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The „South Tyrol Option Agreement“ (German: Option in Südtirol / Italian: Opzioni in Alto Adige)

In the following short essay I want to give a brief overview of the so called „South Tyrol Option Agreement“ (German: Option in Südtirol; Italian: Opzioni in Alto Adige). The Option refers to the period between 1939 and 1943, when native German speakers in South Tyrol and three communes in the province of Belluno had the choice with the following decision: either Option for the German Reich with subsequent emigration or remain in Italy. After giving a brief background, I explain the Option in more detail, analyse a particularity of today's Regional Autonomy and conclude with a conclusion.

Background

The South Tyrol region had been a site of claims and conflicts between German nationalism and Italian nationalism. One of the main founders of Italian nationalism, Giuseppe Mazzini, together with Ettore Tolomei, claimed that the German-speaking population of South Tyrol was in fact a Germanised population of Roman origin that needed to be "liberated and returned to its rightful culture". South Tyrol, renamed "Province of Bolzano", had been part of Italy since the end of the First World War. After the rise of fascism in 1922, a policy of Italianisation was relentlessly implemented in the area. Every place, down to the smallest village, was given Italian names and even surnames were translated. The process intensified in the 1930s, when Benito Mussolini's government encouraged thousands of southern Italians to move to the region in a deliberate attempt to reduce the indigenous German-speaking population to a minority status. Italy achieved the enlargement of the national territory up to the supposedly natural border of the Italian cultural area at the Brenner Pass, which was the aim of the Irredentist movement. The German language disappeared from the public sphere, German surnames were forcibly Italianised, the ancestral place names had to give way to Ettore Tolomei's creations. After the annexation of Austria on 12th March 1938, South Tyrol bordered directly on the German Reich. Especially after the annexation of the Sudetenland, many South Tyroleans hoped to be reunited with the rest of the Tyrol within the German Reich.

The Option

The option began in 1939 and resulted in great social upheaval. The question of whether to leave one's homeland in the course of emigration to the German Reich or to remain in South Tyrol, which had been shaped by the fascist Italianisation campaign, developed into a major issue of conflict, which also resulted in violent attacks and acts of terror between the groups of people who opted for staying and others that voted for leaving. The Option Agreement presented South Tyroleans with a complicated decision-making process. A positive perspective on emigration, to which one

committed oneself in the case of an option for Germany, namely the associated hope for freecultural development and a secure economic existence, was difficult to reconcile with the loss of one's ancestral homeland and leaving one's possessions behind. The debate about whether to emigrate or stay in fascist Italy became the subject of heated discussions even in the small villages and across many families.

In October 1939 Hitler and Mussolini concluded an agreement on the resettlement of the German population in South Tyrol and of the Cimbrians in the provinces of Trento, Vicenza, Belluno, Verona and Udine. At an express request of the Italians, the Ladins were also included in the treaty area. The approximately 250,000 "ethnic German" South Tyroleans (80% of the resident population) as well as the Cimbrians were offered the option of Germany. Those who wanted to remain in Italy had to continue to put up with the repressive Italianisation campaign that had begun in the early 1920s. The agreement buried the hopes of many South Tyroleans for reunification with the northern and eastern parts of Tyrol, which belonged to the Republic of Austria, and which had intensified in 1938 after the annexation of Austria to the German Reich. 85-90% of the population opted for emigration. The Option destroyed many families and the development of the province's economy was delayed for many years. However, only about 75,000 South Tyroleans actually emigrated to the German Reich until the operational zone Alpenvorland was incorporated into the German sphere of power in September 1943, which made the option question obsolete for the time being. After the end of the war, about 20,000-25,000 former optants returned to South Tyrol as "resettlers", where the Gruber-De-Gasperi Agreement guaranteed the German-speaking minority equal status for their language, extensive cultural freedoms and a certain political autonomy.

Despite Austrian efforts, South Tyrol remained part of Italy after World War II, and many chose to assume Italian citizenship after the De Gasperi-Gruber Agreement of September 1946. It was named after the Austrian Foreign Minister (Karl Gruber) and the Italian Prime Minister (Alcide De Gasperi) and agreed that Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol would remain part of Italy while guaranteeing its autonomy. Returnees had to register themselves and their children, and had to prove, by means of a birth certificate, that they were entitled to Italian citizenship.

Ethnic proportional representation and its critics

At this point I would like to turn my attention to a regional peculiarity as a result of the „Second Autonomy Statute“, because I consider it particularly noteworthy and to my knowledge unique in Europe. The "Second Statute of Autonomy" of 1972, which in general significantly strengthened the legal and financial possibilities of the South Tyrol, has since then provided, with regard to ethnic proportional representation, that job plans in the public administration are reserved for "citizens of each of the three language groups in proportion to the strength of the language groups as shown by the declarations of affiliation made in the official census". The legal implementing regulation on proportional representation of 1976 also provides for a privilege for candidates who have already been resident in South Tyrol for at least two years, and links new appointments to previously obtained proof of bilingualism or trilingualism. The first census, which was accompanied by the collection of the declaration of affiliation required for proportional representation, took place in 1981. At the time, it led to considerable political polemics, up to and including a three-day debate in the Italian parliament. Since then, it has been followed by the far less noticed state-wide censuses of 1991, 2001 and 2011.

Ethnic proportional representation was initially criticised primarily by the Italian-speaking side, since a large part of the jobs in the public service had been held by Italian-speaking South Tyroleans until the introduction of the proportional representation system. The regulation of ethnic proportional representation suddenly deprived the largely urban Italian-speaking population of South Tyrol of a considerable part of their original employment opportunities, while ethnic proportional representation opened up additional employment opportunities for the German-speaking population rooted in agriculture, trade and tourism. Criticism from the German-speaking side at the beginning of the 1980s was formulated above all by the representatives of the New Left/Nuova Sinistra. The New Left warned of an increase in social tensions between the language groups, which were in fact triggered by the economic effects of ethnic proportional representation, and which could be clearly seen in the electoral successes of the Italian neo-fascists (Movimento Sociale Italiano) from 1985 onwards. With the increasing practice of ethnic proportional representation, the accompanying tendency towards negative selection of public personnel was also criticised. Due to the fact that applicants are primarily selected according to ethnic criteria (German, Italian, Ladin) and only then according to professional quality criteria, some jobs (e.g. in the health sector) could not always be filled with the best qualified applicant. In extreme cases, jobs that urgently needed to be filled even had to remain unfilled despite the fact that there were applicants with relevant expertise. After several years, this experience finally led to a partial softening of the ethnic proportional representation in selected professions.

Conclusion

South Tyrol has increasingly been looked at as a success story, mainly because of the pacification of the conflict in the region. The model of “power sharing” – the division and sharing of political and administrative power among the social groups of a territory – is increasingly being studied academically and also by political delegations. 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, the Cold War, Europeanization and globalization. South Tyrol offers a case study of the cultural implications of the interaction of these complex issues throughout the twentieth century.

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