



ARTICLE

# The 1939 Option Agreement and the ‘Consistent Ambivalence’ of Fascist Policies towards Minorities in the Italian New Provinces

Emmanuel Dalle Mulle<sup>1</sup>  and Alessandro Ambrosino<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Political History, Theory and Geography, Complutense University of Madrid, Spain, and <sup>2</sup>Department of International History and Politics, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, Switzerland  
Email: [edalle@ucm.es](mailto:edalle@ucm.es); [alessandro.ambrosino@graduateinstitute.ch](mailto:alessandro.ambrosino@graduateinstitute.ch)

## Abstract

The 1939 Option Agreement between Italy and Germany concerning South Tyrol was the first population transfer agreement in western European history. Its analysis offers a unique opportunity to shift the focus of the historiography on interwar minority questions from eastern to western Europe, thus challenging the lingering view of eastern Europe as a land of endemic ethnic heterogeneity and conflict. Furthermore, the 1939 Option illuminates a form of ‘consistent ambivalence’ that problematizes dominant analytical frameworks concerning the management of ethnic differences. Italian fascists consistently affirmed the inevitable assimilation, and therefore inclusion, of minorities within the Italian nation, but they also deeply distrusted them. As this ambivalent attitude reached a climax in the 1939 Option, in order to understand fascist behaviour during the implementation of the agreement we need to consider the longer history of fascist attempts to homogenize the new provinces. Three features structured these attempts: a belief that the assimilation of these minorities would be inevitable; the absence of means to carry out radical solutions; and a deep-seated distrust of the minorities. Fascist policy during the Option was simultaneously more ambivalent than the current historiography suggests and more consistent with the regime’s interwar homogenization policies.

In June 1939, the Italian fascist government and the German Nazi executive signed the so-called ‘Option Agreement’. The pact forced the overwhelmingly German-speaking population of South Tyrol, an Alpine province that Italy annexed from the Habsburg empire in 1919, to choose between keeping their Italian citizenship or acquiring German nationality and moving to the Reich. This dramatic event was the first population transfer agreement

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

between two governments in western European history and its analysis offers a unique opportunity to provide a more balanced assessment of interwar minority questions; one that shifts the focus of the current historiography on this topic from eastern to western Europe.

At the Paris Peace Conference, the Great Powers imposed a series of minority treaties, supervised by the League of Nations, on the new states arising from the fall of the eastern empires, as well as on some neighbouring old ones such as Romania and Bulgaria.<sup>1</sup> The Great Powers thus defined minorities as ‘a problem of Eastern Europe’ and overlooked minority questions in countries outside the minority protection system of the League of Nations, among them Italy.<sup>2</sup> This bias has led the international historiography to overwhelmingly focus on eastern European cases, indirectly contributing to what some authors have defined as the ‘pathologization’ of eastern Europe.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, the Option Agreement has remained virtually unknown outside the context of German–Italian diplomatic relations and regional Tyrolean history.<sup>4</sup>

In recent years, several historians have examined the 1939 Option from a wider angle. Matthew Frank has studied the negotiations between Italy and Germany in light of the 1923 Lausanne Treaty that acknowledged the expulsion of 900,000 Greeks from Turkey and imposed the forced resettlement of an additional 190,000 Greeks and 400,000 Muslims.<sup>5</sup> According to Frank, the Axis powers interpreted this exchange as a positive result of international diplomacy and used it to set up a ‘radical solution’ to achieve their goals of ethnic

<sup>1</sup> The full list of states can be found in Pablo de Azcárate, *League of Nations and national minorities: an experiment* (Washington, DC, 1945), pp. 94–5.

<sup>2</sup> The quote comes from Carlile A. Macartney, ‘Minorities: a problem of eastern Europe’, *Foreign Affairs*, 9 (1931), pp. 674–82. See also Mark Mazower, ‘Minorities and the League of Nations in interwar Europe’, *Daedalus*, 126 (1997), pp. 47–63, at p. 52.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of how the historiography has reproduced this bias and of recent works that attempt to bridge such an east–west divide, see Emmanuel Dalle Mulle, Davide Rodogno, and Mona Bieling, ‘Introduction: sovereignty, nationalism and the quest for homogeneity in interwar Europe’, in Emmanuel Dalle Mulle, Davide Rodogno, and Mona Bieling, eds., *Sovereignty, nationalism and the quest for homogeneity in interwar Europe* (London, 2023), pp. 1–20. On the ‘pathologization’ of eastern Europe, see Tara Zahra, ‘The “minority problem” and national classification in the French and Czechoslovak borderlands’, *Contemporary European History*, 17 (2008), pp. 137–65, at p. 143; Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg empire: a new history* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), p. 39; Maarten Van Ginderachter, Jon E. Fox, and James M. Brophy, ‘Conclusion: national indifference and the history of nationalism in modern Europe’, in Maarten Van Ginderachter and Jon Fox, eds., *National indifference and the history of nationalism in modern Europe* (London, 2018), pp. 248–54, at p. 248.

<sup>4</sup> Benedikt Erhard, ed., *Option, Heimat, Opzioni: Eine Geschichte Südtirols = una storia dell’ Alto Adige* (Bolzano, 1989); Rudolf Lill, *Die Option der Südtiroler 1939* (Bolzano, 1991); Mauro Scroccaro, *Dall’aquila bicipite alla croce uncinata* (Trento, 2000); Leopold Steurer, *Südtirol zwischen Rom und Berlin, 1919–1939* (Vienna, Munich, and Zurich, 1980); Rolf Steininger, *Südtirol im 20. Jahrhundert: Vom Leben und Überleben einer Minderheit* (Innsbruck, 2016); Karl Stuhlpfarrer, *Umsiedlung Südtirol: 1939–1940* (Vienna, 1985); Mario Toscano, *Alto Adige–South Tyrol: Italy’s frontier with the German world* (Baltimore, MD, 1975).

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Frank, *Making minorities history: population transfer in twentieth-century Europe* (Oxford, 2017), p. 8.

homogenization.<sup>6</sup> Roberta Pergher has analysed how Mussolini's dictatorship understood sovereignty in contested areas, such as the provinces annexed at the end of the First World War and the colonies in eastern Africa conquered in the 1930s. The regime, she argues, invested considerably in settlement plans to secure its hold over borderlands where its authority was still questioned. As previous strategies of forceful assimilation did not deliver the results sought by state officials, land colonization with Italians from other provinces of the Kingdom grew ever more important to the fascists and culminated in a radical attempt to replace the local population with the Option Agreement.<sup>7</sup>

These works have broadened the focus within the existing historiography. However, they also tend to over-emphasize the Italian government's determination to move the entire German-speaking population of South Tyrol, and the other areas included in the agreement such as the Canal Valley, north of the Brenner border. In contrast, this article argues that the fascist attitude towards the transfer of the German-speakers of South Tyrol was simultaneously more ambivalent than these recent works suggest and more consistent with the fascist regime's longer-standing assimilation policies. The 1939 Option thus illuminates an approach to minorities that we call 'consistent ambivalence' and that problematizes dominant analytical frameworks concerning inter-group relations and the management of national and ethnic differences. The dominant trend in this field has been to distinguish between policies of inclusion and exclusion.<sup>8</sup> As practices of inclusion can be coercive (notably in the case of assimilation), some authors have turned the inclusion-exclusion continuum into a triad composed of assimilation, exclusion, and accommodation.<sup>9</sup> Yet fascist policy in South Tyrol and Venezia Giulia, i.e. the territories annexed from Austria-Hungary at the end of the First World War (also called the new provinces), does not fit within any of these three categories.

The fascists, in wanting to include the populations living in South Tyrol and Venezia Giulia, believed that their assimilation to the Italian nation was inevitable. However, the regime could not fully overcome its deeply rooted mistrust of these populations. Whereas assimilation was the declared and desired goal of Italian authorities, their distrust of the minorities living in the new provinces placed the latter in a liminal state of simultaneous forceful inclusion and latent segregation. Despite being coerced to adopt the cultural

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>7</sup> Roberta Pergher, *Mussolini's nation-empire: sovereignty and settlement in Italy's borderlands, 1922-1943* (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 203-42.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Bommers, 'Transnationalism or assimilation', in Christina Boswell and Gianni D'Amato, eds., *Immigration and social systems: collected essays of Michael Bommers* (Amsterdam, 2012), pp. 107-24; Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), pp. 1-17; Arnold Suppan, 'Conclusion', in Paul Smith, ed., *Ethnic groups in international relations* (New York, NY, 1991), pp. 331-41; Andreas Wimmer, *Nation building: why some countries come together while others fall apart* (Princeton, NJ, 2020), pp. 26-52.

<sup>9</sup> Harris Mylonas, *The politics of nation-building: making co-nationals, refugees, and minorities* (New York, NY, 2012), pp. 21-3.

script of the majority, the minorities were marginalized, in a way that echoes the mechanism of inclusive exclusion theorized by Giorgio Agamben.<sup>10</sup> Although the regime was not monolithic and there were disagreements between fascist officers about the approach to follow in South Tyrol and Venezia Giulia, the consistent ambivalence examined in this article reveals a patterned behaviour that was prevalent throughout the interwar period. In broader terms, the article challenges the traditional eastern European focus of the literature on the League of Nations, self-determination, and the rise of minority questions after the First World War.<sup>11</sup> It shows that state authorities in the supposedly homogeneous and ‘civilized’ West did face minority questions and adopted harsh homogenizing policies that, however, did not produce the expected results.

In section I, we introduce the context of minority questions in interwar Italy and how this led to the Option Agreement between Italy and Germany. Sections II, III, and IV dissect the core features that structured fascist policy in the new provinces throughout the interwar years: the idea of inevitable assimilation, resource constraints, and the fascists’ deep-seated distrust of the minorities. In section V, we show how these core trends informed the bewildering behaviour of fascist authorities during the 1939 Option. Highlighting the continuity between interwar fascist approaches to minorities and the Option, we argue that, although deeply ambivalent, fascist policy in the new provinces was also remarkably consistent.

## I

In 1919, Italy annexed from Austria-Hungary the territories of Trentino-South Tyrol, the small Canal Valley, at the border with Austria and Slovenia, and Venezia Giulia, an area including the cosmopolitan city of Trieste, its hinterland, and the region of Istria. South Tyrol was inhabited by a local majority of about 200,000 German-speakers, while Venezia Giulia was home to around 500,000 Slovenian- and Croatian-speakers. As a result, Italian authorities faced the task

<sup>10</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: sovereign power and bare life* (Stanford, CA, 1998); Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: the witness and the archive* (New York, NY, 1999). For other authors who have emphasized the existence of contradictory approaches, see Lerna Ekmekcioglu, ‘Republic of paradox: the League of Nations minority protection regime and the New Turkey’s step-citizens’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 46 (2014), pp. 657–79; Pergher, *Mussolini’s nation-empire*, p. 169. In the American context, similar considerations have been proposed by Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American life: the role of race, religion, and national origins* (New York, NY, 1964), pp. 68–80; Catherine S. Ramirez, *Assimilation: an alternative history* (Berkeley, CA, 2020). Regarding the concept of ambivalence, we build on Nathaniel Berman’s definition. See Nathaniel Berman, *Passion and ambivalence: colonialism, nationalism, and international law* (Leiden, 2012), p. 414.

<sup>11</sup> On the League of Nations and minorities, see Carole Fink, ‘The League of Nations and the minorities question’, *World Affairs*, 157 (1995), pp. 197–205; Mazower, ‘Minorities and the League of Nations’. On self-determination after the Great War, see Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian moment: self-determination and the international origins of anticolonial nationalism* (Oxford, 2007). On the Paris system, see Eric D. Weitz, ‘From the Vienna to the Paris system: international politics and the entangled histories of human rights, forced deportations, and civilizing missions’, *American Historical Review*, 113 (2008), pp. 1313–43.

of incorporating populations speaking different languages and showing little identification with the Kingdom, even outrightly opposing annexation.<sup>12</sup>

Italian policy-makers had already faced issues related to linguistic and cultural heterogeneity. These included the integration of linguistic groups such as the francophones of Aosta Valley and debates on whether southerners were ‘true’ Italians or not.<sup>13</sup> However, minority organizations in South Tyrol and Venezia Giulia contested Italian rule much more vigorously and called for broader forms of cultural and political autonomy than previous minority actors had ever done.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, such contestation arose at a time when minorities turned into a key international question. As suggested by Eric Weitz, the Paris Peace Conference marked the transition from an international order based on state sovereignty and dynastic legitimacy, to a so-called ‘Paris system’ grounded in population politics and ‘an ideal of state sovereignty as rooted in national homogeneity’.<sup>15</sup> As a consequence, minorities, i.e. populations whose existence challenged the congruence between state and nation, became an issue of primary international concern, so much so that the peace treaties established a minority protection system supervised by the League of Nations.<sup>16</sup> The combination of these factors caused considerable anxiety among Italian politicians and cast the minority question in a significantly different light.

Post-1918 minority questions, in Italy and beyond, were not about heterogeneity per se. They were rather about sovereignty and perceived loyalty to the state.<sup>17</sup> In the context of the ‘triumph’ of Wilsonian self-determination, minorities were considered populations who did not belong to, or did not identify with, the dominant nation that was deemed to have the right to govern the state.<sup>18</sup> In practice, however, throughout Europe the boundaries dividing majorities and minorities were contested and fluid. The minority treaties did not offer a clear definition of ‘minority’ and simply enumerated some elements (race, religion, and language) that could help to identify one.<sup>19</sup> In the Italian

<sup>12</sup> Pamela Ballinger, ‘“Authentic hybrids” in the Balkan borderland’, *Current Anthropology*, 20 (2004), pp. 31–60, at p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> Pamela Ballinger, *The world refugees made: decolonization and the foundations of postwar Italy* (Ithaca, NY, 2020), p. 148; Tullio Omezzoli, ‘Valle d’Aosta e fascismo: dalla incompatibilità costituzionale all’armonia prestabilita’, *Storia e Regione*, 20 (2011), pp. 40–9; Silvana Patriarca, *Italian vices: nation and character from the Risorgimento to the Republic* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 74–108.

<sup>14</sup> Rolf Wörsdorfer, ‘Die Grenze, der Osten, die Minderheiten und die Modernisierung – Nationalstaat und ethnische Gruppen in Deutschland und in Italien’, in Christof Dipper, ed., *Deutschland und Italien 1860–1960: Politische und kulturelle Aspekte im Vergleich* (Berlin, 2005), pp. 191–2.

<sup>15</sup> Weitz, ‘From the Vienna to the Paris system’, p. 1314.

<sup>16</sup> Carole Fink, ‘Minority rights as an international question’, *Contemporary European History*, 9 (2000), pp. 385–400.

<sup>17</sup> On the concept of minority as a political stance rather than an ethno-demographic fact, see Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism reframed: nationhood and the national question in the New Europe* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 5–6.

<sup>18</sup> Jennifer Jackson Preece, *National minorities and the European nation-states system* (Oxford, 1998), p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Treaty between the Principal Allied and Associated Powers and Poland, 28 June 1919, art. 8, <http://ungarisches-institut.de/dokumente/pdf/19190628-3.pdf> (accessed on 8 Feb. 2023).

context, two terms, *allogeni* and *alloglotti*, reflected the contradictions around the category of minority. In most cases, the fascists used these words to refer to the inhabitants of the new provinces that did not speak Italian as their native language. The terms were synonyms and indicated a divergence from some kind of Italian norm, suggesting that the *allogeni/alloglotti* were Italian by citizenship, but their true nationality was unclear. *Allogeno* referred more strictly to national or ethnic belonging, while *alloglotta* indicated someone who spoke a language different from Italian and generally implied a higher chance of assimilation in the majority culture. These terms allowed fascist officers and intellectuals to name these populations without using the term minority or calling them Germans or Yugoslavs. The fascists could thus distinguish them from 'normal' Italians, while at the same time keeping the door open to their eventual assimilation and denying the existence of minorities in Italy altogether.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the ambiguity surrounding the concept of minority, most contemporary commentators referred to minorities as national minorities and tended to emphasize two features. The first was a claim of difference, in national terms, coming from a substantial share of members of the minority. This claim asserted that the minority constituted a political community distinct from the majority group that identified with the state. The second feature was an asymmetric power relation between the minority and the rest of the inhabitants of the state, where the minority was in a non-dominant position.<sup>21</sup>

In the immediate post-war period, Italian politicians gave assurances that they would treat the inhabitants of South Tyrol and Venezia Giulia liberally. By contrast, the fascists never concealed their aim to assimilate the minorities and eagerly pursued this goal once in power. At first, they relied on measures such as the imposition of Italian in schools, public administration, and the public space, the Italianization of names, and the suppression of minority organizations. Later, the regime also tried to modify the demographic balance in the new provinces through a policy of land colonization that entailed buying land from non-Italian-speakers and giving it to Italians from the old provinces. Yet these attempts only succeeded superficially. When Hitler took power in Germany and set out to unite all German minorities scattered around Europe within the Reich, Italian sovereignty over the new provinces was still highly contested. The Nazis' accession had a double effect on Italian domestic affairs. It alarmed the fascist regime in Italy about potential future attempts on behalf of the new leadership in Berlin to annex South Tyrol. Furthermore, it fuelled hopes among the South Tyrolean population that Hitler could eventually realize his plans to redraw the map of Europe. Although Hitler repeatedly declared to be ready to sacrifice South Tyrol in exchange for a solid alliance with fascist Italy, by the time of the 1938 *Anschluss* it became clear to both governments in Rome and Berlin that a definitive solution to the question of South

<sup>20</sup> Andrea Di Michele, 'The fascist view of the "allogeni" in the border regions', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 28 (2023), pp. 90–112, at p. 107.

<sup>21</sup> De Azcárate, *League of Nations*, pp. 3–6; Jacques Fouques Duparc, *La protection des minorités, de race, de langue et de religion, étude de droit des gens* (Paris, 1922), pp. 17–30; Carlile A. Macartney, *National states and national minorities* (London, 1934), pp. 1–18.

Tyrol had to be found. This chain of events led the two regimes to sign the Option Agreement in June 1939. By the end of December of the same year, the local population had to decide whether they wanted to leave their homeland forever or to remain and behave, in accordance with the fascists' perspective, as 'good Italians'. A vote for Italy tacitly implied the loss of any hope of maintaining a different national and linguistic identity, which a substantial part of the German-speaking population of the region had stubbornly strived to preserve throughout the interwar period.<sup>22</sup>

For the fascists, the Option Agreement represented an implicit recognition that twenty years of harsh Italianization policies in South Tyrol had failed. Although there were some important members of the Italian regime who were in favour of a complete resettlement of the South Tyrolean population, the majority aimed to only expel supposed 'agitators' who were deemed to be fomenting popular resistance against the government's assimilationist measures. This was evident in the shock expressed by many fascists when, in the final months of 1939, they realized that an overwhelming majority of the German-speaking population was about to cast its vote in favour of emigration to Germany (eventually, the *Optanten*, i.e. those who voted for relocation, accounted for about 85 per cent of the overall population of the province). Suddenly, Italian authorities faced a thorny dilemma. After having bombastically claimed for about two decades that the South Tyroleans would inevitably assimilate into Italian culture, they were now confronted with the possibility of a plebiscite in favour of emigration to Germany that threatened to inflict a serious wound to Italian national pride. From September 1939, the regime launched a campaign to convince the South Tyrolean population to remain. At the same time, both for reasons of prestige and distrust of the *allogeni*, the fascists could not throw all their weight behind this campaign, therefore making only inconsistent efforts at reassuring those who intended to stay (called the *Dableiber*) that they would be treated fairly after the vote.

This article argues that in order to understand why the fascists adopted such hesitant behaviour in the second half of 1939, one needs to consider the longer history of Italian homogenization policies in South Tyrol and Venezia Giulia. These attempts had three major characteristics: a naïve belief that the assimilation of the minorities would be inevitable; the lack of means to carry out radical land colonization policies; and a deep-seated distrust of the *allogeni*, even of those who enthusiastically assimilated to Italian culture and served the Fascist Party loyally. These three features structured fascist policy in the new provinces throughout the interwar years and led to a form of consistent ambivalence that culminated in the puzzling behaviour adopted by the regime during the Option.

The next sections dissect these three features. They also show that minorities were not only a 'problem of eastern Europe'.<sup>23</sup> Western European

<sup>22</sup> For more details on the events leading up to the agreement, see Christoph von Hartungen, 'Come si giunse alle Opzioni del 1939. L'Alto Adige/Südtirol nella prima metà del Novecento', in Christoph von Hartungen, Fabrizio Miori, and Tiziano Rosani, eds., *Le lettere aperte 1939-1943: L'Alto Adige delle opzioni* (2 vols., Bolzano, 2006), I, pp. 67-82; Steurer, *Südtirol*, pp. 345-402.

<sup>23</sup> Macartney, 'Minorities'.

governments confronted minority questions too and some of them tried to solve these questions through harsh homogenization policies.

## II

On 15 July 1923, a bald bearded man with a prominent moustache gave a speech at a public meeting in the municipal theatre of Bolzano, the capital of South Tyrol. His name was Ettore Tolomei and he served as Mussolini's adviser on questions related to the German-speaking population of this region. The speech, entitled *Provvedimenti per l'Alto Adige* (Measures for Alto Adige), listed a series of policies that would ensure the Italianization of the area after centuries of Austro-Hungarian control. The *Provvedimenti* had already been endorsed by the recently installed fascist government in Rome and constituted a kind of roadmap to the region's 'redemption'. The plan included a mix of Italian language imposition in the public space, the assimilation of youth by means of schooling in Italian, and the transfer of land from German- to Italian-speakers.

Tolomei's blueprint built on the idea that South Tyrol was geographically Italian, but foreigners had invaded it and de-nationalized the local population. Hence, in spite of their German-speaking nature, the inhabitants of South Tyrol were in fact Italian and the government had the duty to re-awaken their Italianness.<sup>24</sup> Other notable members of the National Fascist Party (PNF, *Partito Nazionale Fascista*) shared similar ideas. In 1927, the South Tyrolean fascist Giuseppe Cristofolini reminded readers of the party periodical *Gerarchia* that Austria-Hungary had favoured the emigration of Germans in the area in the late nineteenth century and had thus upset the natural Italian character of the province.<sup>25</sup> Benito Mussolini himself declared, in a speech given in parliament in June 1926, that out of the 180,000 German-speakers in South Tyrol, 80,000 were Italians who had been Germanized and promised 'to redeem them'.<sup>26</sup> A year later, addressing parliament again, the *Duce* repeated that 'up there [in South Tyrol] there is a minority of Italians who speak a German dialect as their language of use, and they have only been speaking this way for a century'. In his concluding remarks, Mussolini outlined measures to more speedily complete the Italianization of the 'inhabitants of Alto Adige, whom we consider as Italian citizens who must rediscover themselves'.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1920s, not only did Mussolini assert that the inhabitants of the new provinces in the north and in the east were 'disguised' Italians, but also affirmed that these populations could not resist the 'exceptional' assimilative power of the Italian culture. For instance, in a meeting in November 1922 with some delegates representing the Slovenian-speaking population of Venezia Giulia, the *Duce* quietly informed his guests that their transformation into Italians was inevitable since the Italian '3,000-year-old culture conquered

<sup>24</sup> Antony E. Alcock, *The history of the South Tyrol question* (London, 1970), p. 38.

<sup>25</sup> Giuseppe Cristofolini, 'Gli allogeni', *Gerarchia*, 8 (1927), pp. 645–7, at p. 646.

<sup>26</sup> 'Le recise dichiarazioni', *Corriere della Sera*, 7 Feb. 1926, morning edition, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Benito Mussolini, *Opera omnia: 27 maggio 1927 - 11 febbraio 1929. 23: Dal discorso dell'Ascensione agli Accordi del Laterano* (Florence, 1963), pp. 368–9.

everyone until now'. 'This is why – he added – I do not fear the Slavs, and I do not wish for a violent assimilation, as if Italy feared them.'<sup>28</sup>

Mussolini might have been more inclined to acknowledge in private, rather than in public, whatever doubts he may have had about the possibility of assimilating the minorities. Yet, in a circular of November 1925 that he sent to all the ministries of his government to detail some guidelines for their work in the territories annexed from Austria-Hungary, Mussolini stressed that those areas were originally Italian and their Italian nature had been erased 'only because of arbitrary and violent actions of foreign governments'.<sup>29</sup> He thus recommended unity of action and a carrot and stick policy aimed at punishing 'agitators', who would hamper the *allogeni's* assimilation. The rest of the population should experience the advantages of belonging to the Italian state.<sup>30</sup>

In the late 1920s, some party members began to realize that assimilation would be harder than initially expected. However, for most fascist officers this recognition did not put into question the supposedly inevitable nature of the process. In 1927, the Italian ambassador in Vienna, Giacinto Auriti, predicted that South Tyrol would remain the main obstacle of a friendly relationship between Italy and Austria and this would last 'for ten years at least, that is, until the generation born in that province after its re-conquest would become adult'.<sup>31</sup> Despite his concerns for Austro-Italian relations, Auriti was still optimistic about the prospects of the assimilation of South Tyrolean youth. Similarly, a couple of years later, the prefect of Bolzano concluded that 'the alien element becomes ever more sympathetic towards Fascism and the veiled hostility that it manifested towards all that is Italian is almost completely gone'.<sup>32</sup> If assimilation had not occurred yet, several members of the regime argued, this was mostly because of the anti-Italian activities of some agitators financed from abroad.

Against this more sober, but still optimistic, appreciation of the dynamics of assimilation in the new provinces, some fascists began outlining alternative pathways, notably land colonization. In the same 1927 *Gerarchia* issue cited before, Ettore Tolomei raised doubts about the policies adopted until then and wrote: 'schools are an excellent thing and on this matter we are proceeding excellently, but schools bear only an ephemeral fruit if a group of Italian families do not settle in any of the Alto Adige villages, if Italian ownership [of the land] will not be extended'.<sup>33</sup> Encouraging the immigration of

<sup>28</sup> Jože Bitežnik to Wilfan, 25 Nov. 1922, Historical Archive of the city of Ljubljana, AS 1164 Wilfan, box 824, fo. 17.

<sup>29</sup> The president of the Council of Ministries to the ministers' secretaries of state, 1 Nov. 1925, Archivio centrale dello stato (ACS), Interno, Direzione Generale Amministrazione Civile, Divisione II, Comuni, box 2002.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* On the persistence of this belief about the fundamental Italianness of the *allogeni* in the internal exchanges of fascist officers see Di Michele, 'The fascist view', p. 99.

<sup>31</sup> Auriti to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 16 Oct. 1927, Archivio storico diplomatico, Affari Generali 1919–31, Austria, box 866.

<sup>32</sup> Relazioni dei prefetti, ACS, Interno, G Associazioni, Relazioni dei Prefetti, box 227, fo. 1929.

<sup>33</sup> Ettore Tolomei, 'Le due provincie', *Gerarchia*, 8 (1927), pp. 625–43, at p. 643.

Italians from the other provinces to alter the demographic balance became a new priority.<sup>34</sup>

However, the regime never gave up its assimilationist efforts. On the contrary, in the 1930s, the authorities even bolstered their attempts, despite rising doubts about the possibility of Italianizing the *allogeni* and the growing priority given to colonization. The government also tried to penetrate the minorities' social fabric by establishing fascist organizations dedicated to entertainment (*Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro*), youth (*Opera Nazionale Balilla*), and welfare (*Opera nazionale di assistenza all'Italia redenta*) in the new provinces. Through language classes for adults, farming schools, kindergartens, summer camps for kids, free lunches for the destitute, winter subsidies to the unemployed, plays, and sporting events, obviously all in Italian, the regime aimed to win the support of the local population.<sup>35</sup> The idea was that the *allogeni* could not help but appreciate the material advantages that the regime brought to them and, slowly, they would begin identifying with their new state.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, as we will explore in more detail below, the logic behind settlement was to surround minority communities in order to better assimilate them, rather than simply replacing expelled *allogeni* with Italians from other provinces.

The reason why the idea of assimilating minorities through Italianization retained its currency despite its lack of success had to do with the combination of two conceptions of national identity: the organicist conception of the nation-state, whereby the national community was deemed to be similar to a living organism, on the one hand, and the mainly voluntaristic nature of the Italian national identity on the other. In Nazi Germany, the organicist conception of the nation went along with a strong biological racism that could easily justify the expulsion of minorities from the national body. In contrast, Italy's wide regional heterogeneity made it harder, although not impossible, for a strictly biological understanding of the nation to take roots. Before the introduction of racial laws in the late 1930s, and outside the context of the colonization of Africa, Italian racism was based more on images of superiority of the Italian culture and the assimilative might of the Italian nation than on fantasies of biological racial purity, although the latter were not absent and spread further after 1938.<sup>37</sup> Admitting that the minorities had to be expelled

<sup>34</sup> Mussolini to the prefect of Bolzano, 15 Nov. 1927, ACS, SPD, Carteggio riservato, box 2, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Milica Kacin-Wohinz, 'Gli sloveni della Venezia Giulia alla fine degli anni Trenta', *Qualestoria*, 20 (1992), pp. 51–72, at p. 60; Adriano Andri and Giulio Mellinato, *Scuola e confine: le istituzioni educative della Venezia Giulia, 1915–1945* (Trieste, 1994), p. 213.

<sup>36</sup> Milica Kacin-Wohinz, 'Orientamento nazionale, politico e culturale degli sloveni e dei croati nella Venezia-Giulia tra le due guerre', *Qualestoria*, 16 (1988), pp. 51–68, at p. 60.

<sup>37</sup> Stefano Bartolini, *Fascismo antislavo: il tentativo di bonifica etnica al confine nord orientale* (Pistoia, 2006), p. 43. On the historiography of Italian racism, see Olindo De Napoli, 'The origin of the Racist Laws under fascism: a problem of historiography', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 17 (2012), pp. 106–22; Claudio Pogliano, 'Il contributo italiano al razzismo del XX secolo', *Nuncius*, 14 (1999), pp. 663–9. On racism and the Southern Question in the liberal period, see Giovanni Cerro, 'Una "razza mediterranea"? il dibattito antropologico sulla questione meridionale (1897–1907)', *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken*, 102 (2022), pp. 386–416. On racism in the context of the colonization of Africa and on the racial laws of the 1930s, see Riccardo Bonavita, 'Lo sguardo dall'alto: le forme della razzizzazione nei romanzi

because it had been impossible to assimilate them was tantamount to recognizing that the fascists had been wrong all along about the supposedly overwhelming assimilative power of the Italian nation. Hence, the regime could not let go of assimilation, although, at some point, this seemed to be more instrumental in generating consensus among the Italian population in the old provinces than to Italianize minorities.<sup>38</sup> As perceptively argued by Gaetano Salvemini, sometimes it looked as if what the fascists really wanted was not so much that the minorities become Italian, but rather that ‘they appear to be Italian’.<sup>39</sup>

### III

Although assimilation remained a pillar of fascist policy in the new provinces, at the turn of the 1930s doubts about its efficacy began to grow. In Venezia Giulia, the anti-fascist and pan-Slavic clandestine group TIGR (*Trst, Istra, Gorica, Reka*) carried out numerous terrorist attacks and brought home to many party members that resistance was more deeply rooted than previously thought. In 1930, the leadership of the fascist federation of Trieste called for a more realistic approach. The attacks, the politicians argued, had ‘dashed illusions and hopes nourished in these last years, especially by the local authorities in charge, of a simple work of assimilation of the Slavs’.<sup>40</sup> Similar doubts also spread in South Tyrol. In this context, settling the new provinces with Italians coming from the other areas of the Kingdom acquired increasing popularity.<sup>41</sup>

The idea of the ‘conquest of the land’ of South Tyrol had a longer history going back to the period before the First World War, when nationalist and irredentist circles emphasized its expediency in the Italianization of the area. However, before the late 1920s, no Italian government drew any concrete plans of land colonization. In 1926–7, the fascist regime made a first attempt in collaboration with the *Organizzazione Nazionale Combattenti* (ONC), an association of former soldiers. They aimed to expropriate 1,000 hectares of land from German-speaking tenants to settle between 200 and 600 families from the old provinces in the area between Merano and Lavis, to the north of Trento. Lack of resources, foreign policy concerns, and the opposition of the Tyrolean tenants derailed the project. Yet the regime did not abandon land colonization altogether.<sup>42</sup> A few years later, in January 1931, the Ministry of

---

colnali e nella narrativa esotica’, *Studi culturali*, 1 (2006), pp. 5–32; Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini’s Italy: from equality to persecution* (Madison, WI, 2006), pp. 131–8.

<sup>38</sup> Kacin-Wohinz, ‘Orientamento’, p. 70.

<sup>39</sup> Gaetano Salvemini, *Racial minorities under fascism in Italy* (Chicago, IL, 1934), p. 11.

<sup>40</sup> Report from the directorate of the *Fascio* of Trieste, no date (early 1930s from context), ACS, PNF, Situazione politica ed economica delle provincie, box 27, folder on Trieste.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* On South Tyrol, see Pergher, *Mussolini’s nation-empire*, pp. 97–104. In Venezia Giulia, since the end of the 1920s, the regime also promoted the emigration abroad of Slovenian- and Croatian-speakers, notably to Latin America. Aleksej Kalc, ‘L’emigrazione slovena e croata dalla Venezia Giulia tra le due guerre ed il suo ruolo politico’, *Annales*, 8 (1996), pp. 23–60.

<sup>42</sup> Andrea Di Michele, ‘Fascismo, bonifica e politiche d’insediamento in Alto Adige negli anni ‘20.’, *Passato e presente*, 113 (2021), pp. 64–82.

the Interior sent a circular to the prefects of Venezia Giulia asking them to identify parcels of land owned by the individuals belonging to the Slovenian/Croatian minority that could be transferred to Italian settlers.<sup>43</sup>

Against the background of the 1929 crisis and the consequent attempts of the regime to apply autarchic policies, the regime identified the *Ente Rinascita Agraria* (Body for the Agrarian Renaissance or ERA), an agency founded in 1920 that mainly administered war-damaged farmlands in Veneto,<sup>44</sup> as the most suitable body to expropriate the *allogeni's* land. In August 1931, the government transformed it into the *Ente di Rinascita Agraria delle Tre Venezie* (Body for the Agrarian Renaissance of the Three Venices, ERATV) and gave it the specific purpose of buying land from owners belonging to the minority populations of South Tyrol and Venezia Giulia. Initially, the ERATV was more active in the eastern provinces, especially in Gorizia, where it bought about 3,000 hectares of land before 1933. It later reoriented its focus towards the province of Bolzano.<sup>45</sup>

Yet the purchase of agricultural land there faced two major challenges. First, as compared to Venezia Giulia, Tyrolean farms were more intensive in nature. Therefore, they were more expensive and they required a skilled workforce that was not easy to find in the old provinces.<sup>46</sup> The fascist organizations that were running the farms had such a hard time finding suitable candidates that, in some cases, local executives asked the leadership in Rome to let them allocate some of their high-altitude farms to the *allogeni*, which completely defeated the purpose of the organizations' activity.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the *Ente*, and other authorities active in the purchase of land, had to confront the competition of members of the minority who, supported by foreign investors from Germany or Austria, could often afford higher prices.<sup>48</sup>

As of 30 September 1938, 325 farms, accounting for 8,933 hectares of land, had passed from the property of individuals identified as *allogeni* to Italian hands through the *Ente's* purchases. That represented only 0.6 per cent of the productive agricultural surface of the new provinces.<sup>49</sup> As a comparison, by the end of the 1930s, the redemption of the *Agro Pontino* (Pontine Marshes) in Lazio, the main land redemption project carried out in Italy,

<sup>43</sup> Milica Kacin-Wohinz, *Vivere al confine: sloveni e italiani negli anni 1918-1941* (Gorizia, 2004), p. 113.

<sup>44</sup> Andrea Di Michele, 'Terra e Italianità. L'Ente Nazionale per le Tre Venezie tra fascismo e Repubblica', in Diego D'Almelio, Andrea Di Michele, and Giorgio Mezzalana, eds., *La difesa dell'italianità: l'ufficio per le zone di confine a Bolzano, Trento e Trieste (1945-1954)* (Bologna, 2014), pp. 179-208, at p. 183.

<sup>45</sup> Pergher, *Mussolini's nation-empire*, pp. 103-5.

<sup>46</sup> The minister of agriculture and forestry to Mussolini, 20 Dec. 1934, ACS, PCM, 1940-3, fo. 3/1-1, n. 8246/1.

<sup>47</sup> Director of the Azienda di Castel di Nova to the ONC, 8 Aug. 1938, ACS, ONC, Servizio Agrario, Alto Adige, coloni, box 10.

<sup>48</sup> Sottosegretario di stato to the prefect of Bolzano, 2 Mar. 1935, ACS, PCM, 1940-3, fo. 3/1-1, n. 8246/1.

<sup>49</sup> Appunto per il Duce, 18 Oct. 1938, ACS, PCM, 1940-3, fo. 3/1-1, n. 8246. The percentage has been calculated from the total productive agricultural land for the year 1929 to be found in Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, *Annuario statistico dell'agricoltura italiana, 1939-1942* (Rome, 1948), p. 1.

created 2,953 farmhouses and 64,666 hectares of farm parcels.<sup>50</sup> Even Roberta Pergher, who has claimed that the colonization of South Tyrol was the most important strategy pursued by the fascists in the region in the 1930s, acknowledges that until 1939 these efforts were piecemeal at best.<sup>51</sup>

The history of the *Ente* shows that even if fascist authorities had wanted to pursue more radical policies to replace the local population with Italians from the old provinces, deemed to be more loyal to the state, they would have confronted unsurmountable economic and logistic hurdles. The *Ente*, and other land-redemption organizations, not only had a hard time competing with German landowners and buyers. They also enjoyed very small economic margins in the running of their farms. In several instances, these farms could not yield profits. Hence, sharecroppers called for state subsidies to keep their farm running and shrewdly described their holdings as bastions of the nation in hostile territory in order to convince authorities to accept their demands.<sup>52</sup> Yet most of the time these subsidies were denied on account of the already considerable sharecroppers' debt.<sup>53</sup> The need to reduce losses prevailed over the patriotic mission to 'conquer' the land in border areas, thus exposing the material limits of the regime's capabilities to carry out even moderate policies of land colonization. The resource constraints confronted by the regime in the 1930s are not surprising given the concomitant development of two other major land colonization projects: the *Agro Pontino* in Lazio, which involved the transfer of around 29,000 people between 1932 and 1939; and the *Ventimila* programme in Libya, where around 25,000 farmers and their families colonized the north African coast in 1938–9.<sup>54</sup>

In this overall unsuccessful Italianization of the land, the creation of the industrial zone of Bolzano stands out as an exception. Built in 1935 on an area obtained through expropriation of land from Tyrolean owners, the industrial zone truly transformed the city. Italian-speakers went from accounting for 21 per cent of the total population in 1921 to 62 per cent in 1939. Yet, as stunning as this reversal might appear, the Italian community in the city remained isolated from the surrounding German-speaking Tyrolians.<sup>55</sup> More importantly, although land colonization with Italians from the old provinces did become a pressing priority, it was never meant as a total replacement for

<sup>50</sup> Antonio Linoli, *Twenty-six centuries of reclamation and agricultural improvement in the Pontine Marshes* (Frankfurt, 2005), p. 49.

<sup>51</sup> Pergher, *Mussolini's nation-empire*, p. 253.

<sup>52</sup> The prefect of Bolzano to the president of the Opera Nazionale Combattenti, 27 Feb. 1930, ACS, ONC, Servizio Agrario, Alto Adige, Coloni, box 10.

<sup>53</sup> Government commissary to the director of the agricultural firm of Merano, 15 Jan. 1930 and 16 Apr. 1930, in ACS, ONC, Servizio Agrario, Alto Adige, Coloni, box 10; the prefect of Trieste to the Ministry of the Interior, 11 July 1939, Archivio di stato di Trieste (ASTr), Prefettura, Gabinetto, 402/68.

<sup>54</sup> Pergher, *Mussolini's nation-empire*, pp. 83–96; Maria Rosa Protasi and Eugenio Sonnino, 'Politiche di popolamento: colonizzazione interna e colonizzazione demografica nell'Italia liberale e fascista', *Popolazione e storia*, 4 (2003), pp. 91–138; Mia Fuller, *Moderns abroad: architecture, cities and Italian imperialism* (Abingdon, 2010), pp. 73–5.

<sup>55</sup> Andrea Di Michele, *L'italianizzazione imperfetta: l'amministrazione pubblica dell'Alto Adige tra Italia liberale e fascismo* (Alessandria, 2003), p. 244; Pergher, *Mussolini's nation-empire*, p. 108.

the assimilation of the local population, but rather as a catalyst to accelerate this. In 1931, for instance, the federal secretary of the Fascist Party of Pola called for increased colonization, but he clarified that this was required in order to ‘inject abundant blood of pure Latin race into the population living along the border’ (our emphasis).<sup>56</sup> Even Tolomei, in 1935, referred to the ‘amalgam’ that would result from mixture of locals and settlers from the old provinces.<sup>57</sup> Hence, ‘a variety of influential players were envisaging settlement as a kind of beguiling encirclement that would surround the *allogeni* and eventually absorb them’, rather than as their total replacement.<sup>58</sup>

#### IV

In 1925, Mussolini issued a circular detailing the guidelines for dealing with the populations of the new provinces annexed from Austria-Hungary. The *Duce* emphasized how civil servants in these territories served a critical patriotic function and had to exhibit exemplary conduct, since locals attentively observed their behaviour.<sup>59</sup> Four years later, one of these local civil servants, the federal secretary of the Fascist Party in the eastern province of Gorizia, Pino Godina, reminded the provincial party assembly of Mussolini’s words. Party members, he warned, should avoid ‘giving the impression that there are two different categories of citizens: the Italian who has only rights and the Italian of Slovenian language, who has only duties’.<sup>60</sup>

In principle, this concern for equal treatment was in line with other pillars of the party’s ideology. It went along with the strict centralism and uniformity of treatment that the fascists wanted to ensure throughout the country. Since the *allogeni* were deemed as Germanized/Slavized Italians who had to be ‘restored’ to their original essence, it was also logical to treat them as all other citizens. However, equal treatment remained wishful thinking. A deep-seated distrust of the Italians that were considered to belong to the minority populations of South Tyrol and Venezia Giulia lingered on within the fascist regime throughout its history.

The *allogeni* denounced such distrust. In a memorandum written in 1927, the South Tyrolean MPs Karl Tinzl and Paul von Sternbach lamented that:

we have the clear sensation that the population and its representatives are treated as enemies, for the simple reason that they do not deem incompatible with each other to be loyal Italian citizens, on the one hand, and to wish to keep their nationality and culture, on the other.

<sup>56</sup> Report on ethnic assimilation in the province of Istria, 15 Jan. 1931, ACS, PNF, Situazione politica ed economica delle province, box 15, fo. on Pola.

<sup>57</sup> Ettore Tolomei to Benito Mussolini, 3 June 1935, document no. 363, in Walter Freiberg, *Südtirol und der italienische Nationalismus* (2 vols., Innsbruck, 1990), II, pp. 744–8.

<sup>58</sup> Pergher, *Mussolini’s nation-empire*, p. 100.

<sup>59</sup> Mussolini to the secretaries of state, 1 Nov. 1925, ACS, Interno, Direzione Generale Amministrazione Civile, Divisione II, Comuni, box 2002.

<sup>60</sup> Speech of Pino Godina at the PNF’s provincial assembly, 6 Oct. 1929, ACS, PNF, Situazione politica delle province, box 2.

For this reason, the German element is held, as much as possible, away from the administration of the affairs that concern it.<sup>61</sup>

Fascist authorities did not conceal their suspicions in their internal correspondence. In 1926, the prefect of Trieste, Giovanni Gasti, decried the 'double, treacherous' nature of the politicians representing the *allogeni*. Their political movement, Gasti added, was

based on simulating meekness, respect for the law, deference to the Authority [sic] and negation of irredentism, on the one hand; on provoking and channelling any effort of the *allogeni* towards the aim to maintain and strengthen within the family Slovenian sentiments, customs, traditions and ethnic solidarity, on the other.<sup>62</sup>

Similarly, in 1924, the central organs of the Fascist Party recommended to local party members in Venezia Giulia not to 'welcome Slav adherents, which are usually prompted to register themselves...because of unacceptable aims, or out of personal interests. One cannot rely – the document concluded – on such treacherous elements'.<sup>63</sup>

Even when some *allogeni* showed total commitment to the fascist cause and proved to be able to work reliably within the administration, the regime was not keen on having them in positions of power. Massimiliano Markart's story provides a vivid illustration of such distrust. As *podestà* (fascist mayor) of Merano, Markart received widespread praise for his impeccable fascist record and outstanding administrative performance. Yet this did not save him from exclusion from his position. In the mid-1930s, after several years of pressure from local members of the PNF, he was eventually replaced with a 'pure' Italian. In an insightful message sent to the prefect of Trento a few years earlier, the sub-prefect of Merano, Di Suni, who had taken Markart's defence in the local wrangle that eventually led to his removal, presciently predicted that:

if we give the good Italian citizens of German nationality the impression of always and systematically distrusting them based on their nationality, and if we keep them away from our occupations, from public charges and so on, for reasons of principle, no German will become loyal to us, and we will fatally remain few and isolated individuals in a bluntly hostile environment.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Memorandum by the MPs for South Tyrol Karl Tinzl and Paul von Sternbach to Mussolini, 1927, document no. 24, in Michael Gehler, *Eduard Reut-Nicolussi und die Südtirolfrage, 1918–1958: Streiter für die Freiheit und die Einheit Tirols* (2 vols., Innsbruck, 2007), II, pp. 72–6.

<sup>62</sup> The prefect of Trieste to the Ministry of the Interior, 20 June 1926, ASTr, Prefettura, Gabinetto, 143/68.

<sup>63</sup> Silvia Bon, 'Il regime fascista in Istria (1925–1933). Aspetti politici, sociali, organizzativi', *Qualestoria*, 9 (1981), pp. 9–27, at p. 14. See also Luraschi to Starace, 27 Mar. 1935, ACS, PNF, Situazione politica ed economica delle provincie, box 2; the prefect of Pola to the Ministry of the Interior, 27 Mar. 1934, ACS, PNF, Situazione politica ed economica delle provincie, box 15.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Di Michele, *L'italianizzazione*, p. 333.

Di Suni clearly understood that distrust was a major hindrance on the way to the Italianization of the *allogeni*. The questionable skills and moral conduct of many public officers sent from the old provinces to fill the gaps in the administration of South Tyrol and Venezia Giulia made the fascist reluctance to give public offices to members of the minorities even more difficult to accept.<sup>65</sup>

Another fitting example of the regime's distrust of the *allogeni* concerns the committed fascist of Slovenian origin, Albino Furlan. Furlan joined the *Fascio* in 1926 and, according to party sources, showed clear Italian sentiments. In 1929, he became political secretary of the local branch of the PNF in the municipality of Monrupino, near Trieste, and in a few years increased local party membership from 5 to 80 individuals. He was held in high esteem by all local authorities. These impeccable credentials notwithstanding, in 1933, owing to his Slav origins, he was transferred to a municipality in the province of Perugia during a general process that removed primary school teachers not deemed to be trustworthy because of their origin. Local protest brought Furlan's case to the desk of the vice-secretary of the Fascist Party, Arturo Marpicati. Moved by Furlan's record, Marpicati asked the minister of education, Francesco Ercole, to reconsider Furlan's transfer. The case eventually came before the prefect of Trieste, Carlo Tiengo, who refused to accept Furlan's return. Tiengo argued that teachers of Slav origins, 'even if moved by the best intentions, cannot carry out, for reasons of kinship, relations and environment, the delicate task of Italian and fascist educators in this province'.<sup>66</sup> The regime could not free itself from the consistent tendency to exclude the *allogeni* from whole spheres of Italian society, while simultaneously forcing them to become 'good' Italians.

## V

In 1939, the procedure of option, whereby the subjects/citizens of a new state could choose to retain their former subjecthood/citizenship after annexation, was not new. It had been introduced in the late eighteenth century, increasingly used in the nineteenth, for instance after the 1871 German conquest of Alsace-Lorraine, and widely applied to the redrawing of borders effected at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. Option procedures were meant as exceptions, targeting specific cases and a limited number of individuals. Population transfer agreements, an innovation of the immediate post-First World War period, also remained exceptional until the Second World War, but they targeted large portions of a territory's population. In 1923, the Treaty of Lausanne formalized for the first time in international law the expulsion of approximately 1 million Greeks from the new-born Republic of Turkey, as well as the forcible removal of around 400,000 Muslims living in Greece. In the late 1930s, population transfer was a legitimate measure of conflict resolution, albeit of last resort. In 1936, for instance, the governments of Romania and Turkey arranged the transfer of more than 67,000 Turks from Transylvania to Turkey's mainland. Other cases

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>66</sup> See the exchange between Marpicati, Ercole, the prefect of Trieste and the *questore* of Trieste between 30 June 1934 and 18 Sept. 1934 in ASTr, Prefettura, Gabinetto, 291/68.

occurred later in Bulgaria, Bessarabia, and the Baltic Republics, among others. Thus, the international community reckoned both option procedures and population transfers as valid international practices. Moreover, before 1939, governments saw these practices as tools for reducing opposition to annexation or reconquest, as in the Greek–Turkish case, in the latter’s immediate aftermath.<sup>67</sup>

In South Tyrol, however, Italy and Germany agreed to allow the local population to opt for either country twenty years after the transfer of the territory from the Austro-Hungarian empire to Italy. Furthermore, the two governments took this decision fairly abruptly and, despite letting the population choose, they made clear that the procedure should bring to an end any contestation of Italian sovereignty over the region. The ensuing polarized climate and the expectation that the Option would ‘solve’ the South Tyrolean ‘problem’ once and for all turned the event into a hybrid between a traditional option procedure, a plebiscite, and a population transfer.

The Option Agreement in South Tyrol constituted a radical departure from the approach that Italian authorities had followed until then. While the German side sought the complete transfer of the German-speaking population, the fascists rarely contemplated this scenario. Of course, there were disagreements within the regime and some fascists supported a total resettlement. In March 1939, for instance, Tolomei’s journal, *Archivio per l’Alto Adige*, called for a total exodus inspired by the ‘great Kemal’, with obvious reference to the Greek–Turkish population exchange.<sup>68</sup> Also, in 1938, Giovanni Preziosi, a high-ranking fascist politician, urged the *Duce* to let go of the idea that the Germans could be assimilated (which incidentally suggests that Mussolini still deemed assimilation possible). Preziosi believed that the only solution left for Italian authorities was to give the ‘Germans of South Tyrol back to Germany’.<sup>69</sup> Other supporters of a total solution were the vice-minister of the interior Guido Buffarini Guidi, the head of Italian police Arturo Bocchini, the minister of foreign affairs Galeazzo Ciano, and the ambassador in Berlin Bernardo Attolico.<sup>70</sup>

Yet several other members of the fascist government, most notably within the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and, above all, the local administrators in South Tyrol, were much more reluctant to push for a complete ‘cleansing’ of the region. On the contrary, they aimed at selectively pushing some *allogeni*, identified as agitators, to leave. In this way, the assimilation of the remaining population would be easier.<sup>71</sup> For instance, in a report to the Ministry of the Interior of May 1939, the prefect of Bolzano, Giuseppe Mastromattei, wrote that the agreement the government was discussing

<sup>67</sup> Sharon Korman, *The right of conquest* (Oxford, 1996); Nathaniel Berman, “‘But the alternative is despair’”: European nationalism and the modernist renewal of international law’, *Harvard Law Review*, 106 (1993), pp. 1792–903, at pp. 1828–32.

<sup>68</sup> Ettore Tolomei, ‘La trasmigrazione’, *Archivio per l’Alto Adige*, 34 (1939), p. 27.

<sup>69</sup> Giovanni Preziosi to Benito Mussolini, 18 Mar. 1938, document no. 247, in Freiberg, *Südtirol*, II, pp. 529–30.

<sup>70</sup> Steurer, *Südtirol*, pp. 357–79; Frank, *Making*, pp. 130–1.

<sup>71</sup> Steurer, *Südtirol*, pp. 342–90.

with the Nazis should aim to free South Tyrol from those German elements that ‘contrast the action of the Fascist regime’. He further argued that if all the other South Tyroleans were forced to go to the Reich, one would quickly see that ‘all this attachment to Germany on the part of the *allogeni* is more apparent than real, and how this population...loves peace, is greedy and is open to follow that regime which better ensures calm and prosperity’.<sup>72</sup> In the negotiations held in Berlin in June 1939, Mastromattei made it clear that Italy’s priority was to transfer to the Reich the 10,000 German citizens living in South Tyrol, who were deemed to be a stronghold of Germanism in the area. The prefect also asserted that at least half of the 200,000 German-speakers holding Italian citizenship in South Tyrol were not German by ‘race’.<sup>73</sup> At the end of August, Mastromattei was still convinced that only about 30,000 people would leave the region and that, if the regime wanted to increase the figure, it had to take active measures.<sup>74</sup> In other words, while the Nazis openly advocated transferring all German-speakers and even adopted flexible definitions concerning the right of option, as happened in the Canal Valley where speakers of Slovenian dialects were also entitled to opt, the Italian authorities showed a more cautious position.<sup>75</sup>

Italian officials initially adopted a posture of aboulic retreat from the public debate, but the spread of Nazi propaganda throughout South Tyrol forced the prefect to take remedial action. Towards the end of September 1939, Mastromattei launched a campaign to try to convince the local population to keep Italian citizenship. The campaign, however, was conducted with little enthusiasm. Even actors not directly involved in the regime noticed the Italian executive’s hesitation. In a letter to Mussolini from mid-November 1939, an anonymous writer who showed a solid understanding of events in South Tyrol bitterly concluded that:

I do not believe that there has ever been as much uncertainty and apathy and incompetence within the governments that preceded fascism as in the last four months in Alto Adige [the Italian name for South Tyrol], where even some Councillors of the Prefecture did not hesitate to declare (until a month ago) that they did not know what would happen and what the authority wanted.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Mastromattei to the Ministry of the Interior, 12 May 1939, in von Hartungen, Miori, and Rosani, eds., *Le lettere*, I, p. 166. See also report of the *Carabinieri* to the prefect of Bolzano, 31 Oct. 1939, in von Hartungen, Miori, and Rosani, eds., *Le lettere*, I, p. 264.

<sup>73</sup> Renzo De Felice, *Il problema dell’Alto Adige nei rapporti italo-tedeschi dall’Anschluss’ alla fine della Seconda guerra mondiale* (Bologna, 1973), pp. 102–7.

<sup>74</sup> Mastromattei to the Ministry of the Interior, 20 Aug. 1939, in von Hartungen, Miori, and Rosani, eds., *Le lettere*, I, p. 230.

<sup>75</sup> Some Nazi documents suggest that until March/April 1939, the idea of total resettlement co-existed with more moderate plans to move only around 30,000 *Volksdeutsche* from South Tyrol to the Reich. See SS Wolff to the SS Likus, 22 Apr. 1939; Gauleiter Hofer to Heinrich Himmler, 14 Apr. 1939; Martin Bormann to all the Gauleiters of the border’s Gaus, 25 Mar. 1939; report of Heinrich Himmler about the South Tyrolean question, 30 Mar. 1939. All documents in Bundesarchiv (BA) NS 19/2070.

<sup>76</sup> Anonymous message to Mussolini, 14 Nov. 1939, ACS, SPD, Carteggio riservato, box 36, pp. 8–9.

The prefect's change of tack in the autumn attracted even stronger criticism from supporters of a total resettlement. At the end of September, the Italian ambassador in Berlin, Bernardo Attolico, angrily asked the minister of foreign affairs, Galeazzo Ciano, 'why on earth do we want to compel people to remain within our borders who intend, want, and have shown their absolute will to remain for ever and ever German and none other than German?'.<sup>77</sup>

In those final months of 1939, many South Tyrolean and external observers attributed Mastromattei's change of strategy to economic reasons. According to the rumours that spread throughout the province, at the end of the summer the prefect had realized that a full resettlement, as seemed increasingly likely in light of reports coming from throughout South Tyrol, would be detrimental to Italian coffers. He thus decided to reverse the hands-off approach followed until then.<sup>78</sup> Relying on these rumours, some authors have explained Mastromattei's move from silence to opposition to Nazi propaganda as being chiefly motivated by economic factors. Yet there is no strong archival evidence showing that economic motivations constituted the over-riding reason for the regime's policy change. On the contrary, Leopold Steurer has convincingly argued that by the end of October 1939, the negotiations for the financial side of the Option were quite favourable to Italy.<sup>79</sup> In addition, the available sources suggest that fascist authorities were not grasping the economic consequences of a total exodus, nor were they planning for the mass resettlement of the area.<sup>80</sup> However, it is true that, as seen in section III, the economic limitations faced by the regime when implementing the Option Agreement do reflect a structural feature of fascist policy in the new provinces throughout the inter-war period: when the Italian government contemplated a move to more radical measures, resource constraints consistently frustrated the regime's ambitions.

Focusing excessively on economic reasons, the historiography has overlooked the importance of national prestige as a reason for the Italian U-turn in South Tyrol. After all, accepting a total transfer would have been a humiliating recognition that the policy pursued for about two decades had completely failed.<sup>81</sup> Party members reporting on local trends in late 1939 were well aware of the damage that the Option was going to inflict on Italy's

<sup>77</sup> Quoted in Frank, *Making*, p. 131.

<sup>78</sup> Steininger, *Südtirol*, pp. 153–74. See also letter signed 'your sister' from Meran to Heil in Frankfurt, 8 Nov. 1939, and letter from Erna Winter (Brixen) to Stefania Müller (Munich), 21 Nov. 1939, in von Hartungen, Miori, and Rosani, eds., *Le lettere*, II, pp. 40–1, 82; and message from an informer to the *podestà* of Merano, 3 July 1939, in *ibid.*, I, pp. 195–6.

<sup>79</sup> Steurer, *Südtirol*, pp. 357–8.

<sup>80</sup> An article published in the economic newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore* in early November 1939 encouraged the government to do so. However, plans were drawn only between late 1940 and early 1941, i.e. after the end of the Option. 'Attività da riordinare', *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 4 Nov. 1939; Ente Nazionale per le Tre Venezie, *Modalità di cessione dei beni rustici situati nel territorio degli accordi italo-germanici*, Jan. 1941, ACS, PCM, 1940–3. fo. 3/1–1, n. 8246/6.

<sup>81</sup> See Dennison Rusinow, *Italy's Austrian heritage, 1919–1946* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 244–5, for a similar line of argument. The theme of Italian humiliation is to be found also in internal exchanges of Nazi officers. See report of Alpeter, from the *Auffangstelle* for South Tyrolean *Optanten*, 21 Oct. 1939; and *Die Wahrheit über den Südtiroler Volksentscheid 1939*, anonymous report, 9 Jan. 1940; both in BA, R57–1616.

national pride, as shown by an anonymous fascist from Meran relating a mission to the village of Naturns:

Overall, I have noticed that there is nothing to do. Those who are going to leave are already convinced of what they have done or what they intend to do and they do not let themselves be easily persuaded away from their decision. *If the clergy has not been able to do that, what can we do?* After the first attempts, I have understood the uselessness of my work. If there is somebody in Naturns who will opt for Italy, that will certainly not be due to my propaganda. *I did not make any promises to anybody* nor have I intended to undermine the prestige of the Nation with supplications and begging...I add that if we wanted to avoid the almost total exodus of the rural population, we should have taken measures earlier and not now that the horse has left the barn. Now we can only scrape up additional humiliations [emphasis in the original].<sup>82</sup>

The text confirms that the regime did not expect the German-speaking population of South Tyrol to vote overwhelmingly to leave, a conclusion that other documents corroborate.<sup>83</sup> Most fascists were caught off guard once that outcome became clear. This was consistent with the assumption of inevitable assimilation that had informed fascist policy in the new provinces for about two decades. Even if some grew more sceptical of this conviction from the late 1920s, and there were disagreements and diverging opinions within the regime, the belief that sooner or later the majority of the German-speaking minority would yield to fascist efforts persisted in the mind of many fascist officers. These explained every resistance with reference to the propaganda of a few agitators, who were the main target of the 'selective' exodus that local authorities wanted to achieve.

The text above also shows that the regime had limited room to persuade the *allogeni*. The officer who authored the report was sent to Naturns to convince German-speakers to remain. Yet he refused to beg locals in order not to 'undermine the prestige of the Nation'. The fascist's limited range of options to entice the *allogeni* also derived from the regime's deep-seated distrust of them. In his most important speech to the German-speaking population of the region, Mastromattei affirmed that 'those who will freely opt for Italian citizenship will remain in South Tyrol, *provided that* any diffidence and hostile intention will be abandoned' (our emphasis).<sup>84</sup> The regime could not write a blank cheque to the *allogeni* in order to lure them to stay. It rather had to ensure that all the so-called 'agitators' would leave. Such a mistrust of German-speakers is even clearer when considering the regime's attitude towards the *Dableiber*. Instead of teaming up with them to counter Nazi propaganda, the regime often hampered their activities.

<sup>82</sup> Message from a fascist officer from Merano over his inquiries in Naturns, 19 Dec. 1939, in Freiberg, *Südtirol*, II, p. 637.

<sup>83</sup> See Mastromattei, 20 Aug. 1939, in von Hartungen, Miori, and Rosani, eds., *Le lettere*, I, p. 230.

<sup>84</sup> 'S.E. il Prefetto consacra la Casa Littoria di Appiano e pronuncia un importante discorso sugli accordi italo-tedeschi', *La Provincia di Bolzano*, 31 Oct. 1939, p. 3.

## VI

Fascist policy in the new provinces was consistently ambivalent. The regime not only pursued the total assimilation of the minority populations of South Tyrol and Venezia Giulia, which was beyond what it could possibly achieve with the resources and capabilities it had. The fascists also wished to absorb populations that they fundamentally mistrusted into the body of the Italian nation. National prestige complicated things further. The hypertrophic concept of Italian grandeur promoted by fascist propaganda convinced central and local authorities, despite abundant counterevidence, that the *allogeni* would inevitably become loyal Italians.

The 1939 Option Agreement proved to be consistent with this approach and offered the clearest example of such delusions. Moreover, the late fascist attempts to turn the boat represented the harshest moment of reckoning.<sup>85</sup> The regime found itself walking on a tightrope. On the one hand, it could not push for a radical solution because this would have been a (not so) tacit admission of failure. Additionally, even if the regime had been willing to go for a total resettlement, it would have run into major resource constraints. On the other hand, the fascists could only make half promises of benevolent treatment to the *allogeni* because the underlying assumption of the Option Agreement was the *Dableiber's* willingness to accept assimilation. Blinded by oversized national pride, the regime reached a dead end. As Mastromattei grudgingly acknowledged in January 1940, shortly before being removed from office, many fascists had indulged in the 'illusion that it would be easy to "assimilate" the German population of *Alto Adige*', that assimilation would be 'a certain and lasting success'.<sup>86</sup> In other words, the fascists had become victims of their own rhetoric.

A glaring confirmation of this attitude comes from the eastern provinces. In a message to Mussolini of November 1941, that is, well after the Option debacle, Italo Sauro, then Mussolini's adviser on ethnic issues in Venezia Giulia, concluded his report with a passionate defence of the regime's homogenizing efforts:

We do not have to fool ourselves into believing that we will bear the fruits [of our work] rapidly or everywhere: the less progressed the [targeted] population, the more nationalization or assimilation is effective. With regard to Istria and the areas of Trieste, part of Fiume and Gorizia...the time when we will see excellent results is not far, later, much later but certainly, we will see them elsewhere as well.<sup>87</sup>

To add insult to injury, after a promising start, the departure of the *allogeni* came to a halt in the summer of 1940. By the end of that year, only about 50,000 people had left South Tyrol. In the three following years, an additional 25,000 joined the count.

<sup>85</sup> See the *podestà* of Merano to the prefect of Bolzano, 7 Dec. 1939, in von Hartungen, Miori, and Rosani, eds., *Le lettere*, II, p. 101.

<sup>86</sup> Giuseppe Mastromattei to Benito Mussolini, 9 Jan. 1940, document no. 326, in Freiberg, *Südtirol*, II, p. 651.

<sup>87</sup> Italo Sauro, *Appunto per il Duce*, 18 Nov. 1941, document no. 5, in Milica Kacin-Wohinz, 'The assimilation plans of Italo Sauro (1939–1941)', *Annales* 1 (1991), pp. 237–44, at p. 243.

Overall, only about a third of the *Optanten* actually emigrated. Some never meant to move in the first place and had simply voted against Italy out of hatred against two decades of harsh repression. Others were discouraged by the disenchanting accounts of life in the Reich coming from those who had already emigrated. Many simply waited to receive an estimate of their property, a process bogged down by endless discussions about the financial terms of the operation. Above all, the Nazis profited from the presence in South Tyrol of German governmental organizations in charge of resettlement to build up extensive institutions that catered for the community of the *Optanten*, for instance by creating a network of schools in which the language of instruction was German. Hence, not only the ‘question’ of South Tyrol was not settled forever, as the fascists had thought, but also the fascist regime began losing control over the province well before the armistice of 8 September 1943 and the ensuing German occupation.

Trying to save face, in his message to Mussolini in January 1940, Mastromattei referred to the *allogeni* that had opted to remain in Italy as evidence ‘that our twenty-year-long work of political penetration has not been completely vain’. ‘The civilization of Fascism – he added – has exercised its decisive influence even on people of undoubtedly different origins, race and culture.’<sup>88</sup> Despite complaining about the illusions that had undermined the fascist approach in the new provinces, Mastromattei remained loyal to the twenty-year-long fascist tradition to avoid coming to terms with the limits and ambivalence of their attempts to assimilate the *allogeni*.

**Acknowledgements.** Previous versions of this article have received feedback from Mona Bieling, Andrea Di Michele, Thomas Pierre Gidney, David Jiménez Torres, Davide Rodogno, Karlo Ruzicic-Kessler, Amal Shahid, the participants in the 2021 Pierre du Bois Conference, and the editors and two anonymous reviewers of *The Historical Journal*. We thank them very much for their insightful comments. Emmanuel Dalle Mulle would also like to thank the Department of Political History, Theory and Geography at the Complutense University of Madrid and the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy.

**Funding statement.** The research on which this article is based has received funding from: the Swiss National Science Foundation under grant agreement n. 169568; and the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 847635.

**Competing interests.** The authors declare none.

---

<sup>88</sup> Mastromattei to Mussolini, in Freiberg, *Südtirol*, II, p. 655.

**Cite this article:** Dalle Mulle E, Ambrosino A (2023). The 1939 Option Agreement and the ‘Consistent Ambivalence’ of Fascist Policies towards Minorities in the Italian New Provinces. *The Historical Journal* 66, 887–908. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X23000158>