

2013

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

Gerald Steinacher

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, [gsteinacher2@unl.edu](mailto:gsteinacher2@unl.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub>

---

Steinacher, Gerald, "Fascist Legacies: The Controversy over Mussolini's Monuments in South Tyrol" (2013). *Faculty Publications, Department of History*. 144.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub/144>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Department of History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Gerald Steinacher\*

## Fascist Legacies:<sup>1</sup> The Controversy over Mussolini's Monuments in South Tyrol<sup>2</sup>

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

---

\* Gerald Steinacher is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and author of numerous publications on Austrian, German and Italian 20th-century history. Professor Steinacher was a Joseph A. Schumpeter Research Fellow at Harvard University in 2010-2011 and a Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies Fellow at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2006.

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

2 I wish especially to thank Andrea Di Michele, Franz Haller, Thomas Pardatscher and Norbert Sparer for providing useful hints and sharing important literature on this topic. I am also grateful to Markus Schoof for his assistance with the final proof-reading of this essay and to Tracy Brown for helping to improve my prose.

the answers remain elusive. The stories of the Victory Monument and the *duce* relief exemplify the complexities posed by the legacies of fascism. In South Tyrol, where monuments hold starkly different meanings for two distinct parts of the population, dealing with Fascist monuments continues to be particularly tricky.

## I. INTRODUCTION: THE HISTORY OF CONFLICT IN SOUTH TYROL

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

South Tyrol's culture and traditions were and continue to be mainly Austrian. Even today, the vast majority (roughly 70%) of the region's half-million inhabitants speak German (or a German dialect) as their mother tongue. For the people of South Tyrol, Italian control constituted a great reversal: up to 1918, they had been part of the powerful and dominant German-speaking elite in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Then almost overnight, they became a powerless minority in Italy. The Italian occupiers and South Tyroleans<sup>3</sup> had a hard time finding a *modus vivendi*, and the new Fascist movement soon began targeting national minorities, including the South Tyroleans. South Tyrol continued to be a hotbed for "border nationalism" (*nazionalismo di confine*), where Italian nationalism and imperialism clashed with Tyrolean revisionism and pan-German activism. During Mussolini's reign (1922–43), the German-speaking population in this province (which Italians call "Alto Adige") suffered harsh discrimination and oppression. The use of the German language in schools and in public was often prohibited, and German surnames were Italianized. Under the Italian Fascist regime, many German-speaking South Tyroleans withdrew from public life, preferring instead to take refuge in private spaces.<sup>4</sup>

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

---

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

4 Rolf Steininger, *South Tyrol: A Minority Conflict in the Twentieth Century* (Transaction Publishers, Brunswick, NJ, London, 2003).

of the newly conquered land, with the aim of outnumbering the local German-speaking population by at least two to one with Italian immigrants. Grand housing projects were built to transform the provincial capital into an Italian city. The border nationalist and Fascist ideologue Ettore Tolomei—"the man who invented *Alto Adige*"<sup>5</sup>—repeatedly emphasized the pacesetter function of the city: "Bolzano is the most important stage. We must become the masters of Bolzano."<sup>6</sup> The Italians left the historic town centre untouched for the most part and built a new town (*città nuova*) with housing exclusively for ethnic Italians on the other side of the Eisack River.<sup>7</sup> In a relatively short period of time, the Mussolini regime transformed the town and divided it along ethnic lines, building living quarters to provide housing for the flood of Italian immigrants coming from all over Italy and big industrial plants to provide these new residents with work. In 1910, approximately 1,600 ethnic Italians lived in the town; by 1939, there were 48,000. Thus, on the eve of the Second World War, what was once the small Austrian town of Bozen was now the mid-sized Italian city of Bolzano with 67,500 inhabitants, a majority of whom were Italian.<sup>8</sup> The city and its quarters were, and henceforth remained, divided along ethnic lines: The old town was German speaking, and the new city was Italian. Historian Klaus Tragbar calls this an "almost unique attempt of conquest by architecture".<sup>9</sup>

After Adolf Hitler became the German chancellor in 1933, many South Tyroleans placed their hopes for liberation from Italian rule in Nazi Germany.<sup>10</sup> They supported National Socialism mostly because it was German and rejected Fascism mostly because it was Italian. As the South Tyrolean writer Claus Gatterer aptly described it: "Mussolini's Fascism was more human, more corrupt, and, precisely in its human imponderables, more easily predictable—but it spoke Italian; it was 'alien'. Nazism was probably more brutal, more inhuman—but it

---

5 See Sergio Benvenuti and Christoph von Hartungen (eds.), *Ettore Tolomei (1865–1952): Un Nazionalista di Confine. Die Grenzen des Nationalismus* (Museo Storico in Trento, Trento, 1988). See also, Gisela Framke, *Im Kampf um Südtirol. Ettore Tolomei (1865–1952) und das "Archivio per l'Alto Adige"* (M. Niemeyer, Tübingen, 1987). See also Franz Haller and Ludwig W. Regele's 2005 television documentary *Ettore Tolomei und der italienische Nationalismus in Südtirol*.

6 Martha Verdorfer, "Das Zentrum der 'città nuova'", in Gabriele Rath, Andrea Sommerauer and Martha Verdorfer (eds.), *Bozen Innsbruck* (Zeitgeschichtliche Stadtrundgänge, Wien-Bozen, 2000), 18–21.

7 See Harald Dunajtschik and Aram Mattioli, "Von Bozen nach Bolzano. Städtebau als Eroberungsstrategie", *Zibaldone. Zeitschrift für italienische Kultur der Gegenwart* 49 (Spring 2010), 47–59, 52 ff.

8 *Ibid.*, 47 f.

9 *Ibid.*, Historian Roberta Pergher draws parallels between the Fascist policy in the border area of Bolzano and the Italian colonies in Africa. See Roberta Pergher, "A Tale of Two Borders: Settlement and National Transformation in Libya and South Tyrol under Fascism", Ph.D. dissertation on file at the University of Michigan (2007).

10 See Antony E. Alcock, *The History of the South Tyrol Question* (Joseph, London, 1970), and Steininger, *op.cit.* note 4.

spoke German. For many people, ‘it belonged to us’; it was ‘ours’ because it spoke our language.”<sup>11</sup>

From the outset, however, Hitler prioritized the forging of an alliance with Fascist Italy over the fate of South Tyrol’s German-speaking population. In June 1939, Mussolini and Hitler agreed to resolve the “South Tyrol” problem once and for all. The South Tyroleans were to become test cases for Hitler’s concept of *Lebensraum* or “living space”; they were to be removed from their ancient homeland and resettled in the East, in German-occupied Ukraine or Bohemia or somewhere else. Under great pressure, almost 90% of South Tyroleans declared their willingness to leave the old *Heimat* behind and to follow the call of their “Führer”. The famous writer Heinrich Mann warned his fellow Germans and Tyroleans alike: “Hitler is betraying you all!” Mann saw what was essentially ethnic cleansing as a precursor to war. Indeed, Hitler wanted the alliance with Mussolini at all costs and was even willing to give up this historically German-speaking land to get it. No other political force in Germany or Austria had ever been willing to make such a deal with Italy over South Tyrol, and it was a clear signal that war was on the horizon.<sup>12</sup> On 27 July 1939, British prime minister Winston Churchill wrote in the *Daily Mirror*: “The more the agreement between the German and Italian Dictators about the future of the Tyrol becomes known, the more we realise how tense and grave is the state of Europe.”<sup>13</sup> On 1 September 1939, Hitler invaded Poland. With the German defeat in Stalingrad in February 1943 and the collapse of the Mussolini regime just a few months later, the transfer of South Tyroleans came to a standstill. By the war’s end in May 1945, most Tyroleans still lived in the Bolzano area.

In 1946, Italy’s new democratic government promised to grant minority rights to South Tyrol’s German-speaking population. Italy’s actions fell short of its promises, however, as would be the case for the next several decades. After many unsuccessful negotiations with Italy, Austria in 1960 submitted the problem of South Tyrol to the United Nations General Assembly. It was not until 1972 however that Italy finally granted South Tyrol autonomous status. The region’s most burning economic and social issues, such as a fair share in federal and state

---

11 Claus Gatterer, “Südtirol 1930-45. Eine politische Landschaftsskizze”, in: Claus Gatterer, *Aufsätze und Reden* (Bozen: Edition Rætia, 1991), 171–84, at 177. The original quote reads: “Der Faschismus war menschlicher, korrumpierter und gerade in den menschlichen Unwägbarkeiten leichter berechenbar—aber er sprach italienisch, er war ‚fremd‘. Der Nazismus war wohl brutaler, unmenschlicher—doch redete er immerhin deutsch. Für viele ‚gehörte er zu uns‘, war er ‚unsere‘, weil er unsere Sprache sprach.”

12 Leopold Steurer, “Anno Neun aus der Sicht von außen. Andreas Hofer und die Südtiroler Umsiedlung im Spiegel der internationalen Presse des Jahres 1939”, in Günther Pallaver and Leopold Steurer (eds.), *“Deutsche! Hitler verrät Euch!”*. *Das Erbe von Option und Weltkrieg in Südtirol* (Bozen: Edition Raetia, 2011), 111-158, at 124.

13 See Gerald Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run: How Hitler’s Henchmen Fled Justice* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 2011), 34.

employment were resolved in the 1980s and in 1992, Austria and Italy officially ended their dispute over the autonomy of South Tyrol because all major demands of the South Tyroleans were finally fulfilled by the government in Rome.

Although the region today enjoys a considerable level of self-government and is one of the richest areas in Central Europe with almost no unemployment and guaranteed welfare and social peace, the legacies of fascism continue to haunt South Tyrol. German-speaking Tyroleans and local Italians often live and work side by side but not together in a society that is (self-)segregated according to ethnicity or language, from the kindergartens and the schools to the libraries. Thus, what may seem superficially to be symbols and monuments of a bygone era are in fact representations of extant divisions in society, and they serve to deepen the already profound chasm between the Italians and South Tyroleans. Thomas Pardatscher, a historian from Bolzano, wrote about this apparent contradiction: "It seems paradoxical that, in a time of increasing prosperity and growing autonomy, the polemics about a symbolic monument do not abate. But perhaps the battle over symbols has become even more important now that the most urgent problems of South Tyrol have been solved."<sup>14</sup>

## II. THE VICTORY ARCH AND OTHER MONUMENTS TO FASCISM IN SOUTH TYROL

Erected in 1928 to commemorate the Italian "martyrs" of the First World War, but widely seen as a celebration of Italy's annexation of South Tyrol (1919–20), the Victory Monument sits in one of Bolzano's main squares.<sup>15</sup> Mussolini himself sketched the initial design, and he chose Marcello Piacentini, one of his favorite architects, to construct it. At the time it was built, the imposing arch stood as a symbol of Fascist might and Italy's dominion over the local German-speaking population. Designed as a provocation, the Victory Monument—a celebration in stone of nationalism and imperialism, war and fascism, and *il duce* himself—remains an affront to South Tyrol's German-speaking citizens even today.

---

14 "Es erscheint geradezu paradox, dass in einer Zeit des zunehmenden Wohlstands und Ausbaus der Autonomie die Polemiken um ein symbolisches Denkmal nicht abklingen, aber vielleicht wird gerade der Kampf um Symbole wichtig, wenn die Sachpolitik die dringendsten Probleme gelöst hat." Thomas Pardatscher, *Das Siegesdenkmal in Bozen. Entstehung, Symbolik, Rezeption* (Athesia, Bozen, 2002), 202.

15 Vgl. Oswald Zoeggeler and Lamberto Ippolito, *Die Architektur für ein Italienisches Bozen 1922–1942* (Tappeiner, Lana, 1992). Vgl. Claudia Cavallar, „Von fremdländischem Anstrich befreit. Die patriotischen Umgestaltungen von Bozen in der Mussolini-Zeit“, in Jan Tabor (ed.), *Kunst und Diktatur. Architektur, Bildhauerei und Malerei in Österreich, Deutschland, Italien und der Sowjetunion 1922–1956*, Vol. 2 (Baden, 1994), 652–659. Harald Dunajtschik and Gerald Steinacher, "Die Architektur für ein italienisches Südtirol 1922–1943", in Gerald Steinacher and Aram Mattioli (eds.), *Geschichte und Region/storia e regione (Faschismus und Architektur)* 17(1) Jahrgang (2008), 101–37.

The arch was one of Piacentini's first projects in Bolzano. The architect thanked Mussolini for entrusting him with the project and promised to create a "truly Fascist monument" based on Mussolini's original concept, which had won praise among Italian nationalists at home and abroad. Donations for the project flowed in, and the *duce* himself contributed a significant sum of his money.<sup>16</sup> The Victory Monument was completed by 1928 at a carefully chosen site strategically situated between two parts of the rather small Austrian provincial town. More important perhaps, the arch was built over an unfinished Austrian memorial to the fallen soldier of the *Kaiserjäger*, an elite unit that had fought against the Italians in the First World War. In other words, Mussolini's arch literally stood on the ruins of the Habsburg monarchy,<sup>17</sup> symbolizing Italy's rule over South Tyrol and its claim on the new border in the Brenner Valley.

The architectural design of the monument—a Roman triumphal arch—was intended to send a message. Widespread during the Roman Empire (almost 2,000 years ago), triumphal arches enjoyed a renaissance in Europe during the eighteenth century—Paris's Arc de Triomphe and Berlin's Brandenburg Gate are two examples from the period. During the Fascist era, however, they were uncommon in Italy, although there were a number of them in the country's African colonies.<sup>18</sup> To the untrained eye, the Victory Monument could easily be mistaken for a genuine Roman arch dating back to antiquity, erected by an emperor to mark the border of the Roman Empire at the Brenner Valley. (In reality, of course, the Roman Empire reached as far away as England, and no such border near the Brenner ever existed).

The Bolzano arch measures 19 meters wide, 20.5 meters high, and 8 meters deep. The mighty main beam rests on fourteen columns that are in the form of fasces (*fascio* in Italian)—bundles of elm or birch rods with an axe emerging from them—the ancient Roman symbols of authority from which the Italian Fascist Party drew its name. Along the rectangular stone blocks that form the north-facing main façade is the sculpture "Vittoria Sagittaria," a victory goddess firing an arrow northward toward the Italian–Austrian border—a symbolic warning to neighbours Austria and Germany not to interfere in Italy's plans to Italianize South Tyrol.<sup>19</sup> The Latin inscription at the top of the monument states: "Here at the border of the fatherland stands a marker. From this point on, we educated the others with language, law, and culture" (*Hic Patriae Fine Siste Signa / Hinc Ceteros Excolummus Lingua Legibus Artibus*).<sup>20</sup> The arrogant message was clear: The Fascists had brought civilization to the backward Alpine "barbarians" of South Tyrol, which had been part of the Roman Empire more than 1,500 year

---

16 Pardatscher, *op.cit.* note 14, 36–41.

17 Steininger, *op.cit.* note 4, 35.

18 The other best-known example in Italy is the triumphal arch in Genoa, also a Piacentini design, which was built between 1923 and 1931. See Dunajtschik and Mattioli, *op.cit.*, note 7, 49 f.

19 Steininger, *op.cit.* note 4, 37.

20 *Ibid.*, 37.

ago. The monument proclaims that the “fallen sons of the fatherland”—Italian war heroes like the “martyrs” Cesare Battisti, Damiano Chiesa and Fabio Filzi, immortalized in busts inside the arch—had sacrificed themselves to conquer these “borderlands”.

In this context, the Victory Monument became the symbolic portal to the new town. Not far from it sat the city-government buildings and housing for civil servants and military officers. Most prominent among the government buildings was the Casa Littoria, the Fascist Party headquarters, which today houses Bolzano's Finance Department. Built in 1939–42 in the rationalist style—the second most important architectural style (after neoclassicism) of the Fascist era—the Casa Littoria is dominated by an enormous travertine (limestone) bas-relief that spans 36 meters and stands 5.5 meters high. At the center is Benito Mussolini on horseback, his arm raised forward in the Roman salute (commonly referred to as the “Hitler salute”). Emblazoned below the belly of his horse are the words “Credere, obbedire, combattere” (believe, obey, fight). The narrative on the frieze depicts the rise and triumph of fascism, glorifying the civil strife before the Fascists' march on Rome in October 1922, Mussolini's dictatorship, Italy's invasion of Ethiopia (1935–41) and its aid to Francisco Franco's Fascist forces during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39).

Yet, there is no panel or plaque explaining what the relief symbolizes and why it is problematic. In fact, until just a few years ago, hardly anyone cared about Mussolini on his horse, in part because the artist was the prominent and well-respected South Tyrolean sculptor Hans Piffraeder.<sup>21</sup> South Tyroleans' cooperation and collaboration with the Mussolini regime did not fit their narrative of victimhood at the hands of the Italians and thus was little discussed.<sup>22</sup> According to Tyrolean anthropologist Franz Haller, “Hans Piffraeder may well represent the wide spectrum of ‘political art’, which has always been marked by a dichotomy of complicity and selfishness.”<sup>23</sup>

During the 1930s, the Fascists also erected monuments in other parts of the new border province. Although most are much smaller than the massive structures in Bolzano, they have nonetheless attracted debate, stirred controversy and inflamed violence. A monument to the elite Alpini soldiers was built in 1938 in the town of Bruneck (Brunico in Italian), honouring their “heroism” in Ethiopia. During Mussolini's war of aggression against the African empire, widespread use of poison gas, mass shootings and rape were the order of the day. At least an

---

21 Piffraeder was president of the South Tyrolean artists' association from 1947 to 1950.

22 See also Elisabeth Baumgartner and Heinrich Schwazer, “Kunst und Politik. Südtirol zwischen den Diktaturen”, in Wittfrida Mitterer (ed.), *Megawatt & Widerstand. Die Ära der Groß-Kraftwerke in Südtirol* (Athesia, Bozen, 2004), 148–75, 163 ff.

23 “Der Südtiroler Bildhauer Hans Piffraeder kann durchaus stellvertretend für das weite Spektrum ‘Politischer Kunst’ angesehen werden, die immer schon von der Dichotomie aus Komplizenschaft und Egoismus gesteuert war.” Mitteilung Franz Haller, 22 October 2006. See also, Franz Haller and Romano Fantoni's 1987 television documentary, *Vom Rationalismus zu einer Regimearchitektur: Südtirol 1922–1942*.



estimated 300,000 Ethiopians, mostly civilians, were killed during the Italian occupation.<sup>24</sup> For years, the local German-speaking population viewed the monument as a symbol of the Italian conquest of South Tyrol rather than a celebration of heinous atrocities committed in a faraway land.<sup>25</sup> In 1943, a Wehrmacht tank knocked the monument off its plinth. In 1951, the Italian authorities rebuilt it.<sup>26</sup>

In the 1920s, Fascist Italy built charnel houses for the remains of its war dead near the new border with Austria.<sup>27</sup> To fill the ossuaries, the Italians disinterred the remains of their fallen soldiers from gravesites near the fronts in Upper Italy and brought their bones back to the South Tyrol crypts.<sup>28</sup> The aim was to give the false impression that the new border had been an Italian front in the First World War and that the territory had been conquered militarily, thus legitimizing Italy's "blood right" to the Brenner Pass. This was a distortion of history, of course, but dictators are rarely troubled by changing historical narratives if doing so serves their purposes. The ossuaries and the Victory monument are an excellent example of this tendency.<sup>29</sup>

#### *A. Fascist Monuments in the Post-war Period*

There was no Italian Nuremberg. Italians opted not for the rule of law, but rather for vengeance. Mussolini and thousands of his followers were executed in cold blood in the months and years after the fall of the Fascist regime. Because Italy became one of the first conflict zones in the Cold War, the dividing line in society quickly shifted from Fascist versus anti-Fascist to Communist versus anti-Communist. The altered political landscape allowed the young democracy to quickly "move on" instead of confronting its past and the crimes committed under the Fascist regime.

As early as 1946, the remnants of Mussolini Fascists regrouped to form the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) political party, which was not only anti-Communist but also openly praised the "glorious past" under the *duce*. Its electoral per-

---

24 See Aram Mattioli, *Experimentierfeld der Gewalt. Der Abessinienkrieg und seine internationale Bedeutung 1935-1941* (Orell Füssli, Zürich, 2005), 153.

25 Gerald Steinacher (ed.), *Tra Duce, Führer e Negus. L'Alto Adige e la guerra d'Abissinia 1935-1941*, (Temi, Trento, 2008).

26 Steininger, *op.cit.* note 4, 38 f.

27 Alexander De Ahsbahs and Gerald Steinacher, "Die Totenburgen des italienischen Faschismus. Beinhäuser und politischer Gefallenenkult", in Aram Mattioli and Gerald Steinacher (eds.), *Für den Faschismus bauen. Architektur und Städtebau im Italien Mussolinis* (Orell Füssli Verlag, Zürich, 2009), 233-258.

28 Gerald Steinacher, "Die Toten als Grenzwächter der Nation. Die Beinhäuser des italienischen Faschismus in Südtirol", *Zibaldone. Zeitschrift für italienische Kultur der Gegenwart* 49 (Spring 2010), 37-45.

29 Until recently, they drew little attention. Indeed, hardly anyone other than a few politicians and some residents who lived nearby knew the background of the charnel houses. Steininger, *op.cit.* note 4, 39.

formance was quite modest overall. Fascism in democratic Italy was tolerated but no longer in vogue (at least not until the 1980s). In the immediate months after the end of war, many Fascist symbols all over Italy were taken down. But in Bolzano, they remained. Remarkably, the Victory Monument was left almost completely untouched, save for the removal of an inscription glorifying Mussolini.<sup>30</sup>

Of all the Fascist monuments and buildings in South Tyrol, the Victory Monument has stoked the greatest tensions, particularly within the last thirty years, which have seen an escalation in polemics, protests and clashes. From its earliest days, the arch has been a barometer of local ethnic frictions. Protected by the Italian state under the domain of the Federal Department of Fine Arts in Rome, the monument soon came to signify that little had changed since the war ended in 1945. During the Fascist period, the monument served as a stage for marches and wreath-laying ceremonies, especially on 4 November, the anniversary of the end of World War I in 1918 (for Italy) and of Italy's victory over Austria–Hungary. The 4 November ceremonies at the monument continued in the Fascist tradition even after the Second World War, although in 1949 the day was officially renamed “Veterans Day”, and the ceremonies technically became celebrations of veterans rather than of victory.<sup>31</sup> In the early postwar period, there was little objection to the monument or the annual nationalistic celebrations, mainly because other issues were far more pressing. In 1946, Austria and Italy reached a compromise on South Tyrol: Austria would cede the territory for good in return for Italy granting the Tyroleans in the province a right to stay in their *Heimat* and minority rights. Consequently, matters such as the implementation of certain issues (school teaching in German, federal jobs, public housing) dominated the public discourse at the time. The Italian national government, however, did not fulfil its promises for more rights in South Tyrol.

In 1957, the South Tyrolean political leadership decided to take a tougher stand in demanding autonomy from Rome. For the first time, the Piacentini arch became a scandalous object. In the decade since the end of the war, the Victory Monument had come to be interpreted as anti-European and nationalistic, animated by ghosts of the past. The situation in Bolzano was rife with peculiarities. That same year, twelve years after Mussolini's execution, the pieces of the *duce* relief were finally assembled and mounted on the finance building in Bolzano—timed intentionally for a visit by the president of newly democratic Italy.<sup>32</sup> This was undoubtedly a unique way of dealing with the legacy of Fascism. The Italian government was well aware of the provocative message and its effect on the German-speaking population. Yet, only one political group—the South Tyrolean People's Party (SVP)—protested against this revival of the Mussolini cult of personality.

---

30 Steiningger, *op.cit.* note 4, 38.

31 Pardatscher, *op.cit.* note 14, 198.

32 See Mathias Frei, *Hans Piffraeder 1888–1950. Entwürfe zum Relief am Gebäude der Finanzämter in Bozen* (Südtiroler Künstlerbund, Bozen, 2005). See also, Haller and Fantoni, *op.cit.* note 23.

By 1961, the hundredth anniversary of Italy's national unity, South Tyrol had become a tinder box. On 12 June 1961, later known as *Feuernacht* (night of fire), a South Tyrolean resistance group blew up 37 electricity pylons that supplied power to Bolzano's industrial zone, striking fear in the town's Italian population and alarming Rome. In the aftermath of *Feuernacht*, the Italian government sent 24,000 soldiers and 10,000 policemen to South Tyrol, and the minister of interior imposed a curfew in the region.<sup>33</sup> The Italian police arrested and reportedly tortured a number of Tyrolean activists.<sup>34</sup> In the following years, the bombings and violence continued. Tyrolean nationalists twice attempted to bomb the Victory Monument, first in September 1978 and again in April 1979.

Since the 1960s, the Italian neo-Fascist party (the MSI) has ratcheted up its activities, underscoring its position with nationalistic pathos and wreath-laying ceremonies. In response to the terrorist attacks in South Tyrol, members "buried" the Victory Monument in wreaths. By this point, the monument had come to symbolize Italian identity for the town and the whole region. Against this backdrop, a strong anti-Fascist movement formed in the 1970s, composed of an interethnic alliance of German and Italian left-wing groups in Bolzano and the conservative SVP. Together, they called for the removal of Bolzano's Fascist monuments. The Victory Monument was to be replaced by a theatre or an opera house. The alliance was short lived, however. Discussions quickly fizzled, and the monument stood on. Bolzano's SVP politicians continued to demand its removal, whereas SVP parliamentarians in Rome advocated turning the monument into a memorial against Fascism. After the 1978 bombing of the arch, the controversy surrounding the monument again moved to the forefront of the public's attention, where it remains today. Anti-Fascists in South Tyrol—German-speakers and Italians—who support "transforming" the monument have made concrete and, in some cases, extremely creative proposals for "neutralizing" the arch, whereas certain SVP politicians and right-wing groups among the German-speaking population vehemently demand that the monument be torn down.

### B. *Shifting Realities*

During the 1980s, the positions of the Italians and German-speaking people of South Tyrol reversed as the Italian population began to decline and the German-speaking population climbed. With its growing numbers, so grew the self-confidence of South Tyroleans, putting the Italian population on the defensive. Just as the German-speaking population had done during Mussolini's reign, beginning in the late twentieth century many Italians in Bolzano retreated to their own spaces, self-segregating and living in quarters for Italian workers only, in which they had little contact with the almost exclusively German-speaking rural areas of South Tyrol. The descendants of the Italian immigrants who had come

---

33 Hans Karl Peterlini, *Südtiroler Bombenjahre. Von Blut und Tränen zum Happyend* (Raetia, Bozen 2005), 125.

34 Alcock, *op.cit.* note 10.

to the region in the 1930s and 1940s struggled to find their places in the new demographic landscape and to fit into the South Tyrolean *Umland*. In this context, the Victory Monument came to be an important symbol of the Italian identity, or *Italianità*. Once autonomy from Rome had been gained, South Tyroleans began to assert themselves more confidently (perhaps even arrogantly) and started treating the Italians as “invaders” or, at best, tolerated but temporary “guests” in Tyrol. They even challenged the Italians’ right to live in the province of Bolzano, although their challenges were issued more in murmurs than in shouts. Thus, it was from a defensive position that the neo-Fascist MSI staged its protests against South Tyrol’s increasing autonomy at the arch.

Since the 1980s, the Italian right-wing and neo-Fascist parties and groups have come to dominate the 4 November festivities held at the Victory Monument. As has so often been the case in South Tyrol, Italian Fascism masqueraded as Italian nationalism, enabling it to survive the demise of Mussolini’s regime. In fact, the neo-Fascist party had even won strong representation in the regional parliament. In terms of dealing with Mussolini’s legacy, the situation in Bolzano mirrors what is happening in the rest of Italy. Right-wing groups and neo-Fascists hold such ceremonies all over the country every year on 4 November.

Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi’s years in power were marked by relativism and revisionism with regard to Fascism in Italian society today. By forming a coalition government with the neo-Fascists in 1994, Berlusconi opened the floor to positions that before would have been considered unconstitutional. That year, the Berlusconi government became the first in Europe to openly include neo-Fascists. As a consequence, nationalistic and revisionist positions became more widely accepted.<sup>35</sup> For example, also in 1994, Deputy Prime Minister Gianfranco Fini called dictator Mussolini the greatest statesman of the century. In 2003, Berlusconi declared that Mussolini did not kill anyone; he just sent opponents of the authoritarian regime on holiday. To this day, in Italy people can still be seen giving the Fascist salute on the street, in soccer stadiums, and even at political meetings. Government officials have even been known to give the salute during public appearances. It is true that the Fascist relics in Bolzano are not the only ones still standing in Italy today. However, the Bolzano relief depicting Mussolini so prominently on horseback is exceptional.<sup>36</sup>

Along with the *duce* relief, the Victory Monument continues to stir up controversy. In the early 1990s, the Italian government announced that it planned to restore the monument, spurring sharp protests. The protest movement gained momentum when the Tyrolean *Schützen*—an active, historical, well-organized “homeland-defence” militia with some right-wing tendencies that dressed in

---

35 See Aram Mattioli, ‘Viva Mussolini!’. *Die Aufwertung des Faschismus im Italien Berlusconi* (Ferdinand Schöningh, Paderborn, 2010), 18.

36 Harald Dunajtschik and Aram Mattioli, “Die ‘Città nuova’ von Bozen—eine Gegenstadt für eine Parallelgesellschaft”, in Aram Mattioli, Gerald Steinacher (eds.), *Für den Faschismus bauen. Architektur und Städtebau im Italien Mussolinis* (Orell Füssli, Zürich, 2009), 259–286, at 275.

traditional nineteenth-century uniforms—took their issues to the streets, gaining media attention.<sup>37</sup> In 1992, Michael Seeber, a leading Bolzano businessman, wrote:

It is not necessary that the building made of marble and bronze be removed. It is rather a matter of removing the significance and symbolism that both sides attach to it. The objective should be to liberate the monument of the ballast of conflicting ideologies and to regard it as what it has become: a witness of bygone times.<sup>38</sup>

Many shared Seeber's view, and based on this idea the city's centre-left government decided to make a symbolic gesture. It could not remove the Victory Monument or change its symbolism; only the national government in Rome held such authority. However, the city leaders wanted to make a gesture of reconciliation. So in 2001, they changed the name of Victory Square to Peace Square. This sparked a massive uproar among Bolzano's Italian population, who felt that a symbol of their history had been removed without first consulting them. The city government could not ignore the outcry and was forced to hold a nonbinding popular referendum on the issue in 2002. A large majority of voters (62%) cast their ballots in favour of restoring the square's Fascist-era name, Victory Square, after less than a year. This revived old tensions between the Italian and German-speaking Bolzanese, especially between hardliners in both groups.<sup>39</sup>

In 2004, under the liberal Mayor Giovanni *Salghetti Drioli*, the city government placed a set of panels near the Victory Monument, distancing itself from the spirit of the arch.<sup>40</sup> In four languages (Italian, German, Ladin, and English), the panels read:

City of Bolzano. Italy's Fascist regime erected this monument to celebrate victory in the First World War, an event which brought the division of Tyrol and the separation of the population of South Tyrol from Austria, their mother country. The City of Bolzano, a free, modern and democratic town, condemns the discrimination and divisions of the past, as well as any form of nationalism, and pledges its commitment to promoting a culture of fraternity and peace in the true European Spirit. 2004.

---

37 Pardatscher, *op.cit.* note 14, 197 ff.

38 "Es geht nicht darum, das Bauwerk aus Marmor und Bronze zu entfernen. Es geht vielmehr darum, ihm jene Bedeutung und Symbolik zu nehmen, die ihm sowohl die eine als auch die andere Seite zuschreiben. Das Ziel soll sein, das Denkmal vom Ballast der gegensätzlichen Ideologien zu befreien und es als das zu betrachten, was es zwischenzeitlich geworden ist: ein Zeugnis vergangener Zeiten." Oswald Zoeggeler and Lamberto Ippolito, *op.cit.* note 15, 6.

39 "Friedensplatz in Bozen wird zum Siegesplatz", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 8 October 2002.

40 Dunajtschik and Mattioli, *op.cit.* note 36, 259-86, at 281.

In 2005, the coalition formed by Berlusconi's Forza Italia and the right-wing National Alliance party (successor to the MSI) headed by former Italian foreign minister Gianfranco Fini—nominated architect Giovanni Benussi as its candidate for mayor of Bolzano. After the election in May of that year, Silvio Berlusconi celebrated Benussi's victory in front of the Victory Monument, where he brazenly gave his opponents the middle finger. The prime minister's disrespectful gesture made world headlines, and the next day the photo of the *cavaliere* (as Berlusconi is known) with his middle finger in the air was posted on front pages all over Italy. Meanwhile, Mussolini the *cavaliere*, atop his horse with his right arm raised remained on the façade of the Bolzano tax office.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, demands for changes to Bolzano's Fascist relics were met with confusion from Benussi during his brief, one-month tenure. He called for a hands-off approach and invited the South Tyroleans to lay flowers before the *duce* monument. The mayor admitted that the Fascist period had been painful for some, but insisted that Italian Fascism had also done much good, for which the Tyroleans should be grateful.<sup>42</sup> By 2006, little had changed. Right-wing party leader and former Italian foreign minister Gianfranco Fini, flanked by young, flag-bearing followers, celebrated Veterans Day at a wreath-laying ceremony at the Victory arch in Bolzano.

### *C. Monuments Under Siege*

In the autumn 2008 state parliamentary elections, South Tyrol experienced a rightward shift. For the first time since 1945, the Christian Democratic SVP lost its absolute majority in the state government. By contrast, ethnic Austrian right-wing parties fared better than usual at the polls that year. The South Tyrolean Freedom Party, which was strongly connected ideologically to Jörg Haider's Austrian Freedom Party, saw its vote share almost triple, rising to 14.3% from a mere 5% in the previous elections.<sup>43</sup> Other right-wing parties also gained momentum. These parties placed the issue of dealing with "Fascist relics" high on their agendas. The ethnic Austrians likewise made the matter a priority. Perhaps because the region was wealthy and flourishing, its politicians were able to campaign on big, symbolic issues rather than on everyday matters like filling potholes.

On 8 November 2008, the 19th anniversary of the end of the First World War, the *Schützen* and their sympathizers, members of the South Tyrolean right-wing parties, and conservative SVP voters staged one of the largest demonstrations against the Victory Monument in years. The protesters wore their traditional costumes and rallied under the motto "Against Fascism—for Tyrol" (*Gegen Faschismus—für Tirol*). Nearby, 500 or so Italians spat insults at the *Schützen*, and some gave the Fascist salute. The *Schützen* demanded the removal of all Fascist

---

41 "Berlusconi zeigt den Stinkefinger", *Standard*, 7 June 2005.

42 "Benussi: 'Die Deutschen sollten am Siegesdenkmal Blumen niederlegen'", *Suedtirol Online* ([www.stol.it](http://www.stol.it)), 1 February 2011.

43 "Rechtsrutsch in der Südtiroler Landtagswahl", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 28 October 2008.

monuments in South Tyrol and called for the reunification of Tyrol. The militia's regional commandant addressed the crowd: "Italy is [...] the only EU country that, 65 years after the fall of the Mussolini regime, never distanced itself from Fascism and never apologized to us Tyroleans for the crimes of this regime."<sup>44</sup>

The speaker had either forgotten or ignored that the protest was taking place on the 17th anniversary of the so-called *Kristallnacht*. He made no mention of the 1938 pogrom against the Jews in the Third Reich, even as he reproached the Italians for their "careless handling" of the past. South Tyrolean historian Hans Heiss criticized the *Schützen* for not honouring the victims of Nazism along with the victims of Fascism and for failing to acknowledge the elimination of the Jewish community in South Tyrol with the collaboration of local Nazis. He called the *Schützen's* activism "one-sided anti-Fascism".<sup>45</sup> Heiss and others pointed out that many South Tyroleans fought in the Wehrmacht, the SS, and other German units to help carry out Hitler's quest for *Lebensraum*. They served as guards in concentration camps, battled with partisans, and killed Italian civilians in reprisals in 1943–45.

This part of South Tyrolean history is often glossed over or forgotten in a region still grappling with its past.<sup>46</sup> For example, the ethnic Austrian governor of South Tyrol, Luis Durnwalder of the SVP, recently stated that under Italian Fascist rule the South Tyroleans "suffered like the Jews",<sup>47</sup> but failed to mention their collaboration with the Nazis. Although the comparison is absurd, it reflects the historical memory of many South Tyroleans: They were always the victims (of *Italian* Fascism), but never the perpetrators (of *German* Nazi crimes). The region's Italians, meanwhile, dwell on the Nazi abuses against their community in 1943–45. Like its German-speaking counterparts, the Italian population focuses on its victimization while minimizing or ignoring the crimes committed by the Fascists. Italian neo-Fascist groups oppose the South Tyrolean neo-Nazi and right-wing groups, and South Tyrolean neo-Nazis and hardcore nationalists oppose the Italian neo-Fascists. In short, unlike anywhere else in Europe (and possibly the world), in South Tyrol it has always been possible to be simultaneously an anti-Fascist *and* a Nazi and *vice versa*.

On 25 April 2009, the *Schützen* organised a huge demonstration in Bruneck against the Alpini monument. A few months later on 4 November 2009, the SVP issued a public statement condemning the wreath-laying ceremonies

---

44 Landeskommandant Paul Pacher: "Italien hat sich somit als einziges EU Land 65 Jahre nach dem Sturz des Regimes von Benito Mussolini noch nie vom Faschismus distanziert und sich nie für die Verbrechen dieses Regimes bei uns Tirolern entschuldigt", "Offizielles Video SSB—Gegen Faschismus—Für Tirol", at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsTzPiEfv&NR=1>>.

45 "Halbierter Antifaschismus", *Sendung Pro und Contra*, Rai television Bozen, 4 November 2008. See also, Christof Franceschini, "Tiroler Gewissen mit Gedächtnislücken", in *Tageszeitung am Sonntag*, 26 April 2009, nr. 80.

46 See Steinacher, *op.cit.* note 13.

47 "Durnwalder: abbiamo sofferto come gli ebrei", *Alto Adige*, 29 January 2003.

that Berlusconi's People of Freedom party (PdL) had held before the Victory Monument and Tolomei's grave: "With such die-hards, it is impossible to build a better common future for our country."<sup>48</sup> Later that month, the South Tyrolean daily *Dolomiten* reported: "Fascist Victory Monument to be restored". According to the report, the controversial Victory Monument would be renovated with taxpayers' money. This news caused a public outcry, especially as the South Tyrolean right-wing parties had long been demanding that the monument be demolished.<sup>49</sup> In December 2009, the regional parliament in Bolzano agreed to a historicization of the Victory Monument rather than its demolition. The Green Party proposed a project called "Bolzano as a European City of Memories," which placed the Victory Monument at the beginning of a trail for learning contemporary history.<sup>50</sup> But some politicians objected. Eva Klotz, the politician and daughter of a South Tyrolean terrorist, believed that putting the monument in historical context and explaining the background was not enough, and she represented the view of many. "There is no right to fascism", Klotz said. "These are monuments of its glorification and historical falsehood, and such monuments are not to be explained, but ought to be abolished".<sup>51</sup>

#### *D. Comparing the Legacies*

In an open letter in 2011, 41 prominent regional historians had appealed for the radical and effective historicization of South Tyrol's Fascist monuments to prevent further political radicalization in the region. Their proposal for converting or integrating the Victory Monument into a centre for contemporary history (which was ultimately accepted) follows a trend in Europe. The architectural legacies of Fascism, Stalinism, and National Socialism are often objects of controversy. In Budapest, for example, the statues of Communist-era idols have been moved to a park on the city's outskirts—headstones in a graveyard of kitsch. In Spain, meanwhile, Franco's statues are not being destroyed, but rather moved to basements or museums. The fate of the Valley of the Fallen mausoleum complex, where Franco is buried along with roughly 40,000 soldiers, remains unresolved, however. The

---

48 Richard Theiner, "Mit solchen Ewiggestrigen ist es nicht möglich, an einer gemeinsamen Zukunft für unser Land zu bauen", "SVP und 'Südtiroler Freiheit': Kranzniederlegungen nicht akzeptabel", *Suedtirol Online* ([www.stol.it](http://www.stol.it)) 4 November 2009.

49 "Faschistisches Siegesdenkmal soll saniert werden", *Suedtirol Online* ([www.stol.it](http://www.stol.it)), 23 November 2009.

50 "Grüne zum Siegesdenkmal: Gedächtnis statt Missbrauch", *Suedtirol Online* ([www.stol.it](http://www.stol.it)), 1 September 2010.

51 "Eva Klotz betonte, sie sei für die Schleifung, mit einer Historisierung könne man nicht zufrieden sein. Es gebe kein Recht auf Faschismus. Es seien Denkmäler der Glorifizierung und der Geschichtsfälschung, und die gehörten nicht erklärt, sondern getilgt." "Faschistische Relikte—schleifen oder erklären?", 1 December 2009, at <[http://www.landtag-bz.org/de/aktuelles/pm-landtag-aktuell.asp?redas=yes&aktuelles\\_action=4&aktuelles\\_article\\_id=316236](http://www.landtag-bz.org/de/aktuelles/pm-landtag-aktuell.asp?redas=yes&aktuelles_action=4&aktuelles_article_id=316236)>.



dictator commissioned the complex, which took almost 20 years to build (1940–58), as a symbol of his victory in the civil war. Since 2008, “the government has banned neo-fascist groups from commemorating Franco’s death there each 20 November. Yet, fresh wreaths are still laid on his grave there daily, courtesy of the Spanish state.”<sup>52</sup>

And, of course, no country has scrutinised public symbols and spaces more than Germany. The *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (the critical coming-to-terms with the past) had to contend with monuments, symbols, and names in every corner of the inner and outer landscape (*Erinnerungskultur*). The former Nazi Party rally grounds in Nuremberg are an excellent example of how Germany has dealt with Nazi landmarks. Immediately after the war, the U.S. Army destroyed the huge swastikas that hung in the Nuremberg stadium. In 2001, the ruins of the enormous buildings were transformed into a museum. The site no longer attracts neo-Nazi gatherings. The museum hosts the permanent exhibit “Fascination and Terror” about the National Socialist reign of terror as well as the difficulties of dealing with the NS architectural legacy after 1945. The grounds now feature comprehensive labelling, a tour for school classes and seminars for teachers.<sup>53</sup>

After reunification, there was a prolonged fight over the future of the East German parliament building in Berlin, the *Palast der Republik*—an architectural symbol of the Communist era. After lengthy debate, the German government decided to tear the building down and replace it with a replica of the old palace of the Hohenzollern dynasty. This seems to be a more radical and rare solution for dealing with the material culture of dictatorships.<sup>54</sup> In 1995, the German government held a competition to design the German national “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe”. Artist Horst Hoheisel’s proposal for dealing with the challenge of building such a monument in the heart of Berlin was particularly provocative: his design entailed blowing up the Brandenburg Gate, grinding its stones into dust and sprinkling the remains over its former site, and finally covering the entire monumental zone with granite plates. “How better to remember a destroyed people than with a destroyed monument?”<sup>55</sup> Hoheisel’s design

---

52 Thomas Catan, “Generalísimo Francisco Franco Is Still Dead—And His Statues Are Next”, *Wall Street Journal*, 2 March 2009, at <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123594813501604681.html>>.

53 Dokumentationszentrum Reichsparteitagsgelände, at <<http://museen.nuernberg.de/dokuzentrum/index.html>>.

54 John V. Maciuika, “Whose Schlossplatz? Architecture and the ‘Materialization’ of German Identities in Berlin’s Historic Center, 1945–2009”, in Uta A. Balbier, Christina Cuevas-Wolf and Joes Seqal (eds.), *East German Culture and the Power of Memory* (2011) Supplement 7, 15–28.

55 See James Young, “Memory, Countermemory, and the End of the Monument: Horst Hoheisel, Micha Ullmann, Rachel Whiteread and Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock”, in *At Memory’s Edge* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2000), 90–119, 90.

would have transformed the symbol of German unity and German tragedy into a Holocaust memorial.

Clearly, dealing with monuments from the past is anything but easy. How, then, should we deal with the architectural reminders of dictatorships and totalitarian regimes in societies that are now democratic? There is no easy or standardized answer to this question. Demolishing controversial monuments might seem to be the simplest solution, but it is also the most provocative one. Not surprisingly, Hoheisel's plan to turn the Brandenburg Gate into powder did not win the competition. In addition, the current trend all over Europe is away from destroying or dismantling monuments and toward transforming them.

### III. STRUGGLING FOR SOLUTIONS

A turning point in struggle to reach accommodation between South Tyroleans and South Tyrol's Italian population on the issue of Fascist relics came in January 2011. Under the headline "A Blank Slate for a New Start," local newspapers reported a major breakthrough: the Mussolini relief could be removed, and a solution for the Victory Monument and the ossuaries was in sight. The SVP had arrived at an understanding to neutralize the Fascist monuments in Bozen with Berlusconi's minister of culture. SVP leaders called the compromise an important "contribution to the peaceful coexistence" of South Tyrol's ethnic groups.<sup>56</sup> The proposed deal sparked tensions within Berlusconi's party, however, according to the Milan-based daily *Corriere della Sera*. According to the newspaper, the basic understanding was tied to political favours for Berlusconi's party. Bolzano's PdL MP Michaela Biancofiore and other local Pdl leaders were outraged, and rumours that the regional PdL planned to break away from the national party began to circulate. "Compromises must be found, but not at the expense of the Italians in South Tyrol", Biancofiore emphasized. "It is a historic blunder", shouted an angry Alessandra Mussolini, the granddaughter of the *duce*, herself a politician once in coalition with Berlusconi. She went on, "They should remember that history cannot be locked away."<sup>57</sup>

Luis Durnwalder, the widely popular and long-time governor of South Tyrol, promised that the Mussolini relief would not be "turned to dust", but merely removed to another location. In fact, in Durnwalder's view, the provincial government had been "generous" in its handling of the Fascist relics, having insisted not

---

56 Richard Theiner, "Noch nie hat es bei uns so viele positive Rückmeldungen aus der Bevölkerung gegeben, wie in den vergangenen Stunden. (...) Es gibt jetzt viel weniger Alibis für all jene, die zündeln wollen, und zwar auf beiden Seiten. Es ist ein Beitrag zum friedlichen Zusammenleben' "Eine 'tabula rasa' für einen Neubeginn", *Suedtirol Online* ([www.stol.it](http://www.stol.it)), 27 January 2011.

57 Biancofiore ricorda che "i compromessi vanno trovati, ma non a scapito degli italiani altoatesini". "È uno scempio storico", si indigna Alessandra Mussolini, "ma quelli là si ricordino che la storia non si può ingabbiare". Emanuele Buzzi, "Tensione sul patto Bondi-Svp. Mussolini: scempio", *Corriere della Sera*, 28 January 2011.

that the Victory Monument be dismantled, but rather that it be transformed with the addition of explanatory panels and nothing else. He went on:

[W]e do not have to demolish the charnel houses, but the historical context must be explained. [...] The Mussolini relief, however, must be removed. In Germany, a Hitler monument in the form of this Mussolini relief would be unthinkable, not to mention displaying it on a public building. [...] The Italians must not hide behind Mussolini's horse. Poor Italians, I say, if this is the only thing that constitutes their identity.<sup>58</sup>

The governor's words were direct and sharp. In the following weeks, the tone of the debate grew increasingly shrill. For example, Biancofiore spoke of the "injured Italian national soul". However, Durnwalder and the SVP-dominated local government did not hold the authority over certain objects of national cultural heritage. Buildings such as the Victory monument or the ossuaries are still mainly under the control of the federal government in Rome. Therefore, Rome has the last word.

In anticipation of the sesquicentenary of Italy's national unity, the world looked to Italy anxiously. In March 2011, the *New York Times* reported on the mood in Bolzano amid the controversy about the monuments: "[I]t came as little surprise when the president of the autonomous [region of Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol] said he would not join in the nationwide festivities planned this week celebrating the 150th anniversary of the unification of Italy." In an interview in Trento, Governor Durnwalder, who was also the region's president, stated, "We were taken away from Austria against our will." He added, "I respect those people who want to celebrate, but I see no reason to celebrate."<sup>59</sup> By contrast, Biancofiore chose the anniversary to launch a cultural association promoting patriotism in Bolzano. Her "guest star" was television host Vittorio Sgarbi, a former MP. At a ceremony, he addressed the issue of unity ceremonies and commented on the state government's boycott. According to Sgarbi, the Italians in South Tyrol are persecuted, "as the Jews under the Nazis were." He claimed that taking down the Mussolini relief would make Durnwalder not much better than Hitler. Sgarbi continued angrily, "To remove the relief would be the same as the destruction of the Buddha statues by the Taliban in Afghanistan, although not a single Buddhist

---

58 "[G]roßzügig, weil wir nicht die Schleifung des Siegesdenkmals verlangen, sondern eine Umfunktionierung samt Erklärungen und nichts anderes. Auch die Beinhäuser müssen nicht weg, aber sie müssen erklärt werden [...] Aber das Relief kommt weg. In Deutschland wäre ein Hitler-Denkmal in der Art des Mussolini-Reliefs undenkbar, ganz zu schweigen auf einem öffentlichen Gebäude. [...] "Die Italiener müssen sich nicht hinter dem Ross von Mussolini verstecken. Arme Italiener, wenn nur das ihre Identität ausmache" "Relief wird nicht zu Pulver", *Suedtirol Online (www.stol.it)*, 31 January 2011.

59 Rachel Donadio, "Bolzano Journal: An Aria for Italy's Unity Also Sounds Like an Elegy", *New York Times*, 16 March 2011.

lives there anymore. This is pure barbarism and violence. It means that you extinguish history.”<sup>60</sup> In February 2011, the local newspaper had reported that the *duce* relief, the Victory Monument, the Alpini monument, and the charnel houses would be “neutralized”. The *Dolomiten* called on its readers to send in their ideas, sketches, or photo montages for neutralizing the Fascist monuments.

In response to the news, in March 2011 young right-wing Italians with neo-Fascist tendencies marched through the town, protesting the planned changes. Their motto was “Bolzano è Italia” (“Bolzano is Italy”). Roughly a thousand demonstrators from all over Italy answered the call of the Fascist-nostalgic youth movement “Casa Pound”, named for the US-American poet Ezra Pound who for many years lived in Italy and sympathized with the Fascists. About 250 Italian- and German-speaking local anti-Fascists held a counterdemonstration that day, giving history lessons on the square in front of the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano. They considered themselves to be building blocks for a better society. In their view, the Fascist monuments in South Tyrol should remain, but be transformed into memorials.<sup>61</sup>

On 14 March, *Suedtirol online* ran the headline “Fascist relics—Operational phase is due to start shortly.” Durnwalder then made it very clear: “We want to move quickly in order to stop the ethnic tensions that have erupted during the past few weeks.”<sup>62</sup> He announced that panels with background information would be placed near the ossuaries. The Victory Monument would be part of a museum complex with a documentation centre in its crypt and other subterranean rooms. The museum would address not only the history of the monument, but also fascism and Nazism in South Tyrol. In May 2011, the Bolzano government approved the concept for the museum presented by an expert commission in February.<sup>63</sup> The Mussolini relief would no longer be visible, and 483 proposals were submitted in a competition for ideas for the frieze.<sup>64</sup>

---

60 “So wie es die Juden unter den Nazis waren. Durnwalder sollte nicht das Mussolini-Relief loswerden wollen, um wie Hitler zu werden. [...] „Das Relief zu entfernen wäre dasselbe, wie die Zerstörung der Buddha-Statuen durch die Taliban, obwohl in Afghanistan kein einziger Buddhist mehr lebt. Das ist pure Barbarei und Gewalt. Es bedeutet, dass man die Geschichte auslöscht “Südtirols Italiener sind wie die Juden unter den Nazis”, *Suedtirol Online* ([www.stol.it](http://www.stol.it)), 7 March 2011.

61 “Der Faschistenmarsch durch Bozen–Bildergalerie”, *Suedtirol Online* ([www.stol.it](http://www.stol.it)), 5 March 2011.

62 “Wir wollen schnell weitermachen, um die ethnischen Spannungen zu beenden, die in den vergangenen Wochen immer wieder entflammt sind”, “Faschistische Relikte: Operative Phase soll in Kürze beginnen”, *Suedtirol Online* ([www.stol.it](http://www.stol.it)), 14 March 2011.

63 “Siegedenkmal: Inhalt für Ausstellung festgelegt”, *Suedtirol Online* ([www.stol.it](http://www.stol.it)), 23 May 2011. “Monumento alla Vittoria. Nel museo anche la storia del nazismo in Alto Adige”, *Alto Adige*, 24 May 2011.

64 “Faschistische Relikte: Operative Phase soll in Kürze beginnen”, *Suedtirol Online* ([www.stol.it](http://www.stol.it)), 14 March 2011.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

As of this writing in January 2012, South Tyrol's provincial government, the Italian government in Rome, and the city of Bolzano (Bozen) had just made a partial decision on the treatment of Bolzano's Fascist legacies. The Victory Monument will be transformed into a museum dedicated to the history of Fascism and National Socialism. The proposals for "neutralising" the relief's depiction of Mussolini on horseback still await the approval of federal authorities in Rome. Meanwhile, later this year, Bolzano will host the national meeting of the Alpini troops, the traditional mountain troops of the Italian army and fervent Italian patriots. The Alpini fought the Tyrolean *Kaiserjäger* units in the Dolomites during the First World War. The *Schützen* and even some ordinary South Tyroleans see a national gathering of Alpini in Bolzano as a provocation. If some Alpini groups parading in front of the Mussolini relief should happen to meet with *Schützen* members marching through the streets of the city, the situation could again become contentious.

In other words, the Victory Monument museum and the possible transformation of the *duce* relief will not end the discussions and controversies. These structures are merely symbols of longstanding conflicts within South Tyrol's deeply divided society. Like kindling on a fire, the monuments, sculptures, and ossuaries (and their potential destruction or transformation) as well as their use (or prohibition of their use) in nationalistic celebrations provide the pretext for public squabbles between the South Tyrolean and Italian populations; but the discord between the two groups will remain whether the monuments stay or go. The deeper problem is ethnic nationalism (e.g., German versus Italian)—a nationalism that, in South Tyrol and elsewhere in Europe, has existed since the nineteenth century—which led to the First World War. The survival of this type of nationalism rooted in the nation-state through two world wars and the grand unifying project of the European Union is not just an obstacle for a united community in South Tyrol but an obstacle for a united Europe. This will remain the case until we find a substitute for nation-state nationalism in Europe.