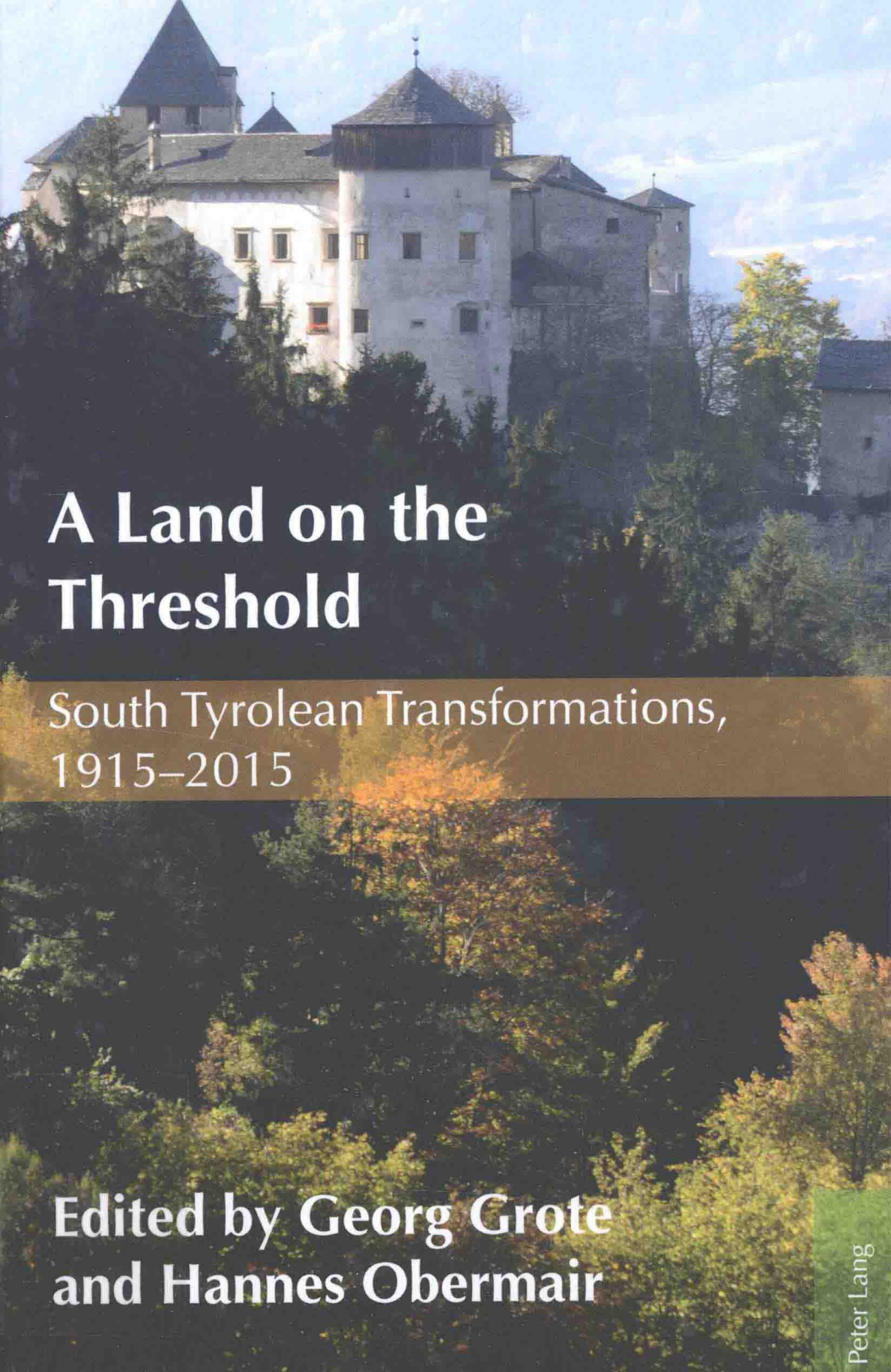

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## South Tyrolean Transformations, 1915–2015

Edited by Georg Grote and Hannes Obermair

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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 Control Number: 2016963047

Cover image: Prösels Castle near Völs am Schlern. Photograph by Georg Grote.

Cover design: Peter Lang Ltd.

ISBN 978-3-0343-2240-9 (print) • ISBN 978-1-78707-420-0 (ePDF)
ISBN 978-1-78707-421-7 (ePub) • ISBN 978-1-78707-422-4 (mobi)

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Wabernstrasse 40, CH-3007 Bern, Switzerland
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This publication has been peer reviewed.

Printed in Germany

# A Land on the Threshold

# Acknowledgements

The editors of this volume would like to express their gratitude to all contributors, to the Peter Lang team for their support, University College Dublin, the Institute for Minority Rights in the EURAC and the Stadtarchiv Bozen, the Prösels Castle Kustos Michl Rabensteiner and the Kuratorium Schloss Prösels for the use of the castle facilities on 8 and 9 May 2015, the Völser Goldschmiede, the Binderstube and the Caffè Caroma in Völs, and to the Hotel Heubad in Obervöls for their generous support.

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GEORG GROTE AND HANNES OBERMAIR

# Introduction: South Tyrol: Land on a Threshold. Really?

While South Tyrol is a part of Italy, it is also an autonomous province with distinct Austrian and German characteristics. Both South Tyrol's geographic location and history underscores its position as a region where the north meets the south of Europe: at its border, Italian and German cultures and languages converse and Mediterranean and northern European climates collide. Hence, it has regularly been described as an "Übergangsland" – as a passage from north to south and vice versa. It has, however, been a contested region for 150 years, and political viewpoints have often characterized the approach of writers and commentators towards this mountainous region in the Central Alps. Depending on the source and context, the region has been claimed as a German or Italian one; only in recent years has there been a growing tendency to regard the region as both German and Italian.[1] It is this latter tendency to view South Tyrol as a unique hybrid of both these cultures that this volume wishes to explore through the prism of various disciplines. While the German and Italian influences may not always harmonize with each other, this collection of essays reveals that they do inform and enrich the region resulting in a complex and diverse collective culture that is modern South Tyrol.

Nothing has epitomized the German and Italian claims on South Tyrol as succinctly as the name of the area itself: Südtirol (South Tyrol) in German, Alto Adige in Italian. In many respects the word pair Alto

1 See Lucio Giudiceandrea, *Spaesati, Italiani in Südtirol* (Bozen: Raetia, 2007); and Lucio Giudiceandrea and Aldo Mazza, *Stare insieme è un'arte. Vivere in Alto Adige/Südtirol* (Meran: alphabeta, 2012).

Adige/South Tyrol hints at its complexity. 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 call the region South Tyrol today, 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 historical unity with Austria. They also stress their cultural affinity with the German-speaking world beyond the Brenner Pass.

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 river Etsch/Adige flows from the Austrian–Italian–Swiss 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 its 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.

## Claims old and new

It is widely accepted that the dispute over where South Tyrol belonged – to which state it should affiliate – began in 1866 with the leading exponent of Italian emancipatory nationalism, Giuseppe Mazzini. Mazzini claimed that only 20 per cent of the Tyrolean people living south of the Brenner Pass were of German origin and thus a minority easy to Italianize. The area, therefore, belonged to Italy and should become part of the new Italian

state.[2] By the 1890s, the pro-Italian nationalist Ettore Tolomei had developed a pseudo-scientific argument that Italy's boundaries were defined by nature and not by the ethnicity of the region's population.[3] This view went against the grain of contemporary nationalist sentiment across Europe, which regarded ethnicity as the marker of borders. Tolomei's rationale was contested by an alternative Austrian–German vision expounded by various groups, in particular, the Tiroler Volksbund established in 1905. This Austrian–German cultural and political movement articulated a competing desire to see a Germanized Northern Italy as far south as Verona.[4]

Thus, on the eve of World War I, South Tyrol was in the eye of a cultural storm with two distinct and, apparently, incompatible views of the region's cultural identity and political future. Hence in the early stages of the conflict, Italy played its political hand with its ambitions regarding South Tyrol firmly in its sights. In 1915, when it was far from certain that the Austrian–German alliance would lose the war, Italy joined forces with the Western Allies. Its strategy paid off when in 1918, as part of the spoils of war, it was rewarded with the southern part of the Austrian crownland Tyrol.

When Mussolini came to power in late 1922, he tightened the Italian grip on South Tyrol by embarking on a Tolomei-led campaign of Italianizing the German-speaking population. The fascists attempted to Italianize all areas of individual and collective life in order to eradicate any traces of the Austrian–German tradition: place names and family names were Italianized; the only language accepted was Italian; and all kinds of Tyrolean collective organizations and newspapers were suppressed.[5] In the face of such fascist suppression, many Tyroleans welcomed Hitler's declaration that all German peoples belonged in the German Reich. However, Hitler was more interested in securing Mussolini's friendship and creating the fascist axis in Europe than protecting or supporting German-speaking

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

3 Georg Grote, *The South Tyrol Question* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 15–18.

4 Rolf Steininger, *Südtirol im 20. Jahrhundert* (Innsbruck: Studienverlag, 1997), p. 259.

5 Grote, *South Tyrol Question*, pp. 35–52.

South Tyroleans. Consequently, an agreement between the two fascist governments in Berlin and Rome in 1938 presented the German-speaking South Tyroleans with an option: if they wished to remain German-speaking and thus part of the Germanic cultural sphere, they had to physically emigrate to the German Reich, or remain in their "Heimat" in Italy and give up their loyalty to their Austrian–German language and tradition. This was a scenario that quite literally tore the German-speaking South Tyroleans apart through bitter disputes. By 31 December 1939, 86 per cent declared they were willing to leave, but, due to the wartime developments, only 75,000 actually managed to leave and of these 25,000 returned after 1945. The *Option* is still remembered as a traumatic event in South Tyrolean history because it symbolizes the limits of internal solidarity among the German-speaking population.[6]

Even after the end of fascism in Rome and Berlin in 1945, when all chances of reunification with Austria were truly dashed, many German-speaking South Tyroleans continued to harbour hopes of an end to Italian rule in the region or at least an end to Italianization. It was generally believed that the historic injustice of St Germain, the partition of Tyrol, would be remedied and Tyrol would be reunited. After 1945, the Cold War emerged swiftly and the Western Allies' agenda to contain Stalin and communism took precedence over the fate of a small minority, which was also tarnished by its (alleged) sympathy for the German Reich. Italy managed to hold on to South Tyrol and, as Italian post-war domestic politics underwent no radical break with its past, unlike in Austria and Germany, South Tyroleans soon felt oppressed again by what they perceived as a continuation of fascist policies of Italianization in the province. Dissatisfaction smouldered over the years and finally erupted in what has become known as the "Bombenjahre" in the mid-1950s, a violent period of terrorist attacks on Italian infrastructure and representatives

6 Much has been written about the cultural and psychological impact of this *Option* period, which tore families apart and left a lasting legacy of bitterness and pain, and it is still claiming a major part of South Tyrolean historiography, see, for example, Eva Pfanzelter's article in Chapter 7 of this volume.

in South Tyrol and beyond which continued into the 1960s.[7] It was not until the intervention of the United Nations and the ratification of the South Tyrolean autonomy in 1972 that South Tyrol finally embarked on a regionalist course within the framework of regional development stipulated by the European Economic Community. Within this programme of regional development and political engagement with the regions of Europe the protection of South Tyrol's German-speaking population has achieved its full potential. It has resulted in a lasting appeasement with Italy, but also to the creation of a remarkable state-like regional self-confidence, distinct from both Italy and Austria.[8]

The "Regional State" South Tyrol has many of the hallmarks of historical nation-building, for example, the emergence of national literature and an accepted culture of writing history and commemorating crucial historical events central to the region's development. Hans-Karl Peterlini's recent history of the province, *100 Jahre Südtirol – Geschichte eines jungen Landes* [100 Years of South Tyrol – History of a Young Country], testifies to this development. This publication sits beside other German language monographs on key events of the past 100 years and the biographies of the "founding fathers" of the "regional state", among them the protagonists of the bombing campaigns in the 1960s and significant politicians.

Hence, it can be argued that South Tyrol has transformed its position on the proverbial threshold into its *raison d'être*. The region defines its international significance by the strength of its autonomy and in providing a powerful example of the potential role European regions can play in the politics and culture of the EU. South Tyrol generally sees itself as a distinct entity, no longer as an area precariously perched between worlds, states and cultures, but as a region drawing strength from its political and geographical position and its cultural complexity.

7 Grote, *South Tyrol Question*, pp. 85–113.

8 Grote, *I bin a Südtiroler. Regionale Identität zwischen Nation und Region* (Bozen: Athesia, 2009), pp. 225–250.

## The modern land and its issues

Spring 2015 heralded the hundredth anniversary of the secret treaty of London that sealed the fate of South Tyrol for the duration of the twentieth century, when this part of Habsburg's crown colony was handed to Italy. While the German-speaking South Tyroleans have often stressed their histo-cultural allegiance with the Germanic world, the 1915 treaty resulted in the creation of new loyalties and new societal developments. The twentieth century would bring to the region war and violence, two dictatorships (Italian fascism and German national socialism), democracy, republicanism, peace initiatives, political wisdom and economic affluence, which have accompanied and influenced the drawn-out societal changes.

A symposium was held in the medieval Castle Prösels in the Italian Dolomites in May 2015 to mark the hundredth anniversary of the 1915 London treaty. Contributors set out to explore through various disciplines the political, social and cultural impact of South Tyrol's existence on the threshold during the twentieth century. Individually and collectively the essays in this volume challenge the simplistic reading of South Tyrol as merely a geographic region torn between two cultures; instead they explore the dynamic effects of its geographical, political and cultural history since 1915. South Tyrol is presented here as an institutional and state-like entity, a region facing very similar problems to many other regions in Europe, be they individual states or sub-state regions. Most of these contributions are from academics and intellectuals within the Province of Bolzano/Bozen who are used to negotiating and discussing these issues through their native languages German, Italian and Ladin. This volume seeks to bring their work and the history and development of South Tyrol to a wider European and global audience, hence the chosen language of English.

The volume is subdivided into five thematic parts. In Part I Rolf Steininger analyses the steps towards partition in 1918; Carlo Moos explores the mechanics of the post-World War I St Germain Treaty negotiations; and Nina F. Caprez investigates the consequences of the partition for the economic survival of the monastery Muri-Gries. Finally, Sabine Mayr

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provides an insight into the fate of the Jewish community in Meran during the early part of the twentieth century.

Part II explores the historiography of the region: Marcus Wurzer demystifies and re-contextualizes the World War I hero Sepp Innerkofler; Georg Grote explores the realities of a zero hour in Austria, Germany and Italy for ordinary people by exploring hundreds of letters written by a couple suddenly divided by borders; and Eva Pfanzelter critically evaluates the commemoration of the *Option* period.

Part III focuses on current challenges the province faces: Sarah Oberbichler investigates how major provincial newspapers presented the migration issue in the early 1990s; Julia Tapfer offers an analysis of how migrant societies have fared in South Tyrol; Friederike Haupt and Bettina Schlorhaufer analyse South Tyrolean regionalism in the arenas of music and architecture; and Irish artist Gareth Kennedy explores how anthropology was conducted in South Tyrol during the period of the Third Reich.

Part IV deals with the existence of borders and their relevance for South Tyrol's communities: Johanna Mitterhofer investigates life on the Austrian–Italian border; Paolo Valente looks at the significance of borders in the Meran area; and Martha Villa takes a detailed look at the small border community of Stilfs.

Finally, Part V adds to the ongoing discussion on belonging in South Tyrol: Antonio Elorza compares and contrasts the situations in Alsace, the Basque Country and South Tyrol; Aldo Mazza and Lucio Giudiceandrea argue that cohabitation of different linguistic groups in South Tyrol equals art; Hans-Karl Peterlini analyses difference and belonging in migration and ethnicity; Barbara Angerer and Siegfried Baur both investigate the use of language in the process of cohabitation of German- and Italian-speaking populations; and Chiara de Paoli challenges existing definitions of ethnic identity.

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