Fascist Legacies: The Controversy over Mussolini’s Monuments in South Tyrol

The northern Italian town of Bolzano (Bozen in German) in the western Dolomites is known for breathtaking natural landscapes as well as for its medieval city centre, gothic cathedral, and world-famous mummy, Ötzi the Iceman, which is on display at the local archaeological museum. At the same time, Bolzano’s more recent history casts a shadow over the town. The legacy of fascism looms large in the form of Ventennio fascista-era monuments such as the Victory Monument, a massive triumphal arch commissioned by the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini and located in Bolzano’s Victory Square, and the Mussolini relief on the façade of the former Fascist Party headquarters (now a tax office) at Courthouse Square, which depicts il duce riding a horse with his arm raised high in the Fascist salute. What should happen to the relics and ruins, monuments and statues of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes? Should we preserve shrines to war and dictatorship? The fate of such structures is still a hotly contested issue in Europe and elsewhere, and

---

1 The title of this article was inspired by Ken Kirby’s 1989 documentary Fascist Legacy, which aired on 8 November 1989 on the BBC and drew harsh protests from Italy. The film highlights the war crimes committed by Italian forces in Africa, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Spain. The Italian public television station RAI bought a copy of the documentary but for years did not air it, given that it challenges mainstream Italian opinion about Italy’s actions during World War II. Although the film remains quasi-banned in Italy, antifascist groups manage to organize showings in the country. See Rory Carroll, “Italy’s Bloody Secret”, The Guardian, 25 June 2001, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2001/jun/25/artsandhumanities.highereducation>.

2 I wish especially to thank Andrea Di Michele, Franz Haller, Thomas Pardatscher and Norbert Sparer for providing useful hints and sharing important literature on this topic. I am also grateful to Markus Schoof for his assistance with the final proof-reading of this essay and to Tracy Brown for helping to improve my prose.
the answers remain elusive. The stories of the Victory Monument and the duce relief exemplify the complexities posed by the legacies of fascism. In South Tyrol, where monuments hold starkly different meanings for two distinct parts of the population, dealing with Fascist monuments continues to be particularly tricky.

I. Introduction: The History of Conflict in South Tyrol

The mountainous historic region of Tyrol, located on the Austrian–Italian border, had belonged to the Habsburg monarchy for centuries. In 1918, after the end of the First World War, Italian troops occupied Tyrol, and in 1919 Italy annexed the southern part of the province. Tyrol was thus divided in two by a new national border at Brenner Pass, the lowest alpine crossing between Austria and Italy, and Italy made safeguarding this new border a high priority. The northern part of Tyrol, meanwhile, became a province of the Austrian Republic.

South Tyrol’s culture and traditions were and continue to be mainly Austrian. Even today, the vast majority (roughly 70%) of the region’s half-million inhabitants speak German (or a German dialect) as their mother tongue. For the people of South Tyrol, Italian control constituted a great reversal: up to 1918, they had been part of the powerful and dominant German-speaking elite in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Then almost overnight, they became a powerless minority in Italy. The Italian occupiers and South Tyroleans had a hard time finding a modus vivendi, and the new Fascist movement soon began targeting national minorities, including the South Tyroleans. South Tyrol continued to be a hotbed for “border nationalism” (nazionalismo di confine), where Italian nationalism and imperialism clashed with Tyrolean revisionism and pan-German activism. During Mussolini’s reign (1922-43), the German-speaking population in this province (which Italians call “Alto Adige”) suffered harsh discrimination and oppression. The use of the German language in schools and in public was often prohibited, and German surnames were Italianized. Under the Italian Fascist regime, many German-speaking South Tyroleans withdrew from public life, preferring instead to take refuge in private spaces.

During the same period, huge numbers of Italians poured into the region. By the 1930s, the Fascist regime had begun to implement a policy of taking possession

3 In this article, the term South Tyroleans refers only to the German-speaking and Ladin-speaking populations of South Tyrol. (Ladin is a Reto-Romanic language spoken by a small minority in the Dolomites). The Italian immigrants who came to the region after 1918 self-identified as Italians, not as South Tyroleans. It is worth noting, however, that in recent years a small but growing number of Italians now consider themselves South Tyrolean and self-identify with the region and its culture. They are slowly gaining acceptance as South Tyroleans by segments of the German-speaking majority.