

Local Reactions to *Option* in South Tyrol: Reconsidering Nationality in Local Society

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Introduction

This paper investigates the effects of the 1939 South Tyrol Option Agreement (*Option*) (German: (*die*) *Option*) for the few years following Summer/ Fall 1939, wherein German-speaking South Tyroleans exercised their choice of adopting German nationality and migrating to Germany, or maintaining Italian nationality and staying in place in Italian territory. By focusing on the actions of local inhabitants after the voting period, this study shows differences between local concepts and motivations surrounding nationhood and citizenship, and the versions debated in state politics. This study reframes *Option*—long interpreted as the intersection of the extreme nationalisms of German National-Socialism and Italian Fascism—from the viewpoint of local inhabitants, especially in terms of their reactions and motives surrounding voting and emigration. Particular focus will be placed on the majority who chose German citizenship but did not migrate to Germany.

1. General understanding of *Option*

Option is considered a critical historical issue in South Tyrolean and Austrian research, referring not only to the agreement between the Nazi regime and Fascist Italy in June 1939, but also to the occurrences surrounding it.¹ Shinsenji's work on commemoration in Bolzano/ South Tyrol² shows a significant gap between

¹ For example, publications on *Option* flourished as its 50th anniversary was celebrated in 1989. At the time, a commemorative exhibition was held in a museum in Bozen / Bolzano, the capital of Bolzano prefecture (South Tyrol), with prefectural government support. Representative descriptions of *Option* from the exhibition that were later published remain the official position of the South Tyrol provincial government. See



local German and Italian inhabitants in understanding the regional historical background, caused by contrasting experiences of the interwar period and the Second World War, including the time of *Option*.

1-1 Descriptions of *Option* in Tyrolean and South Tyrolean Historiography

Option is usually described alongside the preceding conflict between the region's two main ethno-linguistic groups: Germans and Italians, with Italian nationalism fuelling antagonism towards the German speaking population.³

After the First World War, the former Habsburg area of Tyrol and Trentino were annexed by the Kingdom of Italy, and German-speaking locals found themselves becoming a minority group. The Italian Fascist Regime directed strict assimilation policies at German-speaking citizens as soon as it came to power. During the 1920s, school tuition and administration in German were prohibited. Then, German family names were converted into Italian equivalents. During the 1920s and 1930s, assimilation policies focused on changing local economic structures through the dissolution of agricultural associations, or prohibiting the traditional inheritance systems practiced by German-speakers. Finally, the Bolzano surrounds were developed for industry, leading to an influx of Italian laborers from other regions into South Tyrol.⁴

Meanwhile, Italian authorities saw Nazi Germany's influence on South Tyrol's German-speaking population as a serious threat. Some German-speakers were suspected by authorities of being Nazi-sympathizers and agitators, who were spreading the idea of a Greater Germany among locals.

Germany and Italy were constrained in that they could not redraw their borders for political and military reasons, the official friendship as Axis-partners and the guarantee for the Brenner boundary between Germany and Italy. The two states agreed to allow locals to choose between German citizenship and emigration to the Reich, or maintaining Italian nationality, with its obligations to assimilate, and remaining in the area. The first agreement was made on June 23rd 1939. A second, more detailed agreement was entered into on Oct. 21st the same year. Ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*) in South Tyrol, Trentino, and Belluno had until December 31. 1939 to exercise their option.⁵

<http://www.provinz.bz.it/kulturabteilung/kultur/3940.asp>. (last visited March 1st, 2017.) More historically specific writings on *Option* were also edited in 1989 by the Institute for Modern History of the University of Innsbruck. Klaus Eisterer, Rolf Steininger (Hg.), *Die Option: Südtirol zwischen Faschismus und Nationalsozialismus*, Innsbruck, 1989. A textbook aimed at inter-linguistic regional history edited by local historians also gives detailed explanations of the process, and various experiences, surrounding *Option*. See Stefan Lechner, Giorgio Mezzalira, Luciana Palla, Alessandra Spada und Martha Verdorfer (Hg.), *Übergänge und Perspektiven. Gründungszüge der Landesgeschichte Südtirol seit 1919*, Verlagsanstalt Athesia Bozen, 2013, 90–115.

² Yuki Shinsenji, *Memories of Resistances in the Alpine Borderlands: The 70th Anniversary of Liberation in Bolzano*, in: *Quadrante*, No. 19, 2017, 17–21.

³ Further popular explanation of *Option* can be found for example, in Lechner, Mezzalira, Palla, Spada und Verdorfer (Hg.), *Übergänge und Perspektiven*. A simpler, more typical description of *Option* can be found on the website from the first footnote.

⁴ Italian population growth in Bozen/ Bolzano: 7,000 (1910), 20,300 (1921), 80,800 (1939). From, Rolf Steininger, 23. Juni 1939: Gehen oder Bleiben? Die Option in Südtirol, in: Rolf Steininger / Michael Gehler (Hg.), *Österreich im 20. Jahrhundert: ein Studienbuch in zwei Bänden, Band.1, von der Monarchie zum Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Wien / Köln / Weimar, 1997, 371. For categories of Italy's nationalist policies, see Steininger, 23. Juni 1939: Gehen oder Bleiben?, 367–410.

⁵ Italian authorities did not anticipate moving German-speaking farmers on the rural mountainside. Antony Evelyn Alcock, *The History of the South Tyrol Question*, London, 1970, 51–52. The content of the agreement: Walter Freiberg, *Südtirol und der italienische Nationalismus. Entstehung und Entwicklung der europäischen Minderheitenfrage. Quellenmäßig dages. v. Walter Freiberg, hrsg. von Josef Fontana, Bd. 2: Dokumente (Schlern- Schriften 282/2)*, Innsbruck 1990. 548–554.

In these circumstances, local villages were heavily influenced by the propaganda of the well-organized *Völkischer Kampfring Südtirols* (VKS), an outlawed group of Nazi-sympathizers.⁶ Propaganda-battles (*Propagandaschlacht*)⁷ between those who favoured maintaining Italian citizenship (*Dableiber*) and those who favoured leaving for Germany and the Third Reich (*Optanten*)⁸ were not uncommon. The VKS persecuted the *Dableiber* minority through slander, propaganda-battles, massive fliers, and even violence, until the voting period (German: *Optionsfrist*) ended on 12. 31. 1939.

Although 86% opted for Germany, many stayed put. Around 75,000—or one third—of the *Optanten* emigrated. Then in 1941 immigration all but stopped.⁹ Those who left after voting tended to hold little property at home.¹⁰ Meanwhile, two thirds of German-voters delayed emigration and many eventually remained in place, their implicit denial of nationality deviating from their expressed choice.

Most descriptions of *Option* assume Italian state nationalism as a precondition, choosing instead to focus on the process of voting for citizenship, with conflict between *Dableiber* and *Optanten* interpreted as *Propaganda-Schlacht* between nationalities. Therein, nationality-choice was simplified into the nationalistic chant, “German or Italian” (“Deutsch oder Wälsch”).¹² From this point of view, the agreement between the two countries was supposed be a culmination of nationalist policies.

This interpretation does not explain why two-thirds of voters voted to leave but ended up remaining at home. Indeed, attitudes towards German or Italian nationality were not the only factors in how and whether voters followed through on their intention to migrate. Records of those who migrated immediately or soon after the vote appear in monthly reports from *Aderst* in South Tyrol. These indicate that local inhabitants involved in *Option* understood nationality more flexibly and with more malleability than was previously understood. *Option* may have been a decision of self-interest, rather than an expression of loyalty to a fixed idea of nationality.

1-2 South Tyrol as a borderland

The diverse ways locals acted upon their choices suggest that attitudes towards nationality were typically complex in multilingual regions of the former Habsburg Monarchy, even amongst the simplified nationalist narratives preceding WWII. For example, Judson suggests the presence of a “national indifference” until the mid-twentieth century¹³ which provides a theoretical basis for the phenomena surrounding *Option*. South

⁶ *Völkischer Kampfring Südtirols* (VKS) means ‘South Tyrol as an ethnic battlefield’. After *Option* the group changed its name to *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Optanten für Deutschland* (AdO), a co-operative that provided legal/procedural support, and liaisons between those who opted to emigrate, and the official German Repatriation and Emigration Office, *Amtliche deutsche Ein- und Rückwandererstelle* (*Aderst*).

⁷ These conflicts were linked to assaults in the local community by mainly pro-German assailants on pro-Italian victims. Hans Heiss, *Option- Heimat- Opzioni*, in: *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 1991, 111–128.

⁸ The definition of *Dableiber* and *Optanten* is based on: Heiss, *Option- Heimat- Opzioni*, 122–123.

⁹ Karl Stuhlpfarrer, *Die defekte Umsiedlung*, in: Eisterer, Steininger (Hg.), *Die Option*, S. 293. There are several statistics for the results of the *Option* vote. For example, Cole J. and Wolf estimate: 267,265 voters participated in the four provinces of Bolzano, Trento, Belluno, Udine. 185,365 voted to leave for Germany, 38,274 opted to stay in Italy, and 43,626 refrained from voting. John W. Cole and Eric R. Wolf, *The Hidden Frontier: Ecology and Ethnicity in Alpine Valley, with a New Introduction*, Berkley/ Los Angeles/ London, 1999, 60. There is little mention or analysis in South Tyrol histories about those who abstained from the vote.

¹⁰ Lechner, Mezzalana, Palla, Spada und Verdorfer (Hg.), *Übergänge und Perspektiven*, 113.

¹² Nationalsozialistisches Flugblatt vom November 1939, in: Leopold Steurer, *Südtirol zwischen Rom und Berlin 1919–1939*, Wien/München/Zürich, 1980, 452–453. “Wälsch” is used here as a disparaging word for Italian.

¹³ Based on studies of borderlands in the former Habsburg Monarchy until the First World War, Judson mentions that local populations were still processing the concept of nationality even through the Interwar period. Pieter M. Judson, *Do Multiple Languages Mean a Multicultural Society? Nationalist ‘Frontiers’ in Rural Austria, 1880–1918*, in: Gary B.

Tyrol's neighbouring inhabitants also displayed a weak understanding of belonging to a nation. Among the Italian speaking populations in Trentino (south of South Tyrol), some inhabitants understood themselves only as locals, not as members of the Italian nation, and maintained their old relationships with German-speaking regional counterparts during the Interwar period.¹⁴ In multilingual Istria, opportunistic choices of nationality were observed after WWII.¹⁵ Austrian Tyrol and South Tyrol itself can be seen as a battlefield of ethno-cultural conflict in the former Habsburg Monarchy.¹⁶ With these studies, it can be assumed that South Tyrol also experienced a complicated and ongoing nationalizing process, like other borderlands of the former Habsburg Monarchy.

These concepts: a dynamic assimilation process, existing local ethnic conflict, and a fluid understanding of nationality among the local population, will help explain the inconsistency between the voting results of *Option* and the subsequent take-up of migration.

2. *Option* and actual migration behaviour

Option produced various intentions, reactions, and behaviours from both state actors and local inhabitants.

2-1 Germany and Italy's intentions regarding *Option*

The initiators of *Option*, Germany and Italy, attempted to manipulate the numbers of migrants for their own objectives. Germany aimed to attract as many South Tyroleans as possible to become soldiers for militarization, workers for industry, and settlers for occupied areas. At the same time, Germany wanted to obtain foreign currency brought in as South Tyroleans liquidated their holdings. According to the German Consul-General in Milan, Otto Bene,

“The best decision was that no citizens of the German Reich nor any German Volk („Volksdeutsche“) who voted for Germany, needed to emigrate before their property was assessed and proceeds from the sale sent from Italy to D. A. T. (Deutsche Abwicklungs-Treuhandgesellschaft mbH). I had struggled really hard in Rome to win this concession.”¹⁷

Here he argues that obtaining as much money as possible was of primary importance to the German government.

Italy on the other hand, desired partial, selective emigration. It wanted to be rid of political undesirables like underground Nazi-sympathizers without losing the productive farmers which formed the majority of the German population.

It can be said that state motives for migration did not necessarily match those of individual South Tyroleans.

Cohen/ Johannes Feichtinger (eds.), *Understanding Multiculturalism and the Central European Experience*, New York & Oxford, 2014, 61–82. Here, especially 62.

¹⁴ Roberta Pergher, Staging the Nation in Fascist Italy's “New Provinces”, in: *Austrian History Yearbook*, Vol. 43, Apr. 2012, 98–115.

¹⁵ Some decided their citizenship not according to language or national identity, but how it furthered other goals. Pamela Ballinger, History's “Illegibles”: National Indeterminacy in Istria, in: *Austrian History Yearbook*, Vol. 43, Apr. 2012, 116–137.

¹⁶ Laurence Cole, *» Für Gott, Kaiser und Vaterland «. Nationale Identität der deutschsprachigen Bevölkerung Tirols 1860–1914*, Frankfurt/New York, 2000, 17–18.

¹⁷ Bundesarchiv Koblenz (BA), Kleine Erwerbungen Nr. NS 27–1. Die Südtiroler Umsiedlung: Aufzeichnungen des Gesandten a. D. Otto Bene früher Beauftragter der Reichsregierung für die südtiroler Umsiedlung, 82.

2-2 Actions of local inhabitants

After voting ended, some inhabitants acted inconsistently to their vote.¹⁸ Those who emigrated, or exercised the re-settlement option earlier than others seemed to do so for economic reasons. Those who delayed their departure for a few years or indefinitely, seemed similarly opportunistic, staying in place on Italian soil with German citizenship until the German military occupation of South Tyrol.

Migration for economic motives

Ladin speakers in the Gröden Valley choose to move to the Third Reich before German speakers in other places, including South Tyrol. The Gröden locals aimed to transfer the valley's economic structure based on wood-curving industry and tourism in order to develop it in Germany. They selected a settlement area, negotiating directly with the Reich, with little mediation or support from the VKS, which was unusual at that time because it was usually the VKS who guided populations to choose German citizenship through massive propaganda campaigns. The plan to migrate the Gröden Valley locals to a location near Lienz in Austrian Tyrol was ultimately in vain, but their efforts were clearly motivated by economics, not nationalism or nationality.¹⁹

An example of voting against nationality or ethnicity concerns Italian-speaking settlers in Bozner Unterland, Bolzano and Merano. They voted for German citizenship as their *Volksdeutsche* neighbors did, expecting to gain better economic opportunities by migrating to the Third Reich.²⁰

These two examples show that inhabitants selected German citizenship and early immigration with economic, not ethnic motivations. However, they are generally considered exceptions to the voting and migration process in the historiography of *Option*. Yet, the problem remains as to why the vast majority of locals chose German nationality and migration, but remained in Italy.

Flexible post-vote attitudes to nationality and migration

A subsequent report notes the persistence of *Gegenpropaganda* (or anti-vote-for-Germany propaganda) after the voting period. Such propaganda could have dissuaded those who voted to migrate from actually doing so after *Option* period. If nothing else, those who had initially elected to migrate may have changed their decision due to other changing circumstances. It suggests that decisions remained fluid even after the *Optionsfrist* (Option-period), at least in unofficial circles.

“October 1941,
(...) I could not refrain from mentioning that the anti-propaganda actions by the countryside priests grows constantly stronger.(...)”²¹

¹⁸ Some returned illegally to Italy shortly after emigrating to the Reich. Stefan Lechner, Rückoption und Rücksiedlung nach Südtirol, in: Eisterer, Steininger, *Die Option*, 369.

¹⁹ Karl Stuhlpfarrer, *Die Umsiedlung der Südtiroler 1939/1940*, Wien, 1985. Alexander also investigates migration choices by local industrial elites in the Gröden Valley. Helmut Alexander, III. Die Umsiedlung der Südtiroler 1939–1945, in: Helmut Alexander, Stefan Lechner, Adolf Leidlmaier, *Heimatlos. Die Umsiedlung der Südtiroler*, Wien, 1993, 151–156.

²⁰ Paolo Valente, „Sobald die Deutschen einmal abgezogen sind Die „italienische Sprachgruppe“ in Südtirol und Option, in: Günter Pallaver/ Leopold Steurer (Hg.), *Deutsche! Hitler Verkauft Euch! Das Erbe von Option und Weltkrieg in Südtirol*, Bozen, 2011, 185–198.

²¹ Staatsarchiv Bozen/Archivio di Stato Bolzano(ASBZ), Amtliche deutsch Rück- u. Umsiedlungs Stelle (Aderst), b.330, D. Lage und Stimmungsbericht Bozen, 351.

Economic motives

Many who had voted to leave delayed migration upon hearing rumours about a poor economy confronting new settlers in the German Reich. Improving economic conditions at home cooled others' passion for emigration, as per this report:

“Merano, December 3rd 1941,

(...) There have been no changes in general over the last few months to conditions at the Merano branch office. The economic situation remains good; there is no unemployment. (...) But the general level of satisfaction does not increase the need to migrate.”²²

Migration intentions expressed by locals through voting on *Option* deviated from their more opportunistic approach to actual migration. Local inhabitants saw *Option* — supposedly a statement of nationality — as an opportunity to resettle in better economic conditions. In other words, they used *Option* for localized, individual needs, instead of the purposes imposed and assumed by their nationalist governments. This underlying attitude may have delayed emigration as changing circumstances supported remaining at home.

Conclusion

Italy and Germany can be said to have intended *Option* as a mechanism to include and exclude people for their own purposes. Italy for its assimilation policies on language and culture, and later to ease local industrialization and immigration from other parts of Italy. Third Reich Germany on the other hand, needed the South Tyrolean immigrants for their military and workforce.

Though locals' personal motives may have aligned with the governments', they were not precisely the same. *Option* offered locals an opportunity to select not only nationality, but also economic conditions. Cases of delaying or foregoing emigration, groups bargaining to preserve local economies, or Italian-speakers opting for German citizenship and residence rights are thus unsurprising, as new economic information came to light even while the political climate remained comparatively static. Economic self-interest and opportunism better explain actual migration phenomena surrounding *Option* than the assumed motives of nationalism and national identity.

Further investigation into this phenomenon could lead to rethinking other instances of dynamic nationality formation in borderlands around the time of the Second World War.

²² ASBZ, Aderst, b.330, C Stimmungsbericht Meran, 520.

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