

# The South Tyrol Question, 1866–2010

From National Rage to Regional State

Georg Grote



PETER LANG

South Tyrol is a small, mountainous area located in the central Alps. Despite its modest geographical size, it has come to represent a success story in the protection of ethnic minorities in Europe. When Austrian South Tyrol was given to Italy in 1919, about 200,000 German and Ladin speakers became Italian citizens overnight. Despite Italy's attempts to Italianize the South Tyroleans, especially during the Fascist era from 1922 to 1943, they sought to maintain their traditions and language, culminating in violence in the 1960s. In 1972 South Tyrol finally gained geographical and cultural autonomy from Italy, leading to the 'regional state' of 2010.

This book, drawing on the latest research in Italian and German, provides a fresh analysis of this dynamic and turbulent period of South Tyrolean and European history. The author provides new insights into the political and cultural evolution of the understanding of the region and the definition of its role within the European framework. In a broader sense, the study also analyses the shift in paradigms from historical nationalism to modern regionalism against the backdrop of European, global, national and local historical developments as well as the shaping of the distinct identities of its multilingual and multi-ethnic population.

**Georg Grote** was born in the Lower Rhine Valley in northwest Germany. He has lived in Ireland since 1993 and lectures in Western European history at University College Dublin.



## The South Tyrol Question, 1866–2010

# Cultural Identity Studies

---

Volume 10

Edited by  
Helen Chambers



PETER LANG

Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Wien



Georg Grote

# **The South Tyrol Question, 1866–2010**

From National Rage to Regional State



PETER LANG

Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Wien

Bibliographic information published by Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.  
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data:

Grote, Georg, 1966-

The South Tyrol question, 1866-2010 : from national rage to regional state / Georg Grote.

p. cm. -- (Cultural identity studies ; 10)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-3-03911-336-1 (alk. paper)

1. Trentino-Alto Adige (Italy)--Politics and government. 2.

Trentino-Alto Adige (Italy)--Social conditions. 3.

Austrians--Italy--Trentino-Alto Adige--Politics and government. 4.

Austrians--Italy--Trentino-Alto Adige--Social conditions. 5.

Nationalism--Italy--Trentino-Alto Adige--History. 6. Group

identity--Italy--Trentino-Alto Adige--History. 7. Collective

memory--Italy--Trentino-Alto Adige--History. 8. Minorities--Civil

rights--Europe--Case studies. 9. Nationalism--Europe--Case studies. 10.

Regionalism--Political aspects--Europe--Case studies. I. Title.

DG975.T792G773 2012

945'.3809--dc23

2012017519

ISSN 1661-3252

ISBN 978-3-03911-336-1 (print)

ISBN 978-3-0353-0303-2 (eBook)

© Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, Bern 2012

Hochfeldstrasse 32, CH-3012 Bern, Switzerland

[info@peterlang.com](mailto:info@peterlang.com), [www.peterlang.com](http://www.peterlang.com), [www.peterlang.net](http://www.peterlang.net)

All rights reserved.

All parts of this publication are protected by copyright.

Any utilisation outside the strict limits of the copyright law, without the permission of the publisher, is forbidden and liable to prosecution.

This applies in particular to reproductions, translations, microfilming, and storage and processing in electronic retrieval systems.

Printed in Germany

# Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
CHAPTER 1	
Approaches to South Tyrol	I
CHAPTER 2	
Tyrolean Nationalisms before 1918	7
CHAPTER 3	
The Annexation of South Tyrol, 1919–1922	19
CHAPTER 4	
Italianization under Mussolini, 1923–1932	35
CHAPTER 5	
Under the Shadow of the Third Reich, 1933–1938	53
CHAPTER 6	
The Option and German Rule in South Tyrol, 1939–1945	65
CHAPTER 7	
The World and the South Tyrol Issue, 1945–1946	73
CHAPTER 8	
Disquiet and Unrest, 1947–1960	85

CHAPTER 9

Explosions and Settlements, 1961–1972 99

CHAPTER 10

Under Autonomy Rule: South Tyrol since 1972 113

CHAPTER 11

The Regionalist Drive since 1989 121

CHAPTER 12

Writing the Past and Establishing a South Tyrolean  
Collective Memory 143

CHAPTER 13

Commemoration and Collective Memory 161

Bibliography 173

Index 183

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Helen Chambers and Nora Butler for their help in editing the preliminary draft of this book, and Laurel Plapp and the entire team at Peter Lang for their prolonged support.

I am also indebted to the National University of Ireland for a Publication Assistance Grant and to my colleagues in the School of Languages and Literatures at University College Dublin (UCD). Most particularly, I am grateful to University College Dublin for its continued investment in the intellectual development of its staff through research leaves. This book, and several others, sprang directly from a leave of absence for research which the College of Arts and Celtic Studies granted me during the academic year in 2007/08.

Another initiative resulting from this year was the unforgettable South Tyrol conference in the Humanities Institute of Ireland in October 2010. This conference in Dublin reminded me of the true value of academic exchange, and the stimulating session and wonderful publication that resulted from this experience has enriched my work and, I hope, this book. Thanks in this context to Beate Sibylle Pfeil, Thomas Ohnewein, Hans Heiss, Johann Holzner, Rut Bernardi, Günther Pallaver, Marie Mawe, Paolo Valente, Helmut Stampfer, Martin Santner, Verena Wisthaler, Paul Videsott, Andreas Oberprantacher and Inge Bacher who turned the conference into such a success. Thanks to Barbara Siller without whose help neither the conference nor the publication would have turned out as successfully as they did. I want to thank particularly Siegfried Baur, Lucio Giudiceandrea and Hans Karl Peterlini for their continuous engagement with my thoughts and ideas.

This leads me in my gratitude to all those people I met in South Tyrol during that period whose generosity and wisdom helped shape much of my work since then and whose support made life in the central Alps an unforgettable experience for me and my family. To name but a few:

Hanns and Johanna Egger, Hermine and Markus Baumgartner, Werner and Monika Rabensteiner, Sissy Pfeifer and Willy Zorzi, Marianne and Walter Wallnöfer, Gerda Braun and Peter Bertagnolli, Gerlinde Mayer, Anna and Andreas Kritzinger, Familie Seberich, Günther Rautz, Hannes Obermair, Paul Rösch, Stefan Amort, Davide Zaffi, Hatto Schmidt and Hubert Kompatscher.

There were so many people along the way who have inspired me, and I would like to mention in particular Walter Hagg as Austrian Ambassador to Ireland, who has shown constant support to me and to my students at UCD. He came repeatedly to the seminars on South Tyrolean history to talk to my students, which they always found incredibly enriching. He has offered some profound insights into the role of Austria in the history of the German-speaking minority in Italy and, most importantly, has always been wonderful company. Christoph Pan, who has of course been so important in the history of South Tyrol in shaping its identity as a province and its role in Europe through the Südtiroler Volksgruppen Institut and the representation of the South Tyrolean autonomy between Brussels and Budapest, Strasbourg and Bukarest, has been unfailingly generous with his time, support and expertise.

Finally, the greatest support came, as usual, from my wife Lindsey Earner-Byrne. Her thoroughness and patience were invaluable in the process of finalizing the manuscript. A big 'thank you' to Hannah and Ellen for giving me the time to write this book.

Despite all this support I need to state that any errors in the book are of my own making.

## Approaches to South Tyrol

Anyone interested in the history of twentieth-century Europe can learn a good deal about the wider complexities of that century by focusing on a relatively small geographical area situated in the centre of Europe: South Tyrol. This small region situated between the main alpine ridge at the Brenner Pass and Lake Garda, provides the historian with a microcosm of the political, economic and social issues that dominated the history of twentieth-century Europe. The history of South Tyrol contains all the central issues that characterized twentieth-century European history: war, expulsion, suppression, colonialism, imperialism, nationalism, fascism, resistance, division, terrorism, dictatorship, the effects of the bipolar relationship between the USSR and the USA, technical progress, the Cold War, Europeanization and globalization, environmental protection and neo-liberalism. Crucially, South Tyrol also offers a vivid case study of the cultural implications of the interaction of these complex issues throughout the twentieth century.

In 1920, as part of the First World War settlement, the small area of South Tyrol was annexed (with the consent of the Western allies) by the Italian state. In the decades that followed, this small German-speaking area was subjected to an official programme of Italianization, which involved the attempted cultural deconstruction of the Austro-German identity of the region. Despite this prolonged process of denationalization the Germanic culture of the area was never successfully undermined and the people of the region never lost their appetite for self-determination, which brought the area to the brink of civil war in the early 1960s. The South Tyrol question posed serious challenges to the stability of Western Europe against the backdrop of the Iron Curtain and the division of Europe. The fact that the explosive potential inherent in the South Tyrolean situation was defused



and ultimately channelled into a process of regionalization has led many commentators to hail it as the success story in minority protection of the European Union. Since its birth in the late 1940s, the European project has been instrumental in preventing warfare and providing diplomatic solutions within Western Europe. South Tyrol posed the ultimate and, in many respects, symbolic challenge to that spirit of diplomatic endeavour.

The advent of a regionalist approach in European politics in the 1950s and the institutionalization of regional legislative developments through the Madrid Convention in 1980 defused a number of explosive regional situations in Europe. The small region of South Tyrol is today one of the major European regional players and has managed to co-found the 'Europaregion Tirol-Südtirol/Alto Adige-Trentino', thus creating a potentially powerful economic and political institution straddling the sovereignty of two well-established states, Austria and Italy, and establishing itself in the midst of them. This development was gradual, and it emerged from the South Tyrolean nationalist drive for self-determination. This book analyses in detail how the shift in paradigms from historical nationalism to modern regionalism occurred against the backdrop of European, global and local historical developments.

South Tyrol is a small geographical area, barely 120km from north to south and little more from east to west. Most holiday makers who travel through it on their way from Northern Europe to the sunny South will notice that it takes at least an hour and a half in the car after passing the border between Austria and Italy on the Brenner Pass, before the road signs become fully Italian and the German language disappears completely. Near Salurn/Salorno<sup>1</sup> the architecture of the villages glimpsed from the motorway changes and becomes 'very Italian'. At that stage one has left South Tyrol and entered the Provincia di Trento. Anyone with a knowledge of German and Italian will also have noticed that in South Tyrol the bilingual road signs along the A22, the Brenner/Brennero Motorway, bear names

1 All place names in South Tyrol appear in their German and Italian forms, including Trient/Trento, while place names in the Italian heartland appear in their English form.

that often appear unrelated. There may be little difference between Bozen and Bolzano, the name of South Tyrol's capital, but Gossensass and Colle Isarco or Neumarkt and Egna hardly seem like two versions of the same town. Even the Italian name for the entire region, Alto Adige, is not a literal translation of South Tyrol, which would in fact be *Tirolo del Sud*.

In many respects the word pair Alto Adige/South Tyrol hints at the entire complexity of this part of the world. Where there is a South Tyrol, there should be a North Tyrol, otherwise there would be no need to add the prefix South to distinguish one part of the landscape from another. North Tyrol is part of another independent state, Austria, which is located beyond the Brenner border. South Tyrol therefore highlights a connection to an area outside the Italian state. Those who use South Tyrol to describe the area in question, and this is the vast majority of the 320,000 German-speaking South Tyroleans, keep alive the memory of the division of Tyrol in 1918 and a loyalty to a past political unity with Austria.

Alternatively, the fact that the 160,000 Italians in South Tyrol refer to the region as Alto Adige, the high Etsch/Adige region, implies that there must be a lower Etsch/Adige region. As the Etsch/Adige river flows from the Swiss-Austro-Italian border down through the Vinschgau/Val Venosta, unites with the river Eisack/Isarco and then flows to central Italy, this lower Etsch/Adige region is in Italy where the river flows into the Adriatic Sea. The Italian name for the region, therefore, emphasizes the region's geographical connection to the entire Italian landscape: it is literally drawing the region into the Italian homeland. Thus the two names for the region are not merely German and Italian versions of each other, they are, in fact, linguistic attempts to appropriate the area based on competing political and cultural understandings of the region. An exploration of the historical underpinnings of this linguistically expressed tension will form the basis of this study.

The border between Austria and Italy was established in the aftermath of World War I and thus follows the 'natural boundary theory' as propagated by Italian nationalists. This theory was based on the idea that the 'true border' of a nation state should be decided by nature rather than ethnicity. However, this natural boundary theory also conveniently answered some pressing military, strategic, political and economic needs of the Italian state.

From a military strategic point of view, the drawing of the border along the Brenner Pass/Passo di Brennero and the Reschen Pass/Passo di Resia, which are two of the lower passes along the main alpine ridge, answered late nineteenth-century Italian needs to secure the Southern Alps and the Po Valley from northern attacks. A defense line 120km further south, at a much more distinct geographical point such as the gorge of Salurn/Salorno would have been much cheaper, more efficient and easier to instal, but the desire to own 'our half' of the main alpine ridge was dominant in the kingdom of Italy towards the end of the nineteenth century.

The Brenner Pass has for centuries marked the point of busiest trade in the Alps between Northern and Southern Europe. Other passes in the central Alps, such as the Reschen Pass/Passo di Resia, the Staller Sattel/Passo di Stalle and the Timmelsjoch/Passo Rombo, never had comparable importance in international trade. To control the Brenner Pass/Passo di Brennero politically has thus always meant more than simply to participate in the flow of goods: it meant a certain degree of control over imports and exports and an enormous amount of political power. Massive fortresses dotting the landscape from Innsbruck down as far as Sterzing/Vipiteno testify to the attempt to control the flow of goods, travelling armies and intellectual exchange. The Italians, when espousing the natural border theory, were also driven by a pressing need to control this essential gateway of European trade.

South Tyrol boasts another feature which became significant in the late nineteenth century: water. In a period that was above all else influenced by the growing impact of the industrial revolution, water represented a powerful natural resource. The country's biggest rivers, Etsch/Adige and Eisack/Isarco, lend themselves to various uses, for example, the production of electricity. As the main alpine ridge divides south from north-flowing rivers, its possession was another asset for Italy. Christoph Gufler has argued that the prospect of developing hydroelectricity was one of the main reasons for the forced amalgamation with Italy in 1920.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the

2 Christoph Gufler, 'Stauseen und Kraftwerke im Ultental', *Südtirol in Wort und Bild*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (2006), 24–26.

nineteenth century, Italy was in the process of modernization and industrialization, South Tyrol's abundance of water along with its mountainous relief structure offered huge potential for further development. In fact, as soon as Italy owned South Tyrol it began to build hydroelectric power plants alongside an intensification of its efforts in the fascist campaign to industrialize Bozen/Bolzano and upper Italy.

Hydroelectric power was only one factor among others and can only be understood in the context of nationalist philosophies and the defense of natural resources. In the contemporary nationalist context it was important to own the sources of the rivers if one wanted to use their lower parts to produce electricity in order to gain and defend a certain level of economic autarky. It was felt that no northerly neighbour could pressurize Italy if it owned the entire river, from source to mouth. The era of nationalism was a period highly charged with such emotional claims. Within the course of annexing South Tyrol it became an issue of the utmost significance to use the electricity not only in South Tyrol itself, but to transport it further South to the industrial centres in Turin and Milan. It is highly unlikely that Northern Italy would have become as significant an industrial area in the twentieth century without the inexhaustible resources of electricity produced in South Tyrol. Furthermore, the fascist policy of industrializing South Tyrol in the 1920s and 1930s was motivated purely by the desire to bind the largely agrarian South Tyrol more closely to Italy. This policy of industrialization dovetailed with another major plank of the fascist policy in South Tyrol: the desire to relocate large numbers of Italian workers to the newly created industrial zone near Bozen/Bolzano, hence outnumbering the native German-speaking population.

The early period of Italian rule over German-speaking South Tyrol sets the tone for much of the twentieth century: there were various attempts to Italianize the population through force and/or industrial plantations and the ensuing move of Italian workers. The German-speaking South Tyroleans were victims of Italian policies and remained victims for a long time, which explains why much of the literature on the South Tyrol issue during the

twentieth century pays tribute to the 'victim discourse' of South Tyrol,<sup>3</sup> and which, despite the fundamentally changed role of South Tyrol in the early twenty-first century, still tends to characterize the analyses in recent publications.<sup>4</sup> Hence, there is a need to include more recent developments in minority protection and autonomy issues into a history of South Tyrol in the twentieth century: this monograph presents a new approach to the local history of South Tyrol and its interactions with European and world history. It also focuses strongly on the more recent past in South Tyrol (since the 1980s), a time when South Tyrol has left its victim status behind and has emerged as an economic and political force of regional significance in the Alps region and in the European concert of regions.

3 See for example: Dennison I. Rusinow, *Italy's Austrian Heritage, 1919–1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), and Antony E. Alcock, *The History of the South Tyrol Question* (London: Michael Joseph, 1970).

4 See Rolf Steininger, *South Tyrol: A Minority Conflict of the Twentieth Century* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003).

## Tyrolean Nationalisms before 1918

The roots of many conflicts in Europe in the twentieth century can be traced back to the period preceding World War I. The origins of the South Tyrol Question, which dominated politics and society in the southern Alpine region for much of the twentieth century, are no exception dating back to the rampant nationalism of the pre-1914 period. This chapter establishes the links between European nationalist ideas and their effects on the pre-World War I political landscape in today's South Tyrol and Trentino.

### The era of expansive nationalism in Italy

Italy united in 1861, however, nation building was not quite finished at that stage. Venice and Rome only became Italian in 1866 and 1870 as a result of negotiations with Prussia. Bismarck needed alliances with Italy to focus on his war with the Austro-Hungarian Empire and with France and promised Venice and Rome to Italy as a reward for such an alliance. This was a precedent for the acquisition of South Tyrol after World War I. In secret talks with the Western Allies in 1915 Italy was offered this area in return for the abandonment of the existing Three Emperor's Agreement between Italy, Austria and Germany, a move that would significantly weaken the strategic position of the axis powers Germany and Austria.

Italy's claim on South Tyrol as articulated in the secret negotiations in London in 1915 was in stark contrast to the principles of Risorgimento nationalism which had determined the Italian unification process in the 1860s. The underlying idea was that every nation should possess its own

house, that is, the state it was living in. According to this central European understanding nations were distinguished from each other by the use of different languages. Thus nationalists in Italy in the 1860s accepted that Italy's northern border lay in Salurn/Salorno, the linguistic divide between the German and Italian-speaking worlds.<sup>1</sup> This view changed, however, in the immediate pre-World War I period when a more imperialistic philosophy gained ground in Italian political circles, which suggested that even non-Italian-speaking areas could and should become part of the Italian state. As late as 1914, the Italian foreign minister Sidney Sonnino restricted Italian interests in the north to the Trentino. In fact, in 1915 prime minister Antonio Salandra still declared South Tyrol to be a relatively undesirable object as the integration of some 200,000 Germans in order to liberate a few hundred Italians would lead to enormous problems if it ever came to defending the state's northern border.<sup>2</sup>

It is likely that Sonnino's view was influenced by the fear of pan-Slavism against which Austria might still constitute some kind of protection, while in 1914 the then prime minister Giovanni Giolitti expressed the view that the existence of the ailing dual monarchy protected Italy against the German Reich's possible expansionist ideas further south.<sup>3</sup> At the same time the once powerful Austria still tried to hold on to the idea of a multinational Empire, but this ideal became more and more unrealistic with the growth of rampant nationalism especially in the Balkans and along Austria's fringes. The principle of nationhood had become the driving force behind the organization of collective identities in the new twentieth century, but Austria's Emperor Franz Joseph was too slow to recognize this new reality.

Finally, on 1 April 1915 Austria reflected the changing realities of the war situation and offered Italy the option of withdrawing from Trentino. Trentino was to be given to Italy after the end of the war if Italy continued to support the axis powers. At this stage the Italian prime minister Salandra

1 Hanns Haas, 'Südtirol 1919', in Anton Pelinka and Andreas Maislinger, ed., *Handbuch zur neueren Geschichte Tirols* (Innsbruck: Wagner, 1993), 95–130, 97.

2 Claus Gatterer, *Im Kampf gegen Rom: Bürger, Minderheiten und Autonomien in Italien* (Vienna, Frankfurt a. M. and Zürich: Europa-Verlag, 1968), 236.

3 Gatterer, *Kampf gegen Rom*, 239.



and foreign minister Sonnino were well aware that the Entente offered much more than the crumbling dual monarchy.<sup>4</sup> The Italian ambassador had been involved in secret talks with the Western Allies and began to realize that it might be both feasible and desirable to expand the Italian nation state beyond the purely Italian-speaking areas, might well be the desirable ones. When in November 1917 the new Soviet government released details of all the secret agreements the previous Tsarist government had signed up to – among them the secret London Treaty of 1915 – the world learned that South Tyrol was one of the top war goals of the Italian government and that the new Italian imperialism demanded the Brenner Pass/Passo Brennero as its Northern border.<sup>5</sup>

Moderate voices such as the historian Gaetano Salvemini's, who warned against a German minority problem, were swept aside by a public campaign citing democracy, the sovereignty of the Italian people and the solidarity of Italy with its brothers and sisters in the Trentino and beyond. This imperialist claim employed the rhetoric and logic of Risorgimento nationalism as it claimed that all the way up to the Brenner Pass/Passo Brennero the inhabitants of the land were Italian. Giuseppe Mazzini, the father of emancipatory nationalism, had paved the way for this kind of imperialist view in 1866 by claiming that only some 20 per cent of the Tyrolean people who lived south of the Brenner Pass/Passo Brennero were of German origin and that they were thus easy to italianize.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, in his *Unita Italiana* on 25 August 1866, he had declared that the Trentino, which belonged to Italy, stretched as far as Bruneck/Brunico and the main alpine ridge including all the rivers that flowed into the Etsch/Adige, Adda, Po and the Gulf of Venice.<sup>7</sup> Thus Mazzini had, in effect, developed the blueprint for the imperialist policies of the later

4 Umberto Corsini and Rudolf Lill, *Südtirol 1918–1946* (Bozen: Autonome Provinz Bozen, 1988), 40.

5 Gatterer, *Kampf gegen Rom*, 236.

6 Rudolf Lill, *Südtirol in der Zeit des Nationalismus* (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag Konstanz, 2002), 26.

7 Oswald Gschliesser, 'Der italienische Nationalismus', in Franz Huter, ed., *Südtirol: Eine Frage des europäischen Gewissens* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1965), 167.

prime minister Francesco Crispi (1887–1891, 1893–1896) by providing the ideological rationale for extending the geographical boundaries of the Italian nation state.<sup>8</sup> Crispi had not supported the *Irredenta* in Northern Italy as his imperialist ambitions in Africa required German and Austrian approval, but he nevertheless contributed hugely to a change in climate in Italian politics in relation to its northern border, a change that benefited the right wing political parties in Rome in particular.

In an era which claimed that the nation was the highest political ideal and nationalism became an accepted motivating force in European societies, political strategy and moderation gradually disappeared. In the nationalistically zealous period of the immediate pre-World War I era nationalism, imperialism and irredentism in northern Italy and southern Austria blended into a kind of *mélange* which was to have huge repercussions for Europe and South Tyrol, because the drawing of borders in 1919 mirrored both Mazzini's claims of 1866 and Crispi's dreams of Italy as a great power.

## Nationalisms in Trentino before 1918

Neither the Trentino nor South Tyrol was apolitical in this nationalist era. The political landscape in the Trentino was very complicated as German and Italian loyalties were inextricably linked. It took the events of the war to polarize the population. At the beginning of the war there was a pro-Austrian mood, even in the city of Trient/Trento. This loyalty was combined with anti-Serbian and anti-Russian sentiments. Even Vittorio Garibaldi, one of the nationalist representatives of Trentino, reportedly said that Italy was a whore if it did not fight on the side of Austria and Germany. The paper *Il Trentino* refuted reports from pro-Italian papers claiming that the Welschtiroler, the Trentino people, were in favour of neutrality.<sup>9</sup>

8 Corsini / Lill, *Südtirol 1918–1946*, 31.

9 Martha Stocker, 'Austriacanti und Irredentisten', Author's Lecture Notes, 5.