

# Growing up as German-speaking children in the context of fascist Italianization measures during the interwar period

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## Abstract

This paper studies what it was like to grow up in the German-speaking South Tyrol between 1922 and 1939, a time period that was significantly characterized by Italian Fascism. More specifically, one key focus was the analysis of how childhood models, ideals and concepts were recontextualized by the stakeholders of all relevant socialization authorities as well as state and Fascist institutions. A second focus was on the actions of the children themselves in dealing with the contrasting expectations and confrontations directed at them. The paper delivers an analysis of individually remembered and experienced aspects of childhood on the basis of the sources available.

Il presente saggio racconta l'infanzia dei bambini di madrelingua tedesca in Alto Adige fra il 1922 e il 1939, un periodo fortemente caratterizzato dal regime fascista italiano. In concreto, uno dei punti chiave della ricerca analizza come gli ideali, i concetti e i modelli d'infanzia fossero ricontestualizzati dagli esponenti delle autorità sociali rilevanti, così come dallo Stato e dalle istituzioni fasciste. La ricerca si è inoltre focalizzata sulle azioni dei bambini stessi e di come si confrontassero con le contrastanti aspettative del mondo adulto circostante. Il saggio presenta un'analisi degli aspetti d'infanzia individualmente vissuti e ricordati, basandosi sulle fonti al momento disponibili.

**Keywords:** children; South Tyrol; interwar period; individual memory; collective memory

**Parole chiave:** infanzia; Alto Adige; periodo interbellico; memoria individuale; memoria collettiva

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## 1. Introduction

This research aims at reconstructing the upbringing of German-speaking children in the interwar period between 1922 and 1939 in South Tyrol during Italian Fascism. The main interest lies in analyzing how children perceived and dealt with the day-to-day reality of childhood caught between the occupying force's de-Germanizing programs and the strategies for ensuring their identity as a German ethnic and linguistic group. It was a matter of working out, as Sartre said, what children made of what circumstances made of them (Hildenbrand, 1998). Therefore, the study sheds light on the children's active confrontation with their surroundings and focuses on the point of intersection between society and individuality (Schulze, 2000).

The theoretical framework for analysis consists of actor-centric social theories that have been applied to educational and social science concepts concerning socialization, learning and personality development. The aim is to understand the dynamics between material living conditions (everyday life experience), epistemes (worldviews, interpretative patterns) and social order (institutions) (Weber, 1956).

The main challenges in approaching this complex historical phenomenon can be summarized as follows: How can the children's different socialization experiences in the specific time span and geographical area be gathered? How can configurations (or "figurations" according to Elias, 1939/76) of those experiences be made into thought and action patterns? How can self-referential processes of social and psychic systems (Luhmann, 2002) be determined?

To better understand the addressed phenomena, two types of sources were used. Written documents filed in school and community archives reveal insights into the perspectives and actions of actors creating the intentional framework for the pupils' upbringing (such as school) at the different levels (from legislation at the macro level to the school on-site at the micro level) (Fend, 2006). Source-critical assessments are necessary, especially regarding the teachers' records produced in a totalitarian system. In order to gather the children's perspective, some ego documents were found.<sup>i</sup> However, it was necessary to rely on oral witnesses and their retrospective memory of their childhood, reaching back more than fifty years. The problem-centered interviews (Witzel, 2000) were conducted between January and August 2018 and they focused on the memories of childhood and school during Fascism. The forty people that were interviewed were born between 1916 and 1931. The analysis of the interviews followed Mayring's (2015) qualitative content analysis. In a region where the traumatic experience of the Italianization efforts during Fascism (Larcher, 2000) can be read, according to Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, as open wounds, or as a crooked cure, it is even more important to reflect on the complex patterns of individual and collective memory.

## 2. Biographical contextualization of childhood

The geographical area covered by the research is the Province of Bozen – South Tyrol, the northernmost province of Italy since the end of the First World War. The main ridge of the Central Alps is the border to Austria, and the most important border crossing is the Brenner Pass. The Brenner Pass is one of a number of places that, after the end of the war in 1918, became "a boundary of fate"<sup>iii</sup> in the minds of the people living there. For the German- and Ladin-speaking population of the Crown lands of Tyrol<sup>iii</sup>, which made up approximately 89% of

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all inhabitants south of the Brenner Pass to Salorno/Salurn, the new border became a “border of injustice”. Knowing that, despite harsh losses, it had successfully defended the language border in the bitter battles during World War I along the so-called Dolomite mountain front (Brandauer, 2007; Voigt, 2017), the population was not quick to accept the new Italian citizenship. The Italians, however, took the German-speaking part of the Crown lands of Tyrol in the days following November 3, 1918<sup>iv</sup>, without encountering any resistance and saw the Brenner Pass as *il confine sacro*, the sacred border, and the lawful spoils of war that had already been demanded in the 1915 Treaty of London (Hürter & Rusconi, 2007) in the course of the negotiations surrounding Italy's entry into the war.

The new border at the Brenner Pass was set in stone at international level during the peace treaties of Saint Germain in September 1919, without any safeguard clause for the German- and Ladin-speaking minorities, finalizing what the South Tyroleans had disavowed until the very end. Up until then, there had been an anchor of hope: item number 9 on Wilson's 14-point program<sup>v</sup>, which stipulated the consideration of nationalities in the demarcation of new frontiers for Italy (Dotter & Wedrac, 2018). The last formal step separating South Tyrol from the German-speaking cultural sphere was its annexation in the Italian parliament on October 10, 1920 (Steininger, 2004).

While the highest authorities, such as the Italian king, had promised concessions for the cultural and linguistic freedom of South Tyroleans before the new border was internationally corroborated and finalized (Gruber, 1975), the Fascist movement that formed soon after the war considered the new minority an enemy from the very start. The Fascists soon succeeded in gaining a presence in a number of political bodies, and they imposed their ideological and political ideas by means of brute force (Tasca, 2012). Mussolini himself had already made several clear statements on the South Tyrol issue. In the Fascist party organ and at rallies, he defined his political line: «In Italy, there are hundreds of thousands of Fascists who would rather lay waste South Tyrol than to permit the Tricolore [three colors – the name of the Italian flag] that flies above the Vetta d'Italia to be lowered. If the Germans have to be beaten and stomped to bring them to reason, then so be it, we're ready. A lot of Italians have been trained in this business» (Mussolini Benito qtd. in Steininger, 2003, p. 2).

The political ideology, clearly following the nationalist concept “one people, one nation, one language”, had to be unflinchingly implemented within the new untouchable boundaries (Sani, 2012). The German-speaking population suffered its first casualty on October 1, 1922, when groups of armed Fascist thugs marched into Bolzano/Bozen and took full control of the city. This brachial demonstration of nationalist politics towards the German-speaking minority went down in history as a “dress rehearsal” for the March on Rome, four weeks later, in which the Fascists seized control at the national level.

According to Baur (2000), Fascist politics can be compared to an “internal or inner colonization”. Specifically tailored programs were set in place to influence all aspects of the collective and individual lives, aiming at completely Italianizing the collective identity of the German-speaking population, among other things, by Italianizing place and field names, renaming the territory to *Alto Adige*, prohibiting the use of the term *Südtirol* (South Tyrol) and preventing the population from maintaining contacts abroad. From 1926 on, the elected municipal representatives were replaced by Italian administrators, the *podestà* (Gruber, 1975). The individual identity of people was targeted by Italianizing their first and last names in all official documents, including tombstone

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inscriptions. Power over the population's means of existence was wielded by dismissing German-speaking civil servants and by Italianizing banks, cooperatives and institutes. Targeted measures to dominate the province promoted the strategic immigration of Italians from the old provinces.

The sophisticated Italianization and Fascistisation measures<sup>vi</sup> targeted children and adolescents directly, implementing the prohibition of native language classes (Lex Gentile, 1923), the ideologisation of teaching contents and the creation of a Fascist youth organization (Opera Nazionale Balilla – ONA) (Betti, 1983). During Fascism, childhood in South Tyrol was located between two epistemic poles: the Italianization of the minority by the authorities and the resistance strategies of the children's parents and of the German language community, whose identity construction and national and ethnic socialization had largely taken place in the Tyrol area before and during the First World War and was therefore oriented towards German culture and language. To better understand this topic, it is necessary to analyse the parents' understanding of childhood as a social, cultural and historical model connected to their own socialization process.

### 3. Children as pawns in the pursuit of a homogenized national community

At a higher level, the pressure children were exposed to during the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century was linked to the emergence of the idea of the nation-state. As the succeeding generation, in a number of ways, children became guarantors of the development and the continuation of a strong nation (Kössler, 2014). During the political and cultural nationalization process, childhood models and concepts were formed, which were strongly manifested in the notions of education cemented into people's minds, as well as in programs and contents of the educational institutions, resulting, as Konrad (2014, p. 97 et seqq.) wrote, in a "nation-state childhood". Forming a national consciousness implied the "sanctification" of both the fatherland and the ruling house, aiming at the individual's unconditional subordination to the national "dispositions of power" (Foucault, 1978). In the decades around the turn of the century, nationalist ideas were forcefully introduced into children's lives through specific educational programs. This was achieved by heroicizing national history (Ascenzi, 2005; Cavallera, 2012) and by stylizing ideal images of the national child and adolescent, which were narrated in tales and literature aimed at children and young readers (Ascenzi/Sani, 2018; Sani, 2012; Cambi, 2010; Tarozzi, 2006; Augschöll Blasbichler, 2018c; Wikending, 2008).<sup>vii</sup> The Crown lands of Tyrol, whose Italian-speaking area neighbored the unified Italian kingdom, was – like other European border regions – at the forefront of the nationalists' efforts to strengthen national loyalty (Augschöll Blasbichler, 2018a). In addition to the Hapsburgs' restrictive educational policy for the Italian-speaking Trentino, highly committed irredentist and Pan-Germanist school associations had their sights on the German- and Ladin-speaking children as well as on the Italian-speaking part of the territory (Vitali, 2017), and according to Gatterer (1972, p. 91), the schools mutated into "national trenches".

Defending and expanding the nation, from 1914 onwards, the war added a new dimension to the nationalization of childhood: the enemies of the nation. At the same time, the glorification of war as a "national test and character education" generated a new ideal: the soldier. The virtues derived from the new role model called for «the ideal adolescent» to «be willing to take risks, ready for action, fearless, prepared to use violence and full of youthful strength and defiance of death» (Kössler, 2014, p. 296; see Seibert, 2015).

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Schools were manipulated to ideologize and mobilize children. Equipped with the feeling of being able to play an active part in the great goal (the victory of their nation), schoolchildren carried out officially dictated programs: “patriotic collection campaigns” to gather rubber or herbs to replace tobacco<sup>viii</sup>, for the manufacture of clothing<sup>ix</sup> for soldiers etc. (Auer, 2008, 101).

After the defeat of Austria-Hungary and the absorption of South Tyrol by Italy in 1918, even the South Tyrolean children had lost the war as former soldiers of the school front during World War I (Hämmerle, 2015). Many scholars agree on the long-term effects the ideological indoctrination during World War I had on children (for Italy, see Gibelli, 2005). The nationalist socialization of South Tyrolean children in the last decades before and during the war also served as a reference framework for dealing with unknown or new things that the former enemy and now occupying state confronted them with and made available to them.<sup>x</sup> At the same time, the end of the war did not mean «an abrupt end to the new, militarized childhood models»; as Kössler (2014, p. 297) points out: «It was the merging of childhood and war [...] that laid the foundation for the emergence of Fascist childhood designs since the 1920s in the first place» (Ivi, p. 294).

#### **4. Childhood caught between the interests of the nationalist regime and the ethnic minority**

During Fascism, the factual confiscation of childhood was carried out by manipulating the schooling system, the place for «human development, creation of competences, attitudes and mental structures of growing persons» (Fend, 2006, p. 13). The stringent and coherent design of the refined Fascistisation and nationalization programs was implemented at several levels. The main framework was the proclamation of the first comprehensive Italian educational reform, the so-called Lex Gentile (4/10/1923) (Polenghi, 2020). Compulsory schooling was raised from five (since 1905) to eight years<sup>xi</sup>, aiming to increase the young generation’s literacy in the old provinces, whereas for all the linguistic minorities in the new provinces, the same law brought the prohibition of mother-tongue teaching. This affected all German schools in South Tyrol (342 elementary schools and higher schooling levels including 30,000 pupils)<sup>xii</sup>, all Slavic schools in Trieste and the whole province of Friuli Venezia Giulia (444 schools, 52.000 pupils) and all French schools in the Aosta Valley (244 schools) (Villgrater, 1984). To better implement the linguistic and cultural assimilatory measures, the regime planned a radical intervention regarding the schools’ personnel ordering the dismissal of the teaching staff and its replacement with Italian teachers coming from the old Italian provinces. In addition to the «teacher as a social context» (Fend & Helmke, 1981), appropriate programs and didactical materials guaranteed the content conformity of a sustained nationalization and Fascistisation project. The implicit attitude of the actors planning and implementing those programs was optimally described with the arrogant political and cultural self-image that – according to the inscription on the Monument to Victory in Bolzano/Bozen, which was inaugurated in 1928 – defined its actions as a humanist mission: “*Hic patriae fines siste signa. Hinc ceteros excoluimus lingua legibus artibus*” (Here at the border of the fatherland set down the banner. From this point on we educated the others with language, law and culture)<sup>xiii</sup>.

With the foundation of the youth organization *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (ONB) in 1926, Fascists took over the area of informal education as well as the children’s and adolescents’ extracurricular activities. The organization was named after the eleven-year-old Balilla, the mythical protagonist of an Italian heroic epic taking place during

the Risorgimento<sup>xiv</sup>, representing the Fascist ideal of the heroic child with «body strength and moral courage» (Kössler, 2014, p. 300). Through the ONB<sup>xv</sup> the Fascist party developed a network of institutional organizations integrating all social groups and genders and destined to create – through education models from the kindergarten child to the adolescent<sup>xvi</sup> – the new Fascist human and the necessary mass consent to guarantee the further development of the regime. Mussolini believed in a «remarkable success, without any doubt, in the course of our moral conquest»<sup>xvii</sup>, achieved by a strenuous implementation of the youth organizations.

## 5. «We were torn»: actors and action field between assimilation and persistence

With the quote «We were torn», Claus Gatterer, author of the autobiographical novel *Schöne Welt, böse Leut* (Beautiful world, ugly people), perfectly depicts childhood during Fascism in South Tyrol, expressing, as Foucault did in *The Order of Things* (1974), the epistemic violence influencing children through the ideas and expectations explicitly and implicitly conveyed by family and school, the most important and unavoidable socialization agents.

With their systematic approach, both school and youth organizations (ONB) left memory fragments, which partly left even the interviewed persons themselves surprised. Fascist readings, poems and songs, as well as march steps, turned out to be incorporated knowledge and could be cited or demonstrated even after 80 years. Educational indoctrination appears to have been integrated at a mental, emotional and physical level. The counterpart to the “domestication” implemented by youth organizations and the schooling system was the implicit identity deep-rootedness to their own culture and language perpetuated through families and village communities. «At that time, nobody spoke to us. We heard the adults speaking about how Fascists harassed us. We saw their anger. They never explained anything. They also never tried to persuade us. They never asked about how we were doing or how we were coping with all that we had to hear at school» (Josef, born in 1926).

The children’s feeling of “being torn” between those two realities is contextualized by the interviewees’ retrospective analysis. While describing their internal battle, the interviewees did not locate their feelings in the conflict area between the two – hierarchically equally relevant – social systems (family and school) (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). The real confrontation took place between children and school, while enduring humiliations and being coerced into integrating “truths” against their own identity, all within the interaction context at school. School became a place where the children’s hierarchic subordination was inherent to the system with its structural power potential (Foucault, 1966), creating a stringent framework for a violent encroachment.

The parents’ position regarding the children’s daily dilemma was not manifested by increasing their influence over the children’s identity structures, but by further and generally devaluating the whole schooling system. As an interviewee, Josef, born in 1927, said: «Nobody had to tell us that we did not have to believe what we learned at school. We just knew!». They viewed school as “unlawful” and gave their children a “free pass” to fight off all abuses: «We had to go to school, because otherwise our fathers risked imprisonment, but at home nobody urged us to behave appropriately, to learn diligently or to do our homework. Nobody was interested in our certificates» (Anton, born in 1931).

The majority of the interviewees used anecdotes to depict themselves as sovereign child-personalities. As a monolithic collective, they seemingly sabotaged the Fascist actors and their educational programs with cunning and

courage. Their retrospective self-assessment, as seen in many examples, requires us to take into consideration the methodical limitations of memory capability (Heinze, 2001). With the interpretation of the solid and strong childhood image, created by the protagonists themselves, it is possible to show clear parallels to the heroic childhood ideal, invented by the schooling system and the youth organizations using the image of the young Genoese Balilla. Similarly, parallels can be drawn to the implicit childhood ideal already imparted to the previous generation in an institutional setting. The active role children had played during the First World War – by engaging in the so-called “school front” against the national enemies – during the Fascist period now entailed resisting and defending themselves against the enemy’s assimilation politics. At the same time, the testimonies demonstrate their conformity to the contemporary collective narrative of the German-speaking minority. Told as a self-glorifying tale, this narrative consists in a detailed explanation of the Fascists’ strong repressive state policy and the minority’s heroic endeavors to save their linguistic and cultural identity without being damaged (Augschöll Blasbichler, 2018b). In all the collected childhood memories, this is shown by an ambivalence between the feeling of being suppressed and that of being superior.<sup>xviii</sup>

Psychologically interpreted, the described basic positioning of self can also be explained as a natural resistance against the enemy’s violent attack: «Italy’s glorification and the exaltation of its heroes, followed by the devaluation of our fathers and ancestors as barbarians, as written in the textbooks and as declaimed by our teachers, was actually counterproductive» (Maria, born in 1921).

The purposeful construction of a new collective and individual identity, through the degradation of the children’s pre-existing historical rootedness, encouraged the children’s sealed and explicit counter-positioning. Disaggregating the aggression towards everything that was their «“Own” did not allow children to have enough time and space for an approach or a self-reflexive confrontation with the “Other”» (Baur, 2000, p. 52). The “Other” showed itself as a destroyer of their “Self”, which had to activate self-defense mechanisms.

One of the variables mentioned by the interviewees, capable of defying the unitary experience of the authoritarian learning and living space of the Fascist school and challenging the children’s dichotomous friend-foe scheme (see chapter 3.2.4), were the main actors, the teachers, as part of the institutional actor school (Fend, 2006) and subordinated to the same authoritarian Fascist rules. The pressure of successfully implementing the Italianization programs, deemed of high national importance, weighed entirely on their shoulders. Instructed by the education authority (the meso level), they had to use a militant methodical repertoire to reach their children on-site.

In meetings and marches, they were sworn into their mission and to Fascism. In the class register of the 1934/45 school year, the first entry by an elementary school teacher in Barbiano/Barbian describes the notion that the teachers had cultivated of themselves and their duties<sup>xix</sup>:

«This new school year began with a great celebration in Fascist style. All the teachers from all the villages of the province of Bolzano came together at the Casa del Balilla in Bolzano, where they were lined up like legions and, under the benevolent gaze of the population of foreign origin [popolazione allogena], marched to the Monument to Victory, to which we paid tribute. Afterwards we gathered at the Municipal Theatre, where we listened to S.E. Ricci speak. He was sent by the Duce to provide assistance for the new school year. We listened to the ONB leader with great enthusiasm, as his words willed us to love our fatherland, for which we are called to work up here in this borderland; we must therefore

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work with faith, pride and a high spirit as Italian teachers and Fascists. I know that the task entrusted to us is difficult. I feel the responsibility of our work, which must defy a mountain of difficulties, but I am proud to be among the teachers of Alto Adige and to revive the Italian spirit on this most Italian soil [terra italianissima], which was already Latinized [latinizzati; sic] by the legionaries of Marcus Drusus. [...] I return to Barbiano with great joy, and I am strengthened by the will to render as dignified a service as possible to Italy, the fatherland, and Fascism. Now we can begin, [...] knowing how close we are to the heart of the fatherland and how the Duce prefers us, the Italian teachers and Fascists in Alto Adige».

Authored as an official publication, the records quoted above have to be read within the context of the author's ambition and have to be used critically. Nonetheless, or perhaps just therefore, these lines serve as an example of the self-understanding of a group of people assigned to fulfill a national mission. Accordingly, the framework for self-perception was also determined and limited. According to Memmi (1995, qtd. Baur, 2000, p. 128), «the colonization [...] had to inevitably disfigure the colonizer. He was faced with two alternatives, whose ways out were both equally disastrous: the acceptance of a daily injustice for his own benefit or the necessary and never accomplished self-abandonment. That is the desperation of the colonizer's situation: if he accepts colonization, he decays; if he rejects it, he negates himself».

## 6. Childhood during Fascism between freedom and placement in pre-modern social orders

The previously described attitude of parents towards school and its representatives generated free spaces for children, where behaviors were permitted that had nothing in common with the otherwise severe rules of the patriarchally organized environment of family and village communities. The interviewees attributed the teachers' authoritarian approach to a generational habitus already well known by children. The same habitus, connected to an education and childhood concept heavily influenced by religion, also shaped family relationships and generally all relationships with priests and adults. The difference between the children's two main living spaces emerged clearly when parents and village communities did not request or control the children's subordination at school and did not sanction their (disregardful) behavior. Therefore, school during Fascism, as stated by the interviewees, allowed children to play an active part themselves, interpreted as «a new "Paradigm of the Sociology of Childhood" according to the studies of Prout and James (1990), meaning that school allowed children to pass by the social arbitrariness in order to develop experiences of self-effectiveness. The parents' marginalization of school enabled children to develop their personality» (Montada, Lindenberger & Schneider, 2012, p. 51) despite the different expectations of the two main socialization instances.

Parents and other adults did not provide any assistance to children processing their experiences of reality. The interaction with their peers, who represented their most important social circle (Hurrelmann/Bauer, 2015) in the given context, was subordinated, as seen during the analysis of the interviews, to a complex social order.

The radical layoff of German-speakers and the recruitment of Italian immigrants in the tertiary sector and the new industrial branches produced the collateral effect of consolidating pre-modern social structures in the German-speaking community, which forced the dispossessed population particularly into subtle and unconcealed subservience (Schreiber, 2008). For the German-speaking population, agriculture was the only economic sector left. This fact implicated that the often meager mountain farming had to feed more people than before World

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War I. In this socio-political context, the customary primogeniture meant that, even in families with property (e.g., a mountain farm), there were no prospects of an independent existence for children who were not the firstborn son.

Even among children, the notion of an order generated this way had come to form part of their inherent social knowledge. The self-image derived from this, in turn, generated patterns of action and evaluation systems that had a decisive impact on intra- and interpersonal childhood relationships.

Anton remembering his position as the second eldest son: «Among the boys at school, we had already established a ranking order, so what counted was your position among your siblings. The eldest son of the biggest farmer was the leader. I was the second eldest – I knew it, and the others knew it. I could only become a farm-hand» (Anton, born in 1931). Jakob speaking about the family's hierarchy: «In religious education, the priest treated us according to an exact hierarchy. While the eldest boys of the biggest farmers didn't need to know anything, the other children of the bigger farmers needed to know a little more. And the children of poor people could never take a test without a slap in the face» (Jakob, born in 1926).

Stanislaus recalling the girls' aspirations: «In the last years of elementary school, we started to be interested in girls. But they already had a clear idea: They wanted to become farmers' wives at the largest possible farm» (Stanislaus, born in 1927).

With its radical repression politics, the measures of the totalitarian occupying state fostered a pre-modern social order that the “privileged” were not at all averse to: It provided them with manpower to work on the labor-intensive, steep fields of mountain farms – people who «worked extremely hard for a meager board and lodging and a pair of shoes<sup>xx</sup> every year, and who, at the same time, were not allowed to go to the village inn with them (the “privileged”) on Sundays» (Stanislaus, born in 1927). Maria, born in 1928, remembered: «Who could breed a cow, was considered privileged. Even the ‘privileged’ were poor. We were all poor...»

## 7. Childhood's ambivalent self-feeling

Although Fascism during the 1920s and 1930s had its say in the most important secondary socialization fields of children, at school and in the youth groups, attempting to influence them with close-knit programs, it is still not possible to define South Tyrol's children's growth phase during this period as uniform. Nonetheless, the interviewees were visibly conflicted when confronted with their childhood memories. Childhood during Fascism is still part of a collective narrative and therefore uniformly interpreted. Working out the memory fragments regarding their own memories turned out to be a difficult process. On the one hand, the challenge consisted in excavating collectively determined layers and, on the other hand, in confronting official “truths”, relativizing them and questioning their fundamental nature. In particular, the challenge for the interviewer was to find collectively stratified concepts. For the interviewees, the biggest challenge was to allow themselves to confront the official “truths”, to eventually relativize them and therefore to question their significance. Some interviewees interrupted their interview after realizing the discrepancies between their own remembrance and the collective memory by saying that this story was known to everyone and that they “did not know” anything more about it.

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During the retrospective confrontation with their own experiences, the interviewees had to give a new order to their former certainties. Even though, as children, they were predominantly in contact only with those Italians participating in the Fascist Italianizing mission, they could not always envision the conformity between the enforced Italianizing system and the real individuals they were in contact with. This especially applied to the teachers, who can be detected as a dominant social context (Fend/Helmke, 1981) running like a red thread through the interviewees' memories. They can therefore be considered as the main actors at the micro level, creating real learning and living conditions for children at school, which codetermined schooling during Fascism as an empirically relevant variable. Although their assignment was clearly defined, their role in the recontextualisation of rules within the framework of situational action conditions (Esser, 2001) was perceived through the filter of self-reference (Luhmann, 2000). The most substantial and lasting discrepancy experience was portrayed by interviewees when teachers succeeded in detecting the children's physical and psychological needs through warm-hearted relationships and empathic participation. Detailed entries in school documents prove that some teachers recognized childhood's determinacy through hunger, poor clothing and severe psychological and physical burdens. The interviewees describe these teachers as people who gave children an emotional environment they often did not find in their close social surroundings.

«My mother died while giving birth to me. My father was totally overwhelmed by us eleven siblings. He asked the priest to bless the rod, with which he should raise us up to be good people. Nobody really cared if we had warm clothing for our long journeys to school. This was the fate of many, or better, most of us. Our teacher was the only one detecting our distress. She placed a water bowl on the oven and washed our hands. For this, she bought a bar of soap. She straightened our disheveled hair and smiled at us» (Kreszenz, born in 1932).

The biographical experience indicated that some teachers were not merely interested in a radical nationalization of children. The children experienced being acknowledged and appreciated (Prenzl, 2013) while their primary living environment – according to the retrospective observations of some interviewees – often showed lack of interest. When the teachers had a more humane approach, the children had the opportunity to dissociate themselves from the dichotomic friend-foe patterns often seen in the collective narrative of the German-speaking population. This process allowed the development of a positive self-image (Allport, 1958), which did not need to adopt a defensive stance towards the enemy to exist (Montada, Lindenberger & Schneider, 2012). Building on this, children could accept educational offerings, learning basic cultural tools and confronting themselves with the contents, even if the teaching language was not their own. In the best case, teachers succeeded in enabling children, the significant others (Nittel, 1992; Höblich, 2010), to expand their understanding of self and of the world (Marotzki, 1990), inspiring new attitudes towards education.

If the teacher ostensibly remained an executive actor of the hated occupying force, children could not accept even those measures that Fascism offered as care services for a healthy national youth. «We spat out the cod liver oil we were supposed to drink. Pumpkins, we did not know. As vitamin-packed vegetables, they were on the canteen's menu. We did not eat them and ranted: Italians feed us pig feed» (Barbara, born in 1932).

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## 8. Memories of childhood caught between individual, communicative and collective memory

For South Tyroleans and their understanding of self, as a German-speaking minority within the Italian state, experiencing Fascism was a pivotal moment. The German-speaking people's collective memory (Halbwachs, 1991) concerning the interwar period in South Tyrol consists of two complementary strands: on the one hand, the remembrance of rigid nationalization politics conducted with all the measures of a totalitarian state and, on the other hand, the minority's successful battle against Fascism and for their own language and culture. Childhood, especially exposed to the implementation of Fascist programs through school, occupied a significant place in this narrative identity. As a stage of life during which children could not escape the Fascist school programs, childhood had an especially relevant place in this identity narrative<sup>xxi</sup>.

In the serious confrontation with school and childhood during Fascism, both strands turned out to be not compatible with the former children's individual memories. This discrepancy is due to a fixation of the collective consciousness on the resistance myth, manifesting itself in this specific historic sector as the so-called "catacomb schools"<sup>xxii</sup>. Memories of the secret German schools, organized as a network with rudimentarily educated teachers after the Italianization of schools (1923) and persecuted with downright witch hunts<sup>xxiii</sup>, are still cultivated with books, free supplements of daily newspapers and conferences.

On the other side of this powerfully designed historic narrative, there are the individual memories of the former pupils. For individuals, they are linked to a representation dilemma, which can still be felt today: all factual relics of school during Fascism have to symbolize a compliant self-image. The interviewees' awareness of the discrepancies between official and personal memories, and the reluctance to expose themselves to discomfort, constituted a relevant challenge for the study's completion. This specifically applies primarily to literacy deficits in the school language and in their mother tongue. The lack of knowledge, both in reading and writing, of the Italian language is explained by interviewees citing the described resistances<sup>xxiv</sup>, while the insufficient skills in their mother tongue are due to missing or only marginally accessible opportunities. The majority of the interview partners stated that the much-vaunted catacomb schools did not reach them.

«During the secret lessons of the catacomb schools, we learned enough to make the Italian teacher at school suspicious, nothing more. Later, when I wrote home from the front, my uncle made fun of my mistakes and said that, with the number of times I'd put my foot in it with my spelling, I could walk the length of the Senales/Schnals valley. After that, I didn't write anymore» (Friedrich, born in 1923).

The inability of those concerned to communicate their version of history can be explained in many ways. In part, their speechlessness is due to experienced history, as according to Baur (2000), who references Sartre's studies (1964) on the repressive colonization politics made by the French in Algeria and underlines the colonizers' aim to refuse the colonized access to history. This speechlessness, as seen in the present study, shows that it was not possible for the individual to bypass the discrepancy between their own recollection and the overwritten official memory to create a new collective memory (Welzer, 2015) through the exchange with their former schoolmates. Each individual remained alone with his memory and all the "inherited" deficits: «I often thought my neighbor was about the same age as me. She has never said if she could read or write properly...» (Anna,

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born in 1924) The consequences of missing literacy skills and the way individuals and the collective dealt with it are transgenerational effects detectable to this day, especially considering the attitude towards education and governmental educational institutions as an individual and collective legacy of Fascism (Augschöll Blasbichler, 2018b).

## 9. Conclusions

To grow up in South Tyrol during the 1920s and 30s signified coming to terms with numerous childhood models, which were partly laid out in opposition to each other, through their understanding of childhood, their conception of man and their implicit idea of educational goals and methods. The main frameworks in which these models generated the realities of the children's growing process were the primary socialization instances: family and school. The backgrounds for the differences were the relative sociocultural and ideological reconstructions.

Analyzing primary research sources (especially official school publications) and oral testimonies, both the concrete recontextualisation processes of pedagogical concepts (Fend, 2006) in the familial and social environment and the institutional environment controlled by the regime become clear. On the other hand, those processes provided insight into the active role of children dealing with the concepts and goals directed at them at the inter- and intrapersonal level.

Both aspects, the recontextualisation of ideas, which became the concrete framework for the growth process, and the recontextualisation of the expectations produced by children in the concrete framework, depict a spectrum of views that could be sufficiently dissolved only through a close reconnection to the respective actors at the micro level (parents, teachers, children). The following topics, elaborated with regard to the two researched aspects, are part of childhoods during the historical time period from 1918 to 1943.

The development and existence of the children's understanding of self on the basis of the solidification of pre-modern societal structures was favored by the regime's political and economic repression politics. The children experienced that the specifically developed perspectivity in the «collective experience space» of family and of the cultural environment and, therefore, the conjunctive central perception, the thought and action patterns (Mannheim, 1980) at school, was subjected to a systematically conveyed counter-program. The children dealt with opposite, often antagonistically oriented, educational programs of identity development (Honneth, 2003) at home and at school. They constructively explored free spaces, or rather dealt with the position of being in the middle of the dispute between the educational institutions of family and school (Helsper & Beltram, 2006). The not quite uniform representation of the allegedly hostile regime at the interpersonal level (for example, through teachers who possibly showed more empathy and more affectionate interaction than the parents and the near social environment) and the personal integration of these experiences produced a broadened understanding of self and of the world (Nohl, Rosenberg & Thomsen, 2015). They negotiated the different belongings, solidified in the social and political context, to their peers.

The major part of the topics researched does not belong to the collective memory of childhood handed down for the named time period. Even the interviewees, in their long and multi-part interviews, stated this mostly unaddressed fact in a retrospective confrontation with their own childhood memories. In that sense, two

experiences were especially distinctive. On the one hand, the ambivalent experiences at the relational level, often not congruent with the friend-foe scheme occupying state-home/near social environment, and on the other hand, the individual limitations resulting from insufficient literacy in the school language and in their mother tongue. This fact has no pertinence in a remembered history, rewritten as a heroic epic, of the successful survival battle of the German-speaking population. Collectively, only the totalitarian Italianization of schools, but not the individual consequences, were transmitted. The former pupils often remained and remain alone with their deficiencies and negative repercussions. «So often they speak and write about the secret German lessons in the catacomb schools, but I don't know... in those few hours I never learned to write correctly...» (Florian, born in 1930). The individually remembered ambivalences and the ambivalence of the collective memories placed and place childhood in South Tyrol during the period in question “between two stools”.

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<sup>i</sup> A witness cited the children's “illiteracy” in their mother tongue as the reason for the general lack of those documents (Josef, born in 1926).

<sup>ii</sup> The term *Schicksalsgrenze*, which roughly translates to boundary of fate or fateful border, has made its way into the current discourse on the EGTC European Region Tyrol-South Tyrol-Trentino.

<sup>iii</sup> The Crown lands of Tyrol comprised the territories of what is now the EGTC European Region: the provinces of Trento (Trentino) and Bolzano/Bozen (South Tyrol), both of which have been part of Italy since 1918, as well as the federal state of Tyrol in Austria. Together with Vorarlberg, the historic Tyrol became a princely county of the Habsburg Empire in 1363. In 1918, the Brenner Pass became a border pass for the first time in history.

<sup>iv</sup> The armistice agreement was signed between Austria-Hungary and the Entente powers in the *Villa Giusti* near Padua.

<sup>v</sup> On January 8, 1918, American president Woodrow Wilson presented a statement of principles to be used for peace negotiations after World War I. His points should have been used as the basis for the negotiations following the end of the war, but were not always executed. As an example, point IX stated a readjustment of Italy's frontiers along clearly recognizable lines of nationality, a principle which in the South Tyrolean case was evidently not implemented.

<sup>vi</sup> On July 15, 1923, Ettore Tolomei presented his 23-point program at the city theatre of Bozen-Bolzano, which was later implemented by the totalitarian state. The program was well received by the Italian public, as shown by the great acclaim expressed by the enthusiasts, who came to town with special trains departing from Trento.

<sup>vii</sup> The most famous example of patriotic children's literature in Italy was Edmondo de Amicis' *Cuore*, a novel for children first published in 1886.

<sup>viii</sup> Municipal Archive Klausen/Chiusa; Fasc. C 1915.

<sup>ix</sup> Municipal Archive Klausen/Chiusa; Fasc. C 1916.

<sup>x</sup> The nationalization of schools was perpetuated mostly by the German teacher associations. Their philosophy can also be found in school text books and in the political programs of the *Tiroler Volksbund* in the Tyrolean government.

<sup>xi</sup> South Tyrol already had a tradition of compulsory education: In 1774, Empress Maria Theresa had introduced mandatory schooling for six years, to which the *Reichsvolksschulgesetz* (Imperial Primary Education Act) added two more years in 1869.

<sup>xii</sup> Only two German middle schools remained, as part of the theology education program “*Seminarium minus*”, protected under article 39 of the Lateran Pacts, signed on February 11, 1929, between the Italian government and the Roman Catholic Church.

<sup>xiii</sup> Bolzano/Bozen Monument to Victory: <http://www.monumenttovictory.com/en.html>

<sup>xiv</sup> According to legend, Balilla initiated a successful popular uprising in Genoa in 1734 by throwing a stone against the Austrian army.

<sup>xv</sup> In 1937 the GIL (Gioventù Italiana del Littorio) was replaced by the ONB (Opera Nazionale Balilla).

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<sup>xvi</sup> *Figli della Lupa* (wolf's children): infants; *Balilla*: boys, 8-14 years; *Giovani Italiane*: girls, 8-12 years; *Avanguardisti* (vanguard): boys, 14-17 years; *Giovani Italiane*: girls, 14-17 years; *Giovani Fascisti* and *Giovani Fasciste* (Fascist Youth) young adults, 17-21 years.

<sup>xvii</sup> Mussolini Benito, directive to the prefect of the Province Bolzano/Bozen, 17.01.1927, Point 7.

<sup>xviii</sup> The ambivalence realized during their testimonies visibly represented an excessive demand for the interviewees.

<sup>xix</sup> School Archive Barbiano/Barbian, school records, 1934/35 class register.

<sup>xx</sup> A farmhand's monthly wage was 50 to 60 lire, that of a maid 30 to 35 lire. Civil servants (from 1924 on, Italians from the old provinces only) were paid between 420 and 750 lire a month. One kilogram of butter or honey cost 6 to 6.50 lire, one kilogram of beef 7 lire and one cubic meter of medium-quality wood 50 lire; cf. *Dolomiten* newspaper (no. 295, 21.12.1983, p. 15).

<sup>xxi</sup> The Fascist grip on the schooling system remains one of the bitter experiences of the German-speaking population, remembered both individually and collectively.

<sup>xxii</sup> The term "catacomb schools" (*Katakombenschulen*), indicating the secret German lessons, is based on the secret shelters of persecuted Christians in Rome.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Various teachers died on the run, in exile or after imprisonment.

<sup>xxiv</sup> The majority of children left school after having reached the foreseen age limit without having the necessary skills and without obtaining a degree. «Not even those in the third grade can put together more than two words and I really don't know how to teach them to write a few sentences», wrote a teacher of Glurns/Glorenza in the class register.

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### **Archives**

Municipal Archive Klausen/Chiusa

Research and Documentation Centre of South Tyrol's Educational History – Free University of Bozen/Bolzano

School Archive Barbiano/Barbian

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