lap of the youth who was to deposit it, while he was riding in a bus, critically wounding him and injuring several fellow-passengers. In Trento, one of four similar suitcases started detonating in the terrorists' car some 300 yards away from the station; the car went out of control and three of the four frightened occupants were arrested on the spot. Other arrests followed - the fourth member of the Trento group the same night in Bolzano, other members of the Rome group near La Spezia - until eight were in custody by the 16th of September. All, without exception, were University students, ages 24 to 29, from north of the border, either German or Austrian citizens, and members of rightwing youth organizations there. In their amazingly free confessions they have described their recruitment and training and the good-luck banquet they were given in Innsbruck before traveling south to their various targets. Rome has protested officially to Vienna, and the Bonn government has volunteered its apologies.

On 13 September, while these arrests were underway, the Parliamentary Special Commission, with its eight representatives of the German-speaking community, held its first meeting in Rome.

Minister Scelba welcomed the members with the most sensible speech on the Alto Adige problem that has been heard from an Italian politician in many years; Senator Karl Tinzi, dean of the Tyrolese parliamentarians (he was one of the first four representatives of South Tyrol in the Roman Chamber after annexation in 1920), answered for his people in equally moderate and hopeful terms. In Bolzano the Dolomiten amazed its critics by taking an unequivocal stand in favor of cooperation.

With the events of the 9th and 13th of September, the South Tyrol crisis of 1961 had clearly entered a new phase.

Yours sincerely,



Dennison Rusinow

Received New York October 2, 1961