

# Tourism and Border Identity in Italian South Tyrol (1919-1943)

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## ABSTRACT

After the annexation of the Alto Adige area to the Kingdom of Italy, a series of economic and touristic projects and agreements between the neighbouring zones of North Tyrol and Alto Adige were signed. The goal of such initiatives within the cross-border zone ended up becoming an opportunity for social renewal for both Italy and Austria. The work herein focuses on the attempts carried out by both nations in their cross-border areas to promote economic exchanges, especially the flow of tourism, in order to increase the well-being of the population involved and social cohesion and cooperation, while pacifying the area.

## Introduction

The cross-border area between Italy and Austria, featuring high mountains in the heartland of Europe, has always been a strategic entryway towards Italy, but also a cornerstone for the political, commercial and even touristic primacy of both nations.<sup>1</sup> Border control, as well as checking the flow of “passers-by” was contested, for a long time, between Italy, Austria and Germany.<sup>2</sup> From September 1919 onwards, following the Saint-Germain en Laye Treaty,<sup>3</sup> the Southern areas of the historic Tyrol Region, called Alto

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<sup>1</sup> Steinacher (2006), pp. 821-834.

<sup>2</sup> Toscano (1967); Morosini (2018), pp. 147-164.

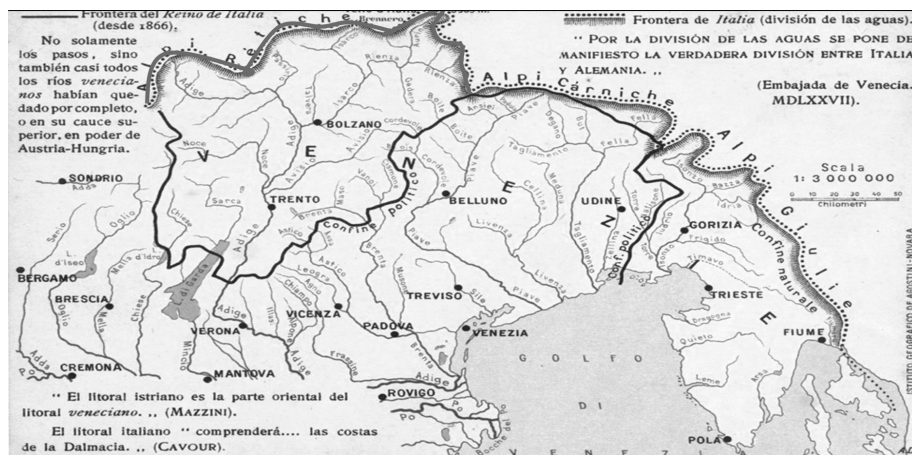
<sup>3</sup> Ministero (1931).

Adige by the Italians, was seized from the Austrians and annexed to the Italian territory of Trentino; at the same time, the Brenner ridge became the border between the two zones.<sup>4</sup>

From then on, the border between the two areas and the issues connected with the linguistic minorities and the diversity in religious cults and cultural traditions were taken into particular account by the Italian government. Those were very complex issues, since the micro areas (be they German or Ladin) which were a part of both South Tyrol and Alto Adige kept, and somewhat protected, their specific features.<sup>5</sup> Such an area, where non-Italian ethnic groups lived, experienced the annexation as a “moment of true passion.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, it should be noted that the German ethnolinguistic majority, from then on, turned into a minority in the area, and attempted to claim its own right and identity.<sup>7</sup>

The first provisions by the Italian government which were focused on reorganising the border areas, concerned, first and fore-

**FIGURE 1**  
The boundaries of Italy in 1919



Source: <https://www.limesonline.com/tag/austria>.

<sup>4</sup> Mussolini (1911), pp. 198-200; Alcock (1970); Framke (1987).

<sup>5</sup> Benvenuto (2007).

<sup>6</sup> Leonardi (2009a), p. 14; Dotter-Wedrag (2018).

<sup>7</sup> Blanco (2008), Paasi (2013), pp. 1206-1219.

most, the administrative structure of the occupied area. The Italian political and military authorities attempted to plan a quick shift from the wartime to the peacetime legislation in a rational way.<sup>8</sup> Within the areas under the new occupation, the local administrations kept carrying out, albeit in a provisional capacity, their activities following the old Austrian rules.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the Central Office for the New Provinces was established<sup>10</sup> (through the Royal Law Decree issued on July 4, 1919, no. 1081, amended into the Royal Law Decree issued on July 22, 1920, no. 1233), which acquired the functions of the General Secretariat for Civilian Affairs, itself under the supreme command.<sup>11</sup>

During the transition phase, the new Office, led by the irredentist Francesco Salata, was tasked with fostering and supporting the relations between the local institutions and the central government, confirming to the former Austrian municipalities, the autonomy they already enjoyed when they were under the Habsburg.<sup>12</sup>

The Central Office for the New Provinces was short-lived. Following the rise of the Fascist regime, it was suppressed as it was considered too lenient in the face of the requests by the minorities. The Royal Law Decrees no.1353 issued, on October 17, 1922, “concerning the political and administrative settling of the new provinces,” detailed, in its art. 4, that “the affairs of the Central Administration for the new Provinces [were] under the aegis of the Ministries being competent *ratione materiae*.” The main goal of the government was to administrate the annexed areas exactly like the rest of Italy, removing any and all particularisms.

During those same years, beyond the Italian boundary, Austria, which had been significantly worn out by its military defeat, was affected by a moment of significant instability, featuring a heavy eco-

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<sup>8</sup> Barbagallo (1984), p. 312.

<sup>9</sup> Bigaran (2009), p. 104.

<sup>10</sup> Presidency of the Italian Council of Ministers (1922).

<sup>11</sup> Capuzzo (2012).

<sup>12</sup> Riccardi (2001); Bigaran (2009), p. 104.

conomic crisis and runaway inflation, which were already present in 1918, after the proclamation of the Republic.<sup>13</sup> The economic life of the areas formerly held by the Habsburg had been strongly affected by currency devaluation, unemployment and famine.<sup>14</sup>

The research herein focuses on the evolution of the touristic sector within the border areas of South Tyrol, as well as on the identification of the main elements which fostered the growth of the cross-border touristic flows. In order to achieve such a goal, the dynamics concerning the affirmation of the identity of the formerly Austrian area and the political strategies adopted by the two nations to tackle the main cross-border issues and help the recovery of the touristic sector have been analysed.

## **A Review of the Relevant Literature**

The cross-border area is something contemporary historiography focused much on, while analysing the touristic and economic development thereof as well. Nowadays, such areas, besides being points of transit, are also attractive touristic destinations due to the unique social, cultural and countryside-related features of the territories they once belonged to.<sup>15</sup>

As time went by, cross-border zones have turned into a particular touristic product, that is to say, the one typically connected with borders, featuring the discovery of areas affected by both historical and cultural dynamics because of their connection to adjacent States.<sup>16</sup> It goes without saying that such areas have been the subject, in many cases, of a dual development path which featured, on the one hand, the activation of cross-border cooperation between governments through joint actions which involved economic operators

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<sup>13</sup> De Simone (2011); Braunthal (1955).

<sup>14</sup> Pasvolsky (1928).

<sup>15</sup> Timothy (2001); Timothy et al. (2016), pp. 1-13.

<sup>16</sup> Weindenfel (2013), pp. 191-213; Mansfeld and Korman (2015), pp. 223-238; Hansen (1981); Lundquist and Trippel (2009).

and institutions while,<sup>17</sup> on the other hand, the need to protect local identities through policies that were different compared to their relevant national milieu.<sup>18</sup>

During the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the enhancement of local identities in cross-border areas has given birth to a significant interest, as it is deemed strategic for tourism development.<sup>19</sup> Such an enhancement has created some governance processes aimed at increasing the economic well-being with a tourism development model that has interpreted the present cultural heritage as an expression of folk traditions and manifestations as well as works, monuments and sites.<sup>20</sup> Local identity has gained a crucial role in the interventions bound to such areas, as it became the social capital and the fulcrum of a new tourism development.<sup>21</sup> Local identity represented an innovative element in the process of modernization of cross-border areas, and its protection has been ensured by those governance systems which have been shared between border countries. Within such a context, one of the economic sectors that has particularly benefited from it was tourism, a sector significantly focused on the integration between different areas.<sup>22</sup> In several cases, cross-border cooperation and tourism have been a multiplier for cross-border economic development,<sup>23</sup> unlike what happened in the past, when it triggered strong identity-based nationalisation interventions, which ended up in policies based on subjugation and banishment.

Such an analysis outlines the relationships between border identity and the political actions by States in their complex workings, which involve political, institutional and social aspects of pro-

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<sup>17</sup> Ioannides et al. (2006), pp. 122-142; Paasi (1996); Wachowiak (2006); Jansen-Verbeke and Lievois (2008), pp. 17-30; Shih (2006), 1029-1039.

<sup>18</sup> Herschel (2005), pp. 245-250; Matthiesen and Bürkner (2001), pp. 43-50; Ilbery and Saxena (2011), pp. 1139-1155.

<sup>19</sup> Gelbman and Timothy (2010), pp. 239-259; Stoffelen and Vanneste (2017), pp. 1013-1033.

<sup>20</sup> Calzati (2012), pp. 265-279.

<sup>21</sup> Sabatino (2013).

<sup>22</sup> Adiyia (2017).

<sup>23</sup> Stoffelen and Vanneste (2016).

foundly different nations and highlight how cooperation-based policies, while not immediately producing positive effects on tourism, had nevertheless the merit of breaking down geographical boundaries. As a matter of fact, cross-border areas have become almost a free zone in the context of the common acceptance of their own identity nowadays.

### Case Study and Methodological Approaches

Our analysis takes into account the shift of the cross-border area from the authority of the Austrian government to Italian control. The establishment of the Brenner border, that is to say the part of Italian territory which borders Austria, as it was formalized within the 1919 agreements following World War I, split a land, which for many centuries had been a single unit, into two parts.<sup>24</sup> The Tyrolean lands North of the Brenner Pass (an area owned by Austria) became a narrow passage, with scarce economic resources and connected to the rest of Austria by a single railway line. On the other hand, the area South of the Brenner Pass, which passed under Italy, lost its natural (Austrian) market, somewhat dazed by the different economic operators and operational methods implemented by the Italian officers, as the latter were very far from the “efficiency of the Habsburg administration.”<sup>25</sup>

Fully aware of their critical economic situation and with respect to the political relationships between Italy and Austria in the wake of World War I, the two cross-border areas were intended to minimize or remove the disadvantages connected with the establishment of the political border, through the stipulation of cross-border agreements.<sup>26</sup> First of all, an economic-tourist agreement aimed at creating links in these areas was activated because it was considered ex-

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<sup>24</sup> Peniston-Bird (2011), pp. 65-84.

<sup>25</sup> Toscano (1967).

<sup>26</sup> Central Archive of the Italian State (ACS, from its Italian acronym), Presidency of the Council of Ministers Collection (PCM, from its Italian acronym), 1929, b. 590.

tremely necessary. Unfortunately, the bureaucratic process proved to be long and difficult due to the numerous and varied obstacles encountered by the two governments, causing a considerable delay in the process towards freedom of expansion and development.

The main goal of our research has been to examine cross-border cooperation policies, with their critical issues and discrepancies which, at certain times, have created conflicts while contributing to the relaunch of border tourism at other times.

We carried out our analysis by studying a wide range of unreleased documents, held both at national and local archives. A part of such documents, in particular those held at the Main Italian State Archive in Rome have been found within the collection belonging to the Presidency of the Italian Council of Ministers, whose hard copy inventory featured no direct indications about such topic, so that the Authors perused the documents long and hard, with significant rigour. The analysis has been extended to the documents held at the General Archive of the Presidency of the Italian Council of Ministers afterwards, namely to the collection of the Boundary Areas Office. Locally speaking, our research considered the documents belonging to the Francesco Menestrini Collection within the Archive of the Municipal Library in Trento, by means of which the phases of the economic and tourism-based cross-border agreement between Italy and Austria were reconstructed.

### **The Awkward Identity and the Italianisation of the Former Habsburg Area during the Fascist Regime**

In the early years after World War I, Italy enacted policies aimed at protecting the rights of ethnic minorities still linked to the former Austro-Hungarian Empire,<sup>27</sup> favouring their integration into the new national fabric, without forcing the acquisition of the Italian lan-

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<sup>27</sup> ACS, Luigi Credaro, b. 30, *Comando I Armata, Governatorato di Trento. Relazione sull'attività svolta dal Governatorato di Trento, from May 1 to July 31, 1919.*

guage and culture.<sup>28</sup> Between November 1918 and August 1919, the Italian government signed a declaration focused on its new municipalities, where the open principles of inclusion were reaffirmed, such as freedom and justice towards the annexed populations.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, an Extraordinary Civil Committee was established, which, in cooperation with local bodies, attempted to resolve the border issues.<sup>30</sup> Despite this, the dissatisfied ex-Austrian representatives forwarded to the head of government, Mr. Francesco Saverio Nitti, a political-economic program aimed at limiting the effects of the annexation, refusing the interference of the Italian State in its territory. Such requests were considered as unacceptable, as they wanted to establish a State within the State,<sup>31</sup> delegitimising the role of the country that won the war. As a result, relations between the former Austrian border area and the Italian government began to crack, causing attrition and reactions on both sides.

A first, very small, opening was recorded in May 1921 when Italy, with the intention of curbing the protests by the irredentists, stated its availability to initiatives in favour of the cross-border population, aimed at the peaceful acceptance of German identity. Until July of the same year,<sup>32</sup> the Italian State allowed the subsistence in "Alto Adige [of] a tiny and bizarre sample of the destroyed Austria[...] with its ideas, emblems, customs and institutions."<sup>33</sup> The *laissez faire* policy was soon abandoned and replaced by actions aimed at the forced Italianisation of South Tyrol, which from then on took the definitive name of Alto-Adige.

The change of course in the government policy was due to the greater spread of discontent among the border population, which in many cases also resulted in heated uprisings coordinated by reac-

<sup>28</sup> Leonardi (2009a), p. 28.

<sup>29</sup> Municipality Archive of Villandro, f. C 1918 *Regio Esercito Italiano - Comando della I. a. Armata, November 18, 1918.*

<sup>30</sup> ACS, Luigi Credaro, b. 30, *Lettera dell'on. Credaro all'on. Nitti, October 11, 1919.*

<sup>31</sup> Toscano (1967).

<sup>32</sup> Lechner (2005).

<sup>33</sup> Il Corriere della Sera (1921).

tionary associations (with the *Andreas Hofer Bund* amongst them).<sup>34</sup> At the beginning of October 1922, a few days before the Fascist March on Rome (held on October 28, 1922), these protests were quelled by the fascist militants who occupied the city of Bolzano, intimidating its inhabitants and forcibly restoring normality. Benito Mussolini's rise to power boosted this policy, as the regime considered the ex-Austrians as squatters in what was considered as the Italian Alto Adige. The Fascist government thus set out towards the colonization of the new cross-border locations.

Consequently, South Tyrol's ethnic minorities became the object of oppressive and totalitarian measures, carried out by both the central government and local authorities. Fascist officer Ettore Tolomei was amongst the protagonists of the operations on the cross-border area. After being appointed Councillor for South Tyrol in July 1923, he had the Grand Council of Fascism approve 32 provisions aimed at implementing procedures for the inclusion of South Tyrolean locations in the province of Trento.<sup>35</sup> The project espoused by Tolomei, while not fully responding to the needs of the government policy, proved to be immediately effective, as it featured some measure of tolerance towards cross-border populations. This understanding had its reason in the need of safeguarding the relations with Austria, considered as "the gateway" for Italy's political-economic expansion towards Central-Eastern Europe.<sup>36</sup> This led to the management of the former Austrians at home, who were thus subject to a double political line: one official, repressive and uncompromising towards the Germanic identity, which reaffirmed the Italian authority in the eyes of the world, while the other, unofficial, line tolerated its diversity in civil social coexistence.

Nevertheless, the Italian government went on with its Italianisation policy which provided for the social, cultural and economic

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<sup>34</sup> Scarano (2012).

<sup>35</sup> Strobl (2013), pp. 303-362; Benvenuti (1998); Framke (1987); Ferrandi (1986); Klein (1996).

<sup>36</sup> Cuomo (2012).

re-education of foreigners. The use of the names Tyrol and South Tyrol, as well as of the German language, in all fields, from place names to signs of public and private activities.<sup>37</sup> Family names were Italianised and changed, even on tombstones,<sup>38</sup> schoolchildren with an Italian-sounding surname were included in the Italian language classes and automatically declared as such.<sup>39</sup>

In the beginning, the Italian government wanted to include the largest number of Germanic inhabitants in the border area, so that they might be led to deny their original identity by subjecting them to the Italianisation process. A further step in this direction was taken through the indoctrination of the new generations,<sup>40</sup> featuring the reform of the former Austrian school system, which suffered very strong restrictions and impositions. In 1923, the Gentile school reform (as per the Royal Decree no. 2183 issued on October 1, 1923) brought with it the closing of every German class, enforcing the sole use of Italian. The result was the dismissal of a substantial number of German teachers replaced by as many Italian professors who, complying with the regime's indications, acted with the "spirit of enthusiastic missionaries towards their homeland."<sup>41</sup> However, as they were inexperienced, unprepared and above all, ignorant of the German language, they were unable to interact with German mother tongue pupils, reacting with the typical attitudes of totalitarian systems, such as arrogance and contempt.<sup>42</sup>

All of this also had serious consequences on the social context, so much so that the indigenous population officially chose the solution of dropping out of school,<sup>43</sup> replacing them with a series of clandestine German schools, the so-called "*Katakombenschulen*", coordinated by a priest, Micheal Gamper.<sup>44</sup> Once they were discov-

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<sup>37</sup> Klein (1996).

<sup>38</sup> Woodcock (1967), pp. 317-335.

<sup>39</sup> Villgrater (1984).

<sup>40</sup> De Felice (2008).

<sup>41</sup> Parcschalk (1993).

<sup>42</sup> Gattarer (2014); Vidoni (2006).

<sup>43</sup> Augschöll Blasbichler (2017), pp. 311-331.

<sup>44</sup> Baratter (2008).

ered, German mother tongue teachers suffered bitter persecutions by the Fascist government.<sup>45</sup>

The process of Italianisation also operated in the ecclesiastical sphere: the German clergy were expelled from the parishes and replaced by prelates from Rome.<sup>46</sup> The press was made Fascist as well, with the establishment of the “*Alpenzeitung*”<sup>47</sup> newspaper and the censoring of the German newspapers.

Economically speaking, the most stringent internal measures concerned the closure of local credit institutions, the modification of the rules on private and public employment and the abolition of the closed farm law (*Geschlossenerr Hof*), which established the indivisibility of land property.<sup>48</sup>

The outcome of the prohibitions and repressions, in fact, in addition to facilitating the establishment of Italian mayors, officials and municipal secretaries, materialized in the migratory flow of the workforce coming mainly from Southern Italy, with the aim of replacing German workers. The wave of migration wanted by the government also involved the families of civil servants, public employees, workers and specialized technicians, who were forced to relocate in spite of themselves, almost like a punitive action by the regime. The Italians, however, did not interact with the social fabric of these areas, as they were hindered both by verbal communication and by the different backgrounds they belonged to.

The immigration policy in favour of workers was supported by the Fascist government that granted special facilities, such as loans for the purchase of real estate, subsidies and the offer of jobs. In particular, the government invited the large industrial groups of northern Italy to place plants and branches in the border area, obviously

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<sup>45</sup> Villgrater (1984).

<sup>46</sup> ACS, PCM, 1922, b. 1090, f. 1/3, no. 1.666, *Petizioni alla Società delle Nazioni e proteste varie*; ACS, PCM, Ufficio Centrale per le Nuove province, b. 126, *Comunicazione di Salata [capo dell'Ufficio Centrale delle Nuove Province] al vescovo di Bressanone Giovanni Raffi, January 14, 1922*; Corsini and Lill (1988).

<sup>47</sup> Di Michele (2003).

<sup>48</sup> Tommassini (2012).

prohibiting the hiring of formerly Austrian workers. Thus, the new headquarters of some strategic and driving sectors within the Italian economic context were inaugurated, such as the Steel Mills in Milan, the Lancia & C. automotive group in Turin, the Italian company for Magnesium and Magnesium Alloys, as well as the Carbural company for the management of the mines in Alto Adige, and the like.<sup>49</sup>

The outcome of such interventions was successful, so that, between 1921 and 1943, there was a significant transfer of people towards South Tyrol, that was interrupted only by the outbreak of the hostilities of World War II (please see Table 1).

**TABLE 1**  
Population per linguistic group (1921-1943)

Population	1921	1939	1943
Ladine Germans	212,273	245,900	186,932
Italians	20,306	80,743	104,766
<b>Total</b>	<b>232,579</b>	<b>326,643</b>	<b>291,698</b>

Source: Mezzalana (2006).

The local development of the cross-border area was followed with particular care: The Fascist government set up a completely different governance, compared with the totalitarian approach which was shaping the areas of the nation. It was understood that cross-border development may be carried out only through providing adequate support to the touristic sector, whose success was ensured by carrying out cooperation and integration interventions. The role of cross-border identity was at last a strong point within the cross-border development, itself an element to enhance and use. Therefore, after the Fascist regime put the irredentism of the locals under control, it enabled a cooperation policy with nearby Austria, in order to increase the Italian economic well-being and pacify the borders.

<sup>49</sup> Miori (1999); Steinegger (1961), pp. 347-357.

### The Cross-Border Cooperation Policy: The Economic-Touristic Agreement (1925)

The South Tyrolean hospitality industry had been significantly affected by the requisitions, destructions and damage to the hospitality and care structures suffered during WWI and in the immediate aftermath of the war.<sup>50</sup> Specific publications at the time and strategic tourism-based marketing activities by both national and local associations were an important engine to enhance those areas and have the sector rebound.<sup>51</sup> In particular, the Club alpino Italiano (CAI), i.e., the Italian Alpine Club, and the Touring Club Italiano (TCI), i.e., the Italian Tourism Club, as well as ENIT, that is to say the main Italian national institutions in the field were committed to promote tourism in the Alpine areas.<sup>52</sup>

An effective step taken by both Italy and Austria within the cross-border cooperation policy was implemented with the stipulation of an economic-touristic agreement, whose build-up was long and complex.<sup>53</sup> Even if the negotiations did not achieve a positive outcome because of the government action on irredentists, from February 1923 onwards, a positive event unlocked the negotiations: the Austrian federal government submitted a “project of agreement for small cross-border traffic” together with a joint agreement to restart the movement of tourists,<sup>54</sup> all of which became a commercial treaty (pursuant to the Royal Decree issued on June 28, 1923, l. no. 1389, published in the O.J. of July 5, 1923, no. 157), signed by both parties. This was a first signal of cooperation, which, unfortunately, remained inactive because of the lack of regulations.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup> ACS, PCM 1930, b. 1186, f. 8501, *Enit*; Gasser (2014), pp. 333-358; Walleczek-Fritz Moritz (2014), pp. 293-312; Leonardi (2009b), pp. 313-316.

<sup>51</sup> Lodola (2003), pp. 93, 95, 106; Bonoldi (2003), pp. 385-407; Leonardi (2009b), p. 316.

<sup>52</sup> Rohrer (2003).

<sup>53</sup> ACS, PCM, 1920, f. 3, Movimento dei forestieri.

<sup>54</sup> ACS, PCM, 1925, b. 590, n. 238175, September 23, 1923.

<sup>55</sup> ACS, PCM, 1925, b. 590, no. 243880, October 15, 1923; Archive of the municipal library of Trento (BCT, from its Italian acronym), Francesco Menestrina (FFM, from its Italian acronym), 1.1.3.9.1, 1924.

However, the path of cooperation was not interrupted and, a few months later (in August 1923), a “Commission for Tourism” “*Ausschuß für Fremdenverkehrs-angelegenheiten*” in German,<sup>56</sup> following a proposal of the Austrian Federal Minister, Hans Schürff and accepted by the Italian Minister for War, was created. The purpose of such activities was to promote the movement of tourists within the cross-border area, even if there were still complaints and fears on the Fascist government’s part, which wanted to avoid the entry into Italy of subversive Austrians, as they were firm believers in the German identity.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, only the persons having a visa on their passport, issued only after strict controls and inspections could enter Italy.

It is important to underline that the touristic movement in Alto Adige was always being supported by Austria, despite the economic and inflation crisis it was in. Indeed, the German-speaking country, even if silently accepting to renounce to a territory it felt as its own,<sup>58</sup> never ceased to admire the beauty of its countryside, keeping spurring its former citizens to visit cross-border locations.<sup>59</sup> Tourism was intended and interpreted as a pacifying tool, within which “the cultural and landscape-based opposites influenced each other and were mended seamlessly.”<sup>60</sup> The Austrian national identity “was endowed by a sense of its worth and pride.”<sup>61</sup> Therefore, the hospitality industry became a strong point for Austria, by means of which the political and economic disadvantages could be overcome; tourism between the two sides of the border had thus to be developed.<sup>62</sup>

Therefore, in December 1924, the Italian government proposed its Austrian counterpart to restart the cross-border commercial relationships. In order to achieve such a goal, it suggested the creation

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<sup>56</sup> Peniston-Bird (2011), pp. 65-84.

<sup>57</sup> ACS, PCM, 1925, b. 590, *Convenzione concernente la determinazione dei punti di frontiera*.

<sup>58</sup> ACS, PCM, 1925, b. 590.

<sup>59</sup> Berrino and Kawamura (2014), p. 272.

<sup>60</sup> Reinalter (1933), pp. 2-6.

<sup>61</sup> Peniston-Bird (2011), pp. 65-84.

<sup>62</sup> Burkart-Medlik (1981).

of an International Commission to define the economic control and increase exchanges in the cross-border area.<sup>63</sup> The delegates of the two countries, Francesco Menestrina for Italy and Georg Pockels for Austria, became the Presidents of such Commission.<sup>64</sup>

In the beginning, both of them envisioned to restore the old commercial networks, which were made unusable by the new border lines, by proposing the establishment of a “duty free zone near the border” between Bolzano and the Austrian Tyrol. Their intent was to liberalise the circulation of goods, by exempting them from duties and taxes, but such an initiative was not finalised.<sup>65</sup>

Finally, in April 1925, the diplomatic action between Italy and Austria became a reality in the stipulation of the “Cross-border economic and touristic agreement”, concerning the determination of border transit points, the dissemination of health regulations, as well as the restoring of the cross-border touristic movement along the borderline.<sup>66</sup> Within such a milieu, tourism-related activities became particularly significant, since they represented an essential source of income for cross-border economy.<sup>67</sup> It is important to underline that the Fascist government adopted contradictory policies for the Alto Adige area: on one side, it forced the Italian identity on the border populations, while tolerating the Germanic identity, in an unofficial capacity, out of economic and diplomatic convenience.

The cross-border area, with the whole of its unique cultural identity, became the crux of the agreement in order to relaunch touristic and commercial flows between the Southern and Northern areas of Tyrol.<sup>68</sup> The identity of such area offered the opportunity to make the most of its specific features, therefore generating an added value

<sup>63</sup> BCT, FFM, 1.1.3.9.1, 1925.

<sup>64</sup> ACS, PCM, 1925, b. 869, Austria.

<sup>65</sup> ACS, PCM, 1925, b. 869; BCT, FFM, 1.1.3.1.9. 23 a, 1925, *Lettera del Presidente della delegazione italiana della Commissione Internazionale per la delimitazione dei confini Italo-Austriaci*, Colonnello Alberto Pariani indirizzata a Francesco Menestrina, Bolzano July 8, 1924.

<sup>66</sup> ACS, PCM, 1925, b. 869, Austria.

<sup>67</sup> ACS, PCM, 1925, b. 869, f. 15-12, telesspresso.

<sup>68</sup> ACS, PCM, 1925, b. 869, Austria.

for local development and a trajectory to follow in order to improve the touristic sector as a whole. Within such a situation, the identity of cross-border locations became an important element towards social cohesion.

Therefore, cross-border tourism ended up being an actual catalyst in strategically promoting the economic processes between the two countries, together with the identity-based connections between the areas.<sup>69</sup> Even today, most of the tourists visiting the Alto Adige region comes from the German-speaking territories nearby: in 2019 53% of the tourists were German-speaking, while 41,6% of them were Italian.

### **Identity and Tourism: the Effects of Cross-Border Cooperation**

The cross-border cooperation policies enacted by the Fascist government gave birth to a series of initiatives focused on enhancing the areas they were applied in. In order to strengthen mobility and communications, the Italian army set up the creation of facilities and infrastructure, which were to be used by the touristic sector as well.<sup>70</sup> Local administrations acknowledged such a line of action and reactivated the facilities servicing the sector. Important interventions were also carried out by local entrepreneurs, as they renewed the pre-existing hotels and built some others, to be exclusively focused on the tourism connected with that winter sports.<sup>71</sup>

Through an ubiquitous marketing campaign, supported both by national and local institutions, the most interesting places of Alto Adige became interesting touristic destinations.<sup>72</sup> Several touristic routes were promoted commemorating the battlefields of World War I and the annexed territories.<sup>73</sup> The propaganda for internal tourism

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<sup>69</sup> Björkman et al. (2007), pp. 658-672; Blasco et al. (2007).

<sup>70</sup> Bergonzi (2009), pp. 232-234; Bonoldi (2003), pp. 385-407; Leonardi (2009b), p. 316.

<sup>71</sup> Abram (1999); Gasser (2014); Leonardi-Heiss (2009).

<sup>72</sup> ACS, PCM, 1929, b. 590, f. 3, *Movimento dei forestieri*.

<sup>73</sup> Berrino and Kawamura (2014), p. 272; Isnenghi (1996).

was one of Mussolini's main atout to let the Italians know about "new Italy."<sup>74</sup> Therefore, brochures, guides, photographs, illustrated postcards, catalogues, posters, billboards, every kind of booklets, as well as coloured posters, were published in Italian.<sup>75</sup>

The Fascist government operated also through some specific public entities within the sector, such as ENIT (the Italian national institution for tourism), which had a decisive role in the area as it sold circular journey tickets called "South of the Alps", advertised to foreigners, with the following claim: "the cheapest ticket to visit Italy."<sup>76</sup> The institution created also a strong network of foreign branches having the task of disseminating articles and brochures about Alto Adige. The most prestigious of such agencies was the one in Vienna, which, in a single year (namely 1925) printed 1,343 advertisements on Austrian newspapers and promoted 10,000 announcements concerning discounts on railway fares for the transfers to Italy. Within the very same year, Enit was able to sell about 17,000 tickets, gaining more than 2 million lire and issuing 7,057 visas on Austrian passports, which helped cut through the red tape.<sup>77</sup> As discussed elsewhere within this article, tourism became a crucial instrument for Austria to build new connections with its former provinces. Touristic promotion was allocated a significant amount of 28,000 Schillings (amounting to about 72,940 Italian Lire) in the 1927 national budget.<sup>78</sup> During the same year, Ludwig Leser, a politician (1890-1946) stated that the postwar peace treaties had "put the Austrians under a foreign government" and that tourism had a "political, or, better still, patriotic mission for the country."<sup>79</sup> At the time, touristic promotion was considered as paramount for the Austrian people inviting them to find their own roots travelling to, and staying in, their ancient territories.

<sup>74</sup> Berrino and Kawamura (2014).

<sup>75</sup> ACS, PCM, 1928-30, b. 1186, *Pubblicazioni dell'Enit*; Lodola (2003), pp. 93, 95, 106.

<sup>76</sup> Paoli (1925), pp. 165-171.

<sup>77</sup> ACS, PCM, 1926, b. 906, *Relazione sull'attività svolta dall'Enit durante il 1925*.

<sup>78</sup> Mariotti (1929).

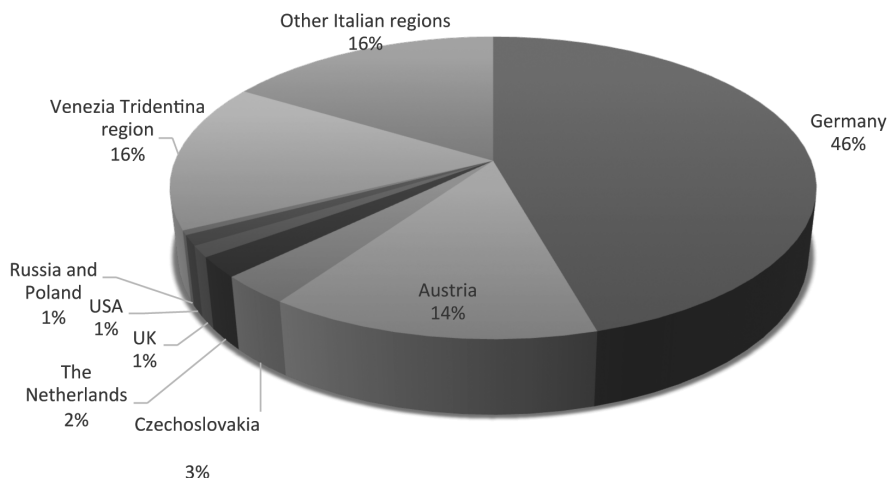
<sup>79</sup> Leser (1927).

The cultural affinities and identities between Austria and the Alto Adige proved to be crucial in reactivating the touristic sector. The positive effects of marketing added to those arising from the economic- touristic agreement.

The touristic movement registered within the cross-border locations increased many times. For example, (graph no. 1, below) mostly German (52,469-46%) and Austrian (16,154-14%) tourists came to Bolzano, but it was also the case of Italians (37,049-38%) half of which, however, came from the nearby Tridentina area (18,785-16%) and only a small part came from the other regions of Italy (18,264-16%).<sup>80</sup> This showed once again that such a cross-border area was still connected to the cultural identity of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire.

However, starting from 1925 the significant increase of the tourist movement gave rise to some perplexities and concern within

**GRAPH 1**  
Arrivals in Bolzano during 1925



Source: The Authors' own elaboration, Tegani (1927a).

<sup>80</sup> Tegani (1927a), pp. 84-91.

the higher-ups of the Italian government:<sup>81</sup> even if a careful promotional campaign had been implemented, most of the visitors of the border area were still the old German “brothers”, as they were taken by “national homesickness when their old countrymen were concerned.”<sup>82</sup> A survey by ENIT revealed that, in 1929, the holiday resorts in South Tyrol featured a more significant foreign attendance compared with the locals. During the very same year, Bolzano saw the arrival of 74,464 foreigners compared with 66,727 Italians, while Merano was visited by 59,766 foreigners besides 27,012 Italians. On average, the foreign guests stayed in luxury hotels for 9 days on average. On the other hand, the Italian guests preferred, by and large, lower level facilities for shorter stays.<sup>83</sup>

However, the positive trend of the touristic movement was disrupted by the deflationary policy connected with the “Quota 90” (1926) initiative, accompanied by the negative effects of the long crisis triggered by the 1929 Wall Street crash.

The whole local economic and financial milieu became unstable, as it was the case with the national level and all of this reverberated significantly on the touristic sector. A decrease in the flow was palpable as was the significant drop in investments in the sector.<sup>84</sup> Several touristic entrepreneurs were forced to renegotiate their bank loans or request advance payments to various local credit institutions, for example the Società Alberghi Alpini based in Merano and the well-known Pitscheider hotelier family, as said family owned some facilities both in Merano and Selva di Val Gardena. The Pitscheiders had obtained an increase in the overdraft and better conditions in returning their loans from their local bank.<sup>85</sup> Within such a context, the requests submitted by some South Tyrolean hotel managers to the Presidency of the Italian Council of Ministers also

<sup>81</sup> Archive of the Bank of Italy (ASBI, from its Italian acronym), De Stefani, 1925.

<sup>82</sup> ACS, PCM, 1926, b. 906.

<sup>83</sup> ACS, PCM, 1928-30, b. 1186, 1929 Care and hospitality stations statistics.

<sup>84</sup> ACS, PCM, 1934-36, b. 1855, 3-2-1-3498 f. Crisi dell'industria alberghiera, 1931.

<sup>85</sup> ASBI, Vigilanza, Pratt. b. 7169, *Cassa di Risparmio di Merano*, 31 December 1931; ASBI, Vigilanza, Pratt. b. 7169, *Cassa di Risparmio di Merano*, 1928.

failed, who were unable to receive funding provided for in the public hotel credit plan.

The whole sector of tourism rebounded only when the capitals made available by the local banking institutions flowed within the cross-border area again. Said institutions were the first to believe in the potential of the touristic sector and of its entrepreneurs.<sup>86</sup> Such credit lines were also accompanied by a different trend in the touristic movement towards the cross-border areas, which, during the second half of the 1930s, experienced an increase in the presence of Italians.<sup>87</sup> The peak of their arrivals in South Tyrol, which amounted to 578,825, was recorded in 1938.<sup>88</sup>

Nevertheless, the positive trend experienced a setback due to the political tensions which were becoming more and more a feature of the relationships within Europe, which ended with the outbreak of the Second World War. The situation degenerated so much so that, in June 1939, the fascist government forced the German citizens residing within the Alto Adige region, to choose if they wanted to remain in Italy as new Italian citizens or to go definitively back to German-speaking Austria, which had been annexed by Germany in the meantime.<sup>89</sup>

Such a policy, called the “policy of options” led the Fascist government to face the issues connected with the change of citizenship, which mostly featured civil and economic and financial procedures. Therefore, the Office for Alto Adige was established (by Royal Decree.I, issued on December 13, 1939, n. 1888), which, together with the Italian Economic Financial Delegation managed the return documents based on the agreements between Italy and Germany.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> ASBI, Ispettorato del Credito, Pratt. b. 551, *Istituto di Risparmio e Prestito per il Commercio e l'Industria di Merano*, 1931; ASBI, Vigilanza, Pratt. b.7169, *Servizio di Vigilanza Aziende di Credito*.

<sup>87</sup> Leonardi (2009a), pp. 33-34.

<sup>88</sup> Leonardi (1996), p. 308.

<sup>89</sup> Archive of the Presidency of the Italian Council of Ministers (APCM, from its Italian acronym), section I, b. 4, f. 1886.

<sup>90</sup> APCM, section I, b. 8, f. 1886; Steurer (1989), pp. 213-215; Erhard (1989); Steineiger (1997); Solderer (2000).

The consequences of the options were that 75,000 persons moved to Third Reich territories, leaving facilities and undertakings behind, including hospitality structures.<sup>91</sup> In particular, considering the 1,250 hospitality undertakings being present in the cross-border area, as estimated by ENIT,<sup>92</sup> a significant 905 of them were put on sale, and only 394 of them were actually alienated (please see table 2). The amounts requested by the owners were mismatched compared with the sales prices and both the facilities and the undertakings were acquired by the Italian State, which ended up paying significantly lower amounts compared to market values.

During World War II, the economic and social situation of the cross-border area became worse and worse. The functions of the Office for Alto Adige and the Economic and Financial Italian Delegation were suspended until the end of the war in order to be reactivated in, 1947, by a new organism, the Office for Border Zones.

**TABLE 2**  
Hotels sold in Alto Adige between 1939 and 1943

Hotels, boarding houses and retirement homes	Number	Amounts requested by the value allocated by the interested parties	Value allocated by the Italian Economic Financial Delegation	Amount provided	Difference between the value requested by the interested parties and the value assessed by the Presidents
Foreigners	330	192,355,995	100,165,265	138,990,142	53,365,853
Germans	64	81,234,026	40,618,177	54,989,581	26,244,445
Total	394	273,590,021	140,783,442	193,979,723	79,610,298

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Archive of the Presidency of the Italian Council of Ministers and Italian Economic Financial Delegation data, 1943.

<sup>91</sup> ACS, National Agency for tourism and hotel industries (ENITEA, from its Italian acronym), b. 4, *Sistemazione definitiva Alto Adige 1930-1957*.

<sup>92</sup> Enit (1941).

## Conclusions

The annexation to the Italian state of areas belonging to the former Austro-Hungarian Empire was certainly a warfare success for Italy, one of the winners of World War I. The acquisition of such a border area, triggered a series of political, organisational and coexistence-related issues between Italians and Germans which have not been resolved even today.

The first obstacle the Italian government had to face was the Italianisation of an area populated by individuals being culturally different and which had been administrated, for centuries, according to the Austro-Hungarian principles and regulations. The integration procedure towards the Italian context was enacted softly at first and then, following disorders and revolts by the foreign population, in a tough and repressive way. The former Austrians were forced to choose between citizenship in the Reich and the Italian one, therefore losing their land, identity and ethnicity. About 75,000 former Austrians abandoned their homes, wealth and assets, the newly acquired territories experienced significant economic difficulties, as the governance of the two cross-border administrations diverged from one another.

Therefore, the Brenner border line was, for many years, an open wound for the economy of the nearby areas; nevertheless, there were initiatives focused on creating economic and touristic agreements. It is important to highlight that such negotiations were carried out within the Fascist totalitarian milieu which if, on the one hand, forced the adoption of Italian identity in Alto Adige, on the other hand allowed the permanence of the German one, due to exclusively opportunistic economic and diplomatic reasons. Economic interests prevailed once again and, luckily, the tolerance towards an identity differing from the national one.

The approval of an economic- touristic agreement between Italy and Austria watered down the clashes between the two ethnicities making moving through the border easier by issuing passports and strengthening the economic rebound in the sector, which ended up multiplying the local economies.

Therefore, a unitary and compact image of the Dolomites was realized, regardless of their geographic and language boundaries, as each side strove to accept the other's identity. In this, the locals, the hospitality entrepreneurs and the economic operators which were able to face difficulties and setbacks, allowing a frontier territory the development it deserves, were the absolute protagonists. The positive growing trend was disrupted as the international political situation became difficult and Italy and Austria fell into World War II.

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