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LANGUAGE OF EDUCATION AND NATIONAL MINORITIES IN ITALY (1860-1940)*

Introductory Remarks

It was only at the end of the First World War, with the annexation of south Tyrol (Upper Adige) and Julian Venetia, that a real problem of national minorities, with important political and demographic dimensions arose in Italy. From this moment on, about 200000 Germans and 400000 south Slavs, Slovenes and Croats came to be included into the kingdom of Italy. Apart from the substantial numbers involved, the importance of the problem was mainly due to the fact that these populations adopted a hostile attitude towards Italy and were concentrated in well defined geographical areas, located next to the Italian borders and contiguous to the 'mother nations' they belonged to. Moreover, until then, they had lived within a multi-national state, the Habsburg monarchy and, subsequently, they tended to seek solutions to the problems of minorities in Italy which would be similar to the ones adopted earlier on in Austria.

Before taking into consideration the period after 1918, on which the main emphasis will be laid in this paper, it is necessary to focus on the situation before 1918, characterised by a less marked ethnic pluralism, though still not destitute of some interesting aspects relevant to our inquiry. The linguistic frame of the Italian peninsula, even before political unity was achieved, had been characterised (apart from a very high percentage of illiteracy and a poor knowledge of 'high Italian' among the non-educated classes) by an absolute preponderance of Italian speaking people, among whom dialect differences were more marked than today. There were, however, some linguistic units, the so-called 'ethnic islands' - Greek, Albanian, Croatian, Catalan, Franco-Provençal and others - spread all over the country and particularly in the south plus a strong compact French area concentrated in the continental part of the kingdom of Sardinia.

Already during the first half of the nineteenth century the small linguistic units had been heavily exposed to the danger of losing their ethnic and linguistic identity, due to their rural character, their economic marginality, and the trend within their *elites* to join the then emerging Italian ruling class, which, at a national level tended towards the modernisation of Italian society and its political structure.

As mentioned before, within the kingdom of Sardinia there were two very compact areas, the valley of Aosta and Savoy, separated by the chain of the Alps, and both inhabited by a French speaking population, which gave the Savoyard kingdom the character of a bilingual state, although with an Italian majority. In both provinces, the language of the administration, the judicial organisation, and the school system were French. The constitutional regime introduced in 1848 gave the members of parliament elected in the towns and villages where French was used the right to express themselves in their own language in the parliament in Turin.

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National Minorities after the Unification of Italy

It was precisely the attitude evolving towards the French group which represented the first consistent example of the policy of the unitary state towards national minorities. The condition of the French speaking population deteriorated after the unification of Italy, due above all to the change in its relative strength within the new state. Weakened by the annexation of Savoy to France and inserted into a much broader political structure, the French group turned from a strong national minority within the kingdom of Sardinia into an insignificant percentage of 0.49 within the kingdom of Italy. In 1861, Giovenale Vegezzi-Ruscalla, a Piedmontese scholar, expressed the first worries about the Aosta valley being really a part of the French linguistic area, and about the possible development of an irredentist feeling. He urged a linguistic, administrative, economic, educational and religious policy of italianisation, on account of the geographical position of the valley within the natural borders of Italy, and expressed the fear that the new kingdom might otherwise also be forced to grant particular rights to the other small minorities living within it. He also recalled the denationalisation policy adopted by France against her own minorities.

Vegezzi-Ruscalla's proposals provided important evidence of a new attitude towards the Aostan problem in the light of the ideological values and political interests of a unitary state. In the decades from 1861 to the First World War this climate affected government policies in the Aosta valley and particularly the school policy. Soon after the annexation of Savoy to France, and still before the proclamation of the kingdom of Italy, Italian took the place of French as a teaching language in the Aosta lower gymnasium (classical secondary school). Moreover, the union of the valley with the province of Turin gave the authorities the opportunity to abolish the Aosta upper gymnasium, in compliance with the law dated November 1861, which envisaged the existence of only one secondary school in each province. A private denominational school, the episcopal gymnasium of Aosta, therefore became the centre of French linguistic resistance: the number of students enrolled in this school increased in reaction to the pressure of italianisation.

The Church came to the aid of French in order both to defend the traditions of the rural population and to stand against the lay and anticlerical Italian state. Indeed, during the first half of the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church had already defended Aostan identity, whereas the liberals had worked to subdue its particularism and force it into becoming part of the Italian national movement. To the pressure upon the secondary school system, was added pressure upon the primary school system. In 1883, the Provincial School Council of Turin made provision for the introduction of Italian as a teaching language in the primary schools of Aosta. Public opinion in the valley reacted and managed to obtain the acknowledgement, albeit a token one, of a parity between the two languages by appealing to the ancient Piedmontese law safeguarding the French speaking areas.

In 1911, the Credaro law, named after the Minister of Education Luigi Credaro, was passed, having validity throughout the national territory. This had deprived municipalities of the right to appoint teachers and assigned this right instead to the Education Department. This decision aimed at establishing rational criteria for appointing teachers and avoiding influence from municipalities and the Church upon such appointments. In the Aosta valley, its consequence was that many classes were left without teachers, as the Ministry of Education could not find people with the necessary requirements who would be willing to teach in small villages in a mountainous area and, in some cases, teachers were appointed who were technically qualified, but had no knowledge of French. This constituted a step backwards at a time when the Aostan willingness to defend their language had strengthened.

In 1909 a *Comité pour la protection de la langue française dans la Vallée d'Aoste* (Committee for the protection of the French language in the Aosta Valley) had been created which, at a later time, took the name of *Ligue Valdostaine pour la défense de la langue française* (Valdotaine League for the Defence of the French Language). The position of French was more favourable in small villages where the number of children was too low to have regular schooling and where 350 village schools operated. The latter were schools created in small villages or isolated clusters of houses, and supported by municipal administrations of local communities, whose task was to provide the children with the basic elements of primary education. There, the so-called 'adjoined teachers' were employed, who often had no regular teaching degree, but all of whom were at least Aostan and therefore bilingual.

The other major example of the Italian government's attitude towards national minorities is provided by the case of about 35000 Slovenes in the Natisone valley, the 'Slavia Veneta', which had become part of the kingdom in 1866. There, the authorities pursued an assimilationist policy with regard to an ethnic group which was completely loyal to the state to which it belonged. The use of the mother tongue in school was forbidden. The diffusion of Slovenian textbooks and catechisms was prohibited. Authorities even rejected the proposal of a Slovenian teacher, Antonio Podrecca, that a bilingual textbook he had prepared in order to help Slovenian children to learn Italian be adopted. Only the teaching of religion was allowed in Slovenian. This was taught in the so-called parish schools, where children came to learn the catechism, but were sometimes given language tuition also.

The Italian state also paid little regard to the small linguistic units mentioned earlier. In 1861 the authorities acknowledged the existence of some minorities in the census of population taken in that year, yet they made no move towards allowing them to develop their own identity. Nor were the distinctive cultural features of the inhabitants of Friuli and Sardinia taken into consideration by the government. In these cases, as in those of the linguistic 'islands', the government's attitude was made easier by the already mentioned phenomenon of the assimilation of the elites. This arose out of the attraction exercised on the peripheral ruling class by the liberal foundations of the new state its policy of modernisation, and the potential for safeguarding the economic interests of the landed classes. The state, therefore, exercised a levelling and unifying influence over the different groups dwelling within its borders.

The effectiveness of the school system as an instrument of italianisation was, of course, still limited by the poor distribution of schooling and education among the people and this also constituted, without doubt, a great obstacle to the preservation of non-Italian languages and cultures. Government policy in this respect could be ascribed to a complex series of reasons: the almost sacred concept of a unitary and national state which developed during the Risorgimento and constituted a fundamental element in Italian political thought; the implementation of the unification process which led to a shaky centralism; the idea that the state should necessarily be based on a linguistic and cultural monolithism. This brief reconstruction of the Italian government's behaviour before 1918 can be useful in explaining the origins and the reasons for the later post-war attitudes.

Italian Schools within the Habsburg Monarchy

Within the-Habsburg monarchy two national conflicts arose at a local level: one between Italians and Germans in Tyrol and the other between Italians and south Slavs along the Adriatic coast. These conflicts reappeared in a more severe form in Italy after 1918. Public opinion in Italy was very sensitive to the problems of Italians in Austria. This played a significant role in the Italian

policy of that period, whereas reactions to the very rapid denationalisation process carried out by the French in Nice were very rare. The national rights of the Italians living in Austria, particularly those concerning language and education, were fully safeguarded by the *Staats-grundgesetz über die allgemeinen Rechte der Staatsbürger*, dated 21 December 1867. As a ‘historic nation’ Italians enjoyed a very efficient and well developed system of education. The only source of dissatisfaction was connected with the university, and the question of the establishment of a faculty of law to be precise, always rejected by the imperial government, which thus gave the question a greater political rather than cultural relevance.

The problem of Italians in the Habsburg monarchy assumed different features in the Trentino and on the Adriatic coast. Trentino, part of a crownland Tyrol, with a German majority, was denied the political and administrative autonomy it requested. The clear-cut separation of the two ethnic groups, on the other hand, made a solution of the school problem easier. In the Italian areas and in the Ladin district of Ampezzo, Italian was the official language of instruction. However, some consequences of the broader national and political contrast between Italians and Germans could also be seen in the educational field. In the Italian schools, subject to the *Schulaufsicht* (supervisory authority) of Innsbruck, teaching of Italian history and culture was poor, to the extent that the feeling was created that it was a *school in Italian* rather than an *Italian school*. The quality of textbooks, prepared by bureaucrats worried about political problems, was unsatisfactory. Moreover, the Italians constantly protested against the activities of the German *Schutzvereine* (Defence Associations) and the presence of state German schools in Trento. These served the bureaucratic and military German settlement in the city, but were also attended by Italian pupils, whose parents wanted to give their children a thorough knowledge of the state language of the monarchy. These schools were perceived as a threat to the Italian make-up of the city.

The situation on the Adriatic coast, where the two ethnic groups, the Italians and the south Slavs, lived next to each other in a climate of high tension, rendered harsher by the overlapping of national and social contrast was more complicated and strained. The Italian group, historically dominant in this area, reacted aggressively to the national awakening of the Slovenes and the Croats, the ‘nations without history’ as they became publicly known. In the period 1871-1910, as far as primary schools were concerned, a remarkable balance between the number of Italian and Slav schools was discernible in the provinces of Gorizia-Gradisca and Istria. This was easier to achieve in Gorizia, where a geographical separation existed to some extent between the two groups, and where the prevalence of a rural population reduced the harshness of the national conflict. It was different in Istria, where the intermingling of the two groups was stronger and where the Italian municipal authorities often opposed the creation of Slovenian and Croatian schools.

The heart of the conflict, however, was Trieste, where the Italian municipal authority, in order to stress the Italian character of the town, allowed the creation of public Slovenian primary schools only in the outskirts and in the rural districts of Trieste. As elsewhere, the Italians wanted to assert in the educational field their argument that the Slovenian presence in Trieste was merely a suburban and rural feature. In the city centre, therefore, there was only room for private Slovenian primary schools, financed by the Society of Cyril and Methodius. A three year private commercial school, created in 1910, was the only Slovenian secondary school in Trieste. An acceptable Slav secondary school network existed in Gorizia, whereas in Istria the number of these schools was much lower. On the whole, the atmosphere in these regions was characterised by an open national conflict, and schools provided one of the most significant areas for expression of this tension. Slovenes and Croats attempted to undermine Italian supremacy while the Italians were determined to preserve their superiority in such a vital field as education.

The weight given to culture as an instrument of national defence and of national penetration was confirmed by the enormous amount of money the Italian municipality of Trieste invested in secondary schools. These were all, except for the technical and vocational ones, municipal and not state schools. On the other hand, in Dalmatia, where the number of Italians was declining even though they still exercised a considerable economic power and cultural influence, they possessed state schools only in Zara and for the rest had to rely on private institutions financed by the National League. In such an atmosphere, schools became, as the Austrian journalist Claus Gatterer observed, not just education centres, but also ‘national bulwarks’. Even on the Adriatic coast, and still more in Trentino, German schools carried a remarkable weight. A widespread German school network existed in Gorizia, a Julian town where the German element was more firmly rooted, and in Trieste, which was an influential commercial and bureaucratic German centre. These schools exercised a strong influence, even on the, non-German environment. In Trieste, in particular, they were attended by both Italians and Slovenes.

The attendance of German schools by Italian pupils, generally belonging to families from within the entrepreneurial and commercial classes, was an object of criticism for the Italian political leadership. That leadership feared the possibility of their own denationalisation not so much from the linguistic, as from the cultural and political point of view. To the Slovenes, on the other hand, the attendance of German schools represented one consequence of the insufficiency of their own primary school network and the total lack of secondary education in their own language. German schools, where some classes included the teaching of Slovenian, represented for them, therefore, a way to avoid the pressure of italianisation. In 1910, the German primary school in Trieste was attended by 829 German, 845 Italian and 668 Slovenian children, whereas in the secondary school there were 171 Germans, 142 Italians and 197 Slovenes. The presence of German state schools in Gorizia and in Trieste with a centripetal political function, was a fact that made the national problem even more complicated and the linguistic and educational conflict in Julian Venetia more acute, right up to 1918.

Liberal Italy after World War I

The history of developments in the school system of the multilingual territories of the Habsburg monarchy, destined to become part of the Italian kingdom after 1918, as well as information concerning the treatment of minorities in the peninsula before 1918, is essential to an understanding of Italian policy towards minorities after that year. During the First World War, foreseeing that in case of victory, Italy would have to cope with new ethnic minorities, the government recognised an ethnic minority problem for the first time, and gave some indication of its intentions for the future. In the Aostan primary schools French survived only as an extra-curricular subject; French teaching was reintroduced as part of the normal school schedule. On the other hand, at the same time, Giorgio Pitacco, an Italian member of parliament for Trieste in the *Reichsrat* in Vienna, then an exile in Rome, made a statement in threatening terms for the future. He said that Italy, as a single national state, should never try to extend to her future Slav citizens the linguistic and educational rights they had enjoyed in multi-national Austria.

At the end of the First World War the Italian government had to deal with new and delicate problems of national minorities, when even the problem of the French population in the Aosta valley seemed to assume a different aspect within the new political framework. The seizure of power by the Fascists a few years later doubtless represented a turning point in the attitude towards

minorities. It is therefore advisable to examine first Liberal government's policies in the period 1918-22, and then those of the Fascist government, although it is necessary to stress that there was also some continuity between the two phases.

The first statements of the Italian politicians and of the king, Victor Emmanuel II, were rather reassuring to the minorities, as these authorities promised to respect their rights and defend their identity. But soon afterwards the contrast between what the government considered to be the correct meaning to be assigned to the concept of autonomy in the so-called 'new provinces' and what the representatives of the minorities thought.. became evident. This contrast was particularly striking in the case of the almost entirely German south Tyrol, where the possibilities for defence of minority rights were much greater, as a consequence of its geographical isolation from the Italian speaking area, and of its strong and well established elite, composed of the old aristocracy, the landowners, and the intellectual and commercial bourgeoisie of the urban centres.

South Tyroleans demanded administrative and political autonomy on the pattern of that existing within the Habsburg multinational state; whereas even the more open minded Italian politicians did not intend to go beyond a form of administrative decentralisation which they considered consistent with the nature of the Italian national state. Julius Perathoner, German mayor of Bolzano, declared during the visit to the town by Victor Emmanuel III that with the annexation of the new provinces Italy had ceased to be a national state. No other statement better expresses the gap between the two points of view. In the view of Italian public opinion, the national state had been strengthened as a result of the accomplishment of unity and the achievement of the 'natural boundaries'.

In this political climate, which created misunderstandings between even the more moderate elements in Italian public opinion and the national minorities, nationalist and Fascist pressures surged to the fore. For some politicians, any agreement with minorities represented a threat to Italian 'sacred' interests and a national betrayal. Furthermore, the regions close to the borders were affected by both new and old conflicts between the groups living there. National tensions and the centralist tradition that was so characteristic of the Italian state thus prevented a positive solution to the problem of autonomy even before 1922. In the short liberal period preceding the Fascist seizure of power, individual rights were fully granted - at least at a theoretical level - to citizens belonging to national minorities, though no solution was offered to the problem of their collective and corporate rights.

As far as the educational system was concerned, the Italian authorities made a promise to respect the right of minorities to be educated in their own language, but at the same time they integrated their schools into the Italian school system, and tried to extend Italian cultural and linguistic penetration in the territories inhabited by minorities. In south Tyrol, this policy was carried into practice by the opening, first of all, of new Italian schools next to the German ones, both in the few multi-lingual areas and in the areas until then exclusively inhabited by Germans, where an influx of Italians was then taking place.

On the other hand, Italian policy aimed at reshuffling Slovenian and Croatian schools in Julian Venetia, where all German schools had been shut down immediately after the end of the war. According to the official statistics for 1918-19, the number of Slav schools was smaller than that reported by the last Austrian official census of 1913: 149 primary schools had been closed, whilst 392 kept working. All private schools financed by the Cyril and Methodius Society were abolished. Many of the suppressed Slovenian and Croatian schools were transformed into Italian establishments. Starting with the school year 1919-20, Italian taught by Italian teachers was introduced as a compulsory subject in Slav primary schools. The logic followed by the authorities

was to reduce drastically, if not eliminate altogether, the educational structures of the minority in the most important urban centres of the region (Trieste, Gorizia and Pola), as well as in the Istrian coastal towns, which were predominantly Italian, and in the bilingual areas of inner Istria. This line of action was clearly visible in the decision to eliminate all but one Slovenian primary school in the urban area of Trieste.

The logic of the Italian attitude showed itself even more clearly in the secondary school field. The schools in Trieste, Gorizia, Pola, Zara, Pisino and Abbazia- Volosca were closed, whilst the technical school at Idria was kept working. To replace the schools which had been closed, a lower *gymnasium* and a normal (teacher training) school for teachers at Tolmino were created. Slovenian secondary schools were thus 'exiled' to two small towns in totally Slovenian districts in the interior of Julian Venetia, and reorganised as vocational schools. The Italian authorities more and more tended to give a rural character to Slovenian and Croatian settlements, and to reduce the Slav community to playing a rural role. The echo of the harsh conflict of the past between Italians and south Slavs was thus reflected in the Italian government's policy in Julian Venetia: a liberal system could not deny its Slav citizens the right to an education in their mother tongue, but it stressed simultaneously the marginal position of the Slav group.

If, on the one hand, a marked difference could be seen between the Italian attitude in Julian Venetia and that in Upper Adige, on the other, some common elements did exist also. Soon after Italian troops entered the new provinces, the supreme military authority introduced changes in the syllabuses of primary schools. History and geography had to be taught with particular reference to Italy. In teaching history, the dominant emphasis had to be upon the period of the Italian *Risorgimento*. Teachers were requested to introduce individual tuition programmes in compliance with these provisions. In schools where a minority language was taught, provisions were made for the compulsory introduction of Italian as a second language. Even in Upper Adige, where the Italian policy was not as harsh as in Julian Venetia, tensions arose between public authorities and local public opinion.

The state organs aimed at compulsory introduction of bilingualism among the minorities through the school and at 'rescuing' the 'denationalised' Italians; that is, at national reintegration of those who had earlier on succumbed to the Habsburg monarchy's denationalisation policy. This reitalianisation policy was developed from a single case: that of the village of Laghetti (Laag), where social pressures by certain German landowners had effectively overcome the Italian population. The post-war provincial authority decided to open an Italian primary school instead of the German one after ascertaining that children belonging to families which had declared themselves German actually knew only Italian. Similar cases, although less striking, can be found in other villages in the southern part of Upper Adige (Unterland), where, in the past, Italians had preferred to merge with the numerically and socially stronger ethnic group. However Italian policy was to replace German schools with Italian ones throughout the Unterland and in the Ladin valleys, the inhabitants of which were automatically considered to be Italian.

In August 1921, an explicit general legislative rule, the Corbino law, named after the Minister of Public Education Mario Orso Corbino, stipulated that all Italian children had to attend Italian schools. Their nationality was, however, ascertained in a somewhat debatable way. In the Unterland, Italian family names were automatically held to be a sign of belonging to the Italian ethnic group, and Ladin names were considered Italian. As a result, a considerable number of German primary schools (49 schools with 115 classes, to be precise) were changed into Italian schools, whilst Italian primary schools were put next to the German ones in any village in Upper Adige where there were at least 12 Italian children of school age. In the newly established Italian schools, German was taught in extra hours as an additional subject.

Local public opinion considered the Corbino law to be a first attempt to change the ethnic physiognomy of the region, and also considered it an infringement on parents' rights to choose a school for their children. However, the educational policy of liberal Italy cannot be equated - as must be stressed very firmly - with that of the Fascist regime. Notwithstanding the Corbino law, Germans in South Tyrol kept most of their schools, including all the secondary ones which were consistent with the Italian school system. In Julian Venetia, the blows dealt to the minorities' educational institutions were certainly not soft, but at least insofar as primary education was concerned, the school network was not fundamentally affected.

There are, doubtless, some aspects of the period which tend to make the difference with the Fascist period which followed less marked. There was, for instance, the national character given to school syllabuses; the tendency to consider the presence of minorities in Italy as an anomalous factor and, therefore, as an exceptional and transitory stage; the centralisation of the school system, a logical consequence of the overall political and administrative centralism. No structural and formal autonomy was granted to the German and Slav schools, in spite of the fact that special provisions for the new provinces, and the respect for their educational peculiarities and traditions, were requested not only by the minorities, but also by some Italians like the writer and secondary school teacher, Giani Stuparich. Thus the belief that the goal of a national state should be the assimilation of the minorities became a widespread notion.

In the eyes of the Fascists, this process was to be accomplished rapidly and violently, while for the moderate politicians, it needed to be done in a painless way that retained respect for the minorities. In this context, voices like that of Giovanni Ferretti, the head of school administration for the new provinces, who was in favour of introducing teaching the mother tongue of minorities all over the peninsula, both in the new provinces and the linguistic islands, were rather isolated. According to Ferretti, a general provision dealing with the teaching of minority languages could have reduced the ugly character of the debate over the school problem in the new provinces. It is necessary to emphasise that the logic of unification of the school system also affected a minority such as the Aostan one, whose loyalty towards the state was not in doubt. A decree of 6 July 1919 objected to the existence of village schools, while offering salaries equal to those of the teachers in public schools to their teachers. This made it difficult to find local teachers who spoke French, and imposed financial burdens they could not afford upon the small villages. Benedetto Croce, Minister of Education under Giovanni Giolitti at the time, tried to reduce the negative effects of this provision, but his efforts became an empty gesture with the fall of government.

The Fascist Period

Suppression of minority schools and dismissal of alloglot teachers were to figure even more prominently in the years to come. Fascism, which, after a brief transitional interlude, was to become an open dictatorship in 1925, represented the third stage in the periodisation of Italian governmental policy towards national minorities. It came after the liberal experience of the pre-war years, characterised by the growth in national consciousness and striving for national unity, and after the weak liberal governments of the post-war period, which were unable to cope with the tense and explosive political climate of those years. The coming to power of Fascism did not promise a rosy future to national minorities, as the fascist movement represented the most radical wing of Italian nationalism. In the previous years, it had violently criticised the Liberal cabinets, charging them with excessive softness towards alloglot populations, who had been the object of open Fascist

violence, especially in Julian Venetia, but also in Upper Adige. The myth of a ‘mutilated victory’ itself, which was one of the basic themes of Fascist propaganda, had both an international and a domestic relevance. In fact, not only did it criticise the ‘insufficient fruits’ obtained by Italian diplomacy at the peace treaty of 1919, but also attacked the unwillingness of the Liberal cabinets to nationalise rapidly the new provinces.

Yet, despite these precedents, the initial attitude of minorities towards Fascism was a ‘wait and see’ one. There was a sense of relief when an end was made of that separation between formal authority and effective power which had characterised the period of the last Liberal cabinets. Mussolini, for his part, showed a cautious realism and avoided exacerbating the situation. As far as schools were concerned, strong pressures were exerted for an Italianising thrust, especially in south Tyrol, where Italian penetration had been slow in previous years. This, at least, was the gist of the accusations that came from a fanatical nationalist from Trentino, Ettore Tolomei, and also from the Prefect and the local Director of Education in Trento. Both officials maintained that Italian behaviour must not be affected by the existence of a minority group, but that it should be guided by the principle of the unitary character of the state. As a consequence of this pressure, German speaking school officials were forced to use Italian only in their official correspondence, and four more German primary schools in bilingual areas were closed. In these schools, German could survive only as ‘a language of comparison’.

In fact, at the beginning, Mussolini paid more attention to the Aosta valley, suggesting the abolition of the extra hours of French in the schools of the region, as a countermeasure to the repeal of the guarantees the Italians had enjoyed in Tunis and the denationalisation policy which had always been pursued in Nice and Corsica. Thus, the question of the Aosta valley began to get some attention within the context of Franco-Italian relations (a first hint of the interconnection between foreign policy and the attitude towards national minorities which was to be a constant feature of the Fascist period), and Mussolini linked the case of this ancient and loyal minority to that of the newly constituted ethnic minority groups. The Minister of Education, the philosopher Giovanni Gentile, at first managed to oppose pressure from both local authorities in Venezia Tridentina and those of the *Duce*. Confronted, however, with a powerful intervention by Mussolini, who stated that ‘in Italy Italian must be spoken’, he was compelled to bow to the will of the *Duce* and to sanction the abolition of the extra hours of French in Aostan primary education.

The attitude of the Italian authorities that then prevailed towards alloglot schools can be deduced from a note dated 21 August 1923, from the Directorate General for primary and popular education in the Ministry of Public Education. In this document, which was mainly devoted to the ‘rescue’ of the Italians in the Unterland begun under the Corbino bill, some statements of general intent were also contained. Italian policy, it was stated, must not take into account demographic ratios, but base itself upon the principle of the ‘unitary character of our national body’. The liberal conception of a school policy, which was to seek a compromise between the interests of the state and those of the small groups of alloglot people, was therefore rejected. On the contrary, it was seen as necessary to subdue particularist interests to the superior goal of the development of a national civilisation embracing all Italy. For the first time, the *Leitmotiv* of the whole school policy of the Fascist state was affirmed: school, the place where the cultural preparation of the new generations was accomplished, was to be the fundamental instrument of the policy of assimilation.

Less than a year after the Fascist seizure of power, the fate of minority schools was definitely decided, not by means of specific measures designed for this purpose, but within a more general provision of the Italian school reform. The bill, introduced by Minister Gentile and therefore known as the Gentile reform, confirmed Italian as the only language of teaching in the

schools of the kingdom. Rejecting his previous position in favour of linguistic liberalism and freedom of teaching, the Sicilian philosopher now considered the nation as a unitary and organic community which could not allow any particularist deviations. Gentile, however, introduced the bill as consistent with a philosophical trend, according to which the realisation of each individual personality could be reached only through the state. On the other hand, in the name of an educational and not a mechanical concept of teaching, the Minister underlined the need to find space for the study of dialects and local traditions. The provision concerning dialects constituted, at least for a few years, a way of preserving in schools, a limited presence of the languages of the major non-dominant groups.

The Gentile law envisaged a single national school, with a gradual abolition of the minority schools. From the year 1923-4 on, Italian became the only teaching language in the first grade of primary school. Children who had already begun their studies in their mother tongue were, however, allowed to follow and finish primary education in their own language. In the second, third and fourth grades, however, pupils had to attend five hours a week of tuition in the 'state language' Italian. This was increased to six hours in the fifth. The suppression of alloglot primary schools was to be accomplished in five years' time .

In this context, it is needless to stress that history and geography were taught without any reference to the peculiarities of the national minorities. These two subjects were, on the contrary, considered as a means of inculcating an Italian national consciousness into the alloglot children, and to persuade them of the superior value of Italian culture and civilisation. No room was left for local elements, folk traditions or popular songs. The italianisation process was basically accomplished by 1927-8, when only 35 post-primary German school classes survived and even these were to be abolished within the next three years. In these classes some subjects were already taught in Italian anyhow. The Gentile reform affected the fate of 444 Slovenian and Croatian schools (with 842 classes and 52000 pupils) and 324 German primary schools (with 593 classes and 30000 pupils) which were operating in 1923. In secondary schools, Italian was to have been introduced in non-Italian schools from 1927-8 onward. In fact, the italianisation process was accomplished much faster, with the immediate abolition or transformation of several German, Slovenian and Croatian schools into Italian teaching establishments.

Primary schools were among the first to be closed. This fact is to be seen on the one hand as a logical consequence of the process of italianisation of primary education, and on the other, as an indication of the significance attached to the problem of training the future primary school teachers. On 10 May 1927, Gentile's successor as Minister of Education, Pietro Fedele, could announce triumphantly to Mussolini that Italian was the only teaching language in public, secondary schools in Julian Venetia and Upper Adige. Only some German private schools run by religious orders survived. Attendance at state secondary schools was made easier by the fact that it was declared free, and that special provisions were made for the pupils and their families.

Dialects and local traditions were taught all over the country at primary school level, mainly in the first years after the approval of the Gentile bill. In the so-called 'new provinces' and in the Aosta Valley, the consequences of this provision were limited to the introduction of 'extra hours' which were to be devoted to the study of mother tongues within the national school system. In the Aosta valley, the recently-abolished system of extra-curricular classes in French were thus re-introduced. The situation of French in the valley was, actually, therefore, slightly improved. Under the Gentile bill, village schools were replaced by the so-called *scuole sussidiate* (state subsidised schools), institutions where some tuition in French was allowed. The effectiveness of these schools was, however, seriously hampered by the cuts in their budget decided on by the Finance Minister,

Alberto de Stefani. The study of the mother tongue of minority groups at the primary school level was thus turned into that of a local or a second language by Gentile.

Practical implementation of the rules relative to extra hours in the new provinces encountered various official obstacles from the very beginning. In Julian Venetia, the opportunity to attend extra classes was not automatically granted to all Slovenian and Croatian pupils, but could take place only upon the presentation of a special request by the parents. The examination of such applications was deliberately made a time-consuming business by school officials. Classes were fixed with timetables which rendered attendance difficult for the children. Moreover, language teaching was limited to oral instruction, and quite often given by Italians who had a poor command of Slovenian and Croatian. No textbooks were admitted. The Slovenian member of parliament, Engelbert Besednjak, a lawyer, condemned the whole system of extra hours as a cheat.

The same problems occurred in south Tyrol, where classes were limited to the main centres: Bolzano, Merano, Bressanone and Brunico. In such a situation it was not surprising that the introduction of the Gentile reform was followed by impressive demonstrations and protests. In the Aosta valley, the *Ligue Valdotaïne* presented Mussolini with a petition signed by 8000 heads of families. German mothers organised a big demonstration in front of the Subprefecture of Bolzano. The reaction of the Slavs in Julian Venetia was less well organised, but still quite strong. In the second half of the 1920s, illegal and violent forms of protest occurred the south Tyrolean members of parliament, Paul von Sterbach and Karl Tinzl, maintained that the aim of the Fascist government was no longer the diffusion of Italian in the new provinces, but the suppression of minority languages. The Gentile bill was followed, in 1924, by the closing down of German and Slav kindergartens, and their replacement by Italian institutions under the supervision of a Fascist national council. In south Tyrol, the attempt to organise private *Spielstuben* (kindergarten playrooms) was hampered and nullified by the intervention of Italian police authorities.

In 1925, even this limited opportunity for study of their mother tongue was taken away from the minorities. The extra hours were abolished by a decree issued by Minster Fedele on 22 November 1925. From the report annexed to the decree, it appears that the abolition of extra classes was decided on, above all, because of the state of tension reflected in the spirit of the alloglot population in the border areas. According to Fedele their feelings were being exploited by the enemies of Italy. These works make it clear Fascist policy towards minorities was determined primarily by their location at the borders of Italy and also by the problems of international policy connected with this fact.

The overlapping of these two factors affected the Fascist attitude to such an extent that, during the 1930s. Mussolini declared that the fate of the German schools would have been totally different if south Tyrol had been in Tuscany instead of in the alpine region. But in Fedele's 1925 report, there were also some passages that were typical of the Fascist concept of the state and of its consequences for the regime's nationality policy . Italy, it was argued, was not an aggregate of nationalities such as the Habsburg monarchy had been. Neither was it a state *sui generis* with strong alloglot minorities, like the successor states of Austria-Hungary: Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia or Poland. It was a geographical and ethnic whole, with well determined geographical boundaries marked by the Alps and the sea. The national government had, therefore to ensure a linguistic cultural unity of all those who lived within the political boundaries of the Italian motherland. These concepts were personally stressed by Mussolini in a circular letter sent to all Ministries on 1 November 1925. In this he criticised the views of liberal politicians, according to which the new boundaries of Italy were, above all, based upon strategic considerations. Instead he put forward the

Fascist concept of the Italian character of all the annexed territories, which was to be reaffirmed wherever it had been erased or weakened by history .

This ‘reconquest’ had to begin, according to Mussolini, with the diffusion of the Italian language in the areas next to the borders and, for this to occur, the exclusive use of Italian in primary schools had to be ensured absolutely. The Fascist leader thus allocated to schools an essential task in his national policy in the alloglot or mixed territories. Mussolini’s words can also be seen as a proof of the fact that the Italian denationalisation policy was not a reply to widespread irredentist trends among the minority groups, but an aim in itself, based upon ideological foundations and a radical vision of the national future. The measures associated with the italianisation of schools were accompanied by provisions that drastically reduced the number of Slav and German teachers, inherited from Austria. In fact, even before the Gentile reform, a substantial number of teachers had been forced out under various pretexts, such as not being in possession of Italian citizenship or having an inadequate knowledge of the official language. The Gentile law, and the following abolition of extra classes, led, in November 1925, to a regulation imposing the duty upon all alloglot teachers of taking an examination in order to become qualified to teach in Italian. A subsequent law, dated 24 December 1925, gave the authorities the opportunity to dismiss all those civil servants who did not fulfil their duties loyally, a measure easily made applicable to employees belonging to national minorities.

The combined effect of these two provisions led to the discharge of many German and Slav teachers, all the more because the examination that they had to take was made extremely difficult, in order to eliminate as many applicants as possible. The few teachers who managed to stay on in their posts were generally moved to different provinces from those where their original jobs had been. In Upper Adige, only 111 out of 745 teachers in service in 1921, remained at the end of school year 1927-8. However, most of these were forced to retire or move to other areas of the peninsula from 1928-9. On the other hand, 412 Italian teachers were sent to Upper Adige in the first years of transformation of the South Tyrolean school system: 115 in 1923-4; 86 in 1924-5; 62 in 1926-7; 24 in 1927-8; and 15 in 1928-9. In 1936, only 50 Slav teachers out of about 1000 in 1923 were still in their positions; and of these only ten were allowed to stay in their native territory .

The italianisation of the school system was, therefore, generally followed by the dismissal of teachers who spoke the same mother tongue as their pupils. Thus alloglot children were confronted not only with being taught Italian, a language of which they were often totally ignorant, at least at the beginning of their schooling, but also with teachers who could not communicate with them. Moreover, sometimes Italian teachers attracted to the new provinces by salary, allocation of living quarters and other career incentives, felt themselves entrusted with the mission of extracting pupils from the cultural community they belonged to. The aim behind italianisation of the school system was closely connected in Fascist politics, with the moral aim of eliminating and uprooting the languages and cultures of the alloglot populations, starting with the youngest generation. The introduction of Italian as the only acceptable language of instruction, and the elimination of extra-curricular language hours, were followed by rules which forbade private tuition in minority languages (a decree issued by the Prefect of Trento on 27 November 1925 was the first step). Even tuition within families was prohibited, if it was given to more than three children at the same time. In a parliamentary speech of 14 May 1926, devoted to the problem of use of a mother tongue at school, Karl Tinzl vainly demanded for the German children the minimal right to learn a language through private tuition; a right uncontested elsewhere in Italy. Provincial and police authorities watched diligently for any form of clandestine instruction and they intervened quite frequently. Teachers were compelled to rebuke children when they chatted among themselves in their own tongue. Guido Miglia, an Istrian writer, gives a very vivid and impressive picture of this, when he

compares his experience as a young primary school teacher among Croatian children with his personal fate when he had to leave his native town, Pola, in 1947.

The Teaching of Religion

The teaching of religion was, equally, viewed with suspicion, because it was considered to be an instrument for defending non-Italian languages, and preserving particularistic traditions. Under Austrian rule religion had been a compulsory subject of instruction, taught by priests and not by secular teachers. In Italy, the teaching of religion was introduced into the primary school curriculum by the Gentile bill, but only later on, with the Church-State treaty of 1929, into the secondary school. Under a decree issued in 1919 by the Italian military authority, the teaching of religion in the new provinces was kept in the curriculum and was still entrusted to the clergy, but as an optional subject. In 1923, the Ministry of Education made the first attempt to italianise religious instruction under the general provisions of the Gentile bill, but this ruling was withdrawn under the pressure from the Holy See.

The use of a mother tongue in the teaching of religion - not only in Julian Venetia and South Tyrol, but also in the Aosta Valley - was limited to the first three years of primary school by a decree dated January 1924, issued by the Ministry of Education, but it was also tolerated in the higher grades. In 1926, however, bilingual catechisms and the exclusive use of Italian in oral instruction were imposed. After a certain delay, starting with the school year 1928-9, this provision was finally enforced. Many ecclesiastical catechists then moved out of the schools, to be replaced by ordinary teachers. A network of parish schools, particularly widespread in south Tyrol, was thus established for the teaching of catechism and religion. In this extra school teaching, the potential for defence of national identity and use of a mother tongue varied from region to region, depending also on the co-operation of the ecclesiastical authorities and the degree of ethnic compatibility between the clergy and the faithful.

In south Tyrol, where both clergy and believers were mostly German, parish schools played a significant role in preserving the mother tongue and, in some cases, also provided some elementary language instruction under the cover of teaching religion. In Julian Venetia, where the national line of demarcation also passed through the Church itself, the chances of national resistance by Slovenes and Croats within ecclesiastical institutions were much weaker. In the Aosta valley, at the beginning of the 1930s, when an Italian nationalist prelate, Monsignore Renzo Imberti, succeeded the francophone and francophile bishop, Angelo Calabrese, a turning point could be observed in the attitude of the Church towards the linguistic and national problems of the valley. The defence of French was then entrusted to the lower clergy, and their initiatives. This finally came to resemble the situation in Julian Venetia. Some evidence of a profound Italian penetration of the region, however, is given by the fact that by 1929, only 26 out of 86 parish priests were using French while teaching catechism to children.

Self-defence Measures taken by the Minorities

In schools, after the abolition of extra classes, the only officially recognised place devoted to the study of the languages of minorities was that of teaching the mother tongue as a foreign language, and this was possible only in secondary schools where the curriculum permitted learning a modern foreign language. This was not always feasible. In the Aosta *lycee*, for instance, reinstated after its

abolition in 1861, the study of German as a foreign language in place of French was introduced in 1924. In Julian Venetia, the study of Slovenian and Croatian was offered in only a few schools and its presence was further reduced by frequent interventions from schoolmasters or some Italian parents who protested against the 'shame' of teaching Slav languages. In 1931-2, the courses in Slovenian and Croatian were abolished altogether, and they were only partially restarted from 1937 on. The choice of the mother tongue also prohibited the study of any other foreign language, and this fact caused protests everywhere, especially in the tourist area of Upper Adige. Moreover, this form of teaching the mother tongue was inadequate and unsatisfactory, all the more because it was generally entrusted to Italian teachers, who did not usually possess an adequate background in, or fluent knowledge of, the language.

During the 1930s, some concessions were made by Italian authorities towards the south Tyrolean minority, in the shape of private extra school courses in German open to children enrolled in the compulsory school classes. These concessions, given for foreign policy reasons, aimed to strengthen the prestige of the friendly governments of Dollfuss and Schuschnigg in Austria. The already limited scope of these measures was further weakened by the obstacles put in the way of their effective implementation. Furthermore, most local circles considered the courses organised and supervised by Italians with scepticism, and preferred the more dangerous opportunities offered by clandestine 'catacomb schools' which were oriented towards the German speaking community at a national and ideological level. Even less significant were some sporadic concessions made to Slovenes and Croats, which also aimed at a *detente* in the relationship with the government in Belgrade.

A defence of the minority group was, therefore, not really possible within the public school system and had to rely upon the self-organised capacity for resistance of the populations involved (in Upper Adige, for instance, singing groups and circles were used as a means to keep linguistic traditions alive and to spread them among the younger generation). Realistic chances of preserving a linguistic and cultural inheritance were closely related to the social and cultural level of the families themselves. For this very reason, the first line of defence was, in most cases, inadequate and had to be supplemented by some organised forms of private and clandestine tuition, on which Fascist repression concentrated. Although similar attempts were made in Julian Venetia and the Aosta valley, Upper Adige was the major centre for a widespread network of clandestine schools, the so-called 'catacomb schools'. They had a very high number of pupils and were based on an efficient organisation which allowed them to survive the many blows dealt them by the police authorities.

The ethnic compactness of the south Tyroleans, their developed social awareness, the financial and political support given by the organisations for the defence of German minorities in Europe, were all factors which explain the capacity to create an organic emergency school system in Upper Adige, one which could not be created on a systematic basis elsewhere. A recent book by Maria Villgrater gives impressive figures concerning the diffusion of the 'catacomb schools' network: an average of more than 200 teachers, mainly female and 5000 pupils were involved in the courses every year. Textbooks and other teaching aids were generally smuggled into south Tyrol from Germany and Austria. Courses for the training of teachers involved were held both in Italy and outside, mainly in Austria and Bavaria. The clandestine schools had strong ties with German organisations. This inevitably brought a consequent increase in the influence upon it of German nationalist tendencies and, later on, of national socialism. This led, in the late 1930s, to considerable tensions between Catholics and National Socialist sympathisers in south Tyrol.

It is necessary in this context to look at the role played by the Catholic Church, whose actual involvement varied from place to place. In Upper Adige the Church as a whole was involved.

In Julian Venetia and in the Aosta valley, where great tensions and conflicts were to be found within the Church, which was also split up along national lines and where denationalisation pressures sometimes even affected the seminaries, it was very much in the hands of individual bishops and priests. But, on the whole, the words of an Aostan historian, Ettore Passerin d'Entrèves, who described the Church as the Noah's ark of French during the Fascist period can be extended to all minorities living in the border areas of northern Italy, even if it often was the lower clergy, acting on an individual basis, and not the hierarchy who were the real protagonists in the defensive struggle.

The strong presence of the Church and of the religious orders in south Tyrolean society before and after 1918 gave rise to a flourishing network of private Catholic secondary schools for boys and girls, owned by religious orders active in the principal centres of Upper Adige. Although less directly, and more slowly than the state schools, they too were affected by general regulations. In some cases these led to their suppression or induced their owners to opt either for closing down, or, in some instances, for Italianisation. In those schools which continued operating, though, the teaching of German as a second language was tolerated. Four religious private schools, destined for the education of the clergy, and which kept the character of German institutions, were very important in the defence of the mother tongue. In particular, the two seminaries, one at Bressanone (Brixen) for the eponymous diocese and one at Dorf Tirol for the German part of the diocese of Trento, which were also frequently attended by pupils who did not intend to become priests but looked instead for an education in a German environment, represented important and relatively free institutions which other minority groups did not possess.

Conclusion

School policy, like all the other aspects of Fascist policy towards national minorities, though characterised by uniform direction and consistent logic, was in practice very much affected by local conditions prevailing in the different areas and, especially, by the uneven intensity of opposition to the regime. In Upper Adige, the ruling class, with its aristocratic and bourgeois components, plus the political elites and most of public opinion, were all conservative in their orientation. The ideological confrontation with Fascism, therefore, was not very direct there, especially in the first years after Mussolini's seizure of power. Opposition by Catholics and liberals displayed a moderate profile and restrained attitudes. On the other hand, the lack of a local Italian element, at least until the mid 1930s, when Italian immigration into Bolzano took place, gave the national struggle in that region the character of a conflict between the state power and a minority, and not that of a struggle between two ethnic groups. Thus, the room granted for national resistance by the minority was relatively ample.

In Aosta valley, belonging politically and spiritually to the Piedmontese state first and to the Italian kingdom second, Fascist pressures gave a strong push to the already ongoing process of Italianisation of the social elites. But the place of these elites which 'betrayed' their own people was taken by elements of the middle and working classes (students, primary school teachers, lower clergy, postmen) who had never felt a greater need to defend vigorously their identity than at the very moment when it was under attack. Particularly in the smaller valleys and the minor centres, lacking in more acute social and national tensions, close ties with the national tradition could be safeguarded.

The most strained and violent political climate was that of Julian Venetia, where the strain between the repressive state apparatus and Slovenian and Croatian minorities grew and developed

into an open conflict between the national groups living in the region. This national struggle was intensified by the parallel existence of a long-standing and deeply rooted social tension, which gave rise to a politically radical clandestine opposition within which a communist component was soon to prevail. The Slav reaction therefore took a more violent form, one not found elsewhere, which ended up with actions such as setting fire to Italian school and nursery school buildings, the two most visible and hated symbols of the Italian denationalisation policy . Italian repression, on its part, was extremely harsh.

The variations in political climate thus brought about, despite the uniform character of the school and linguistic policy , substantial differences in the forms of cultural defence. As already mentioned, from the very beginning, Fascism focussed on the school as the essential instrument in the policy of denationalisation. School was the place where the education of the younger generation was proceeding and the regime believed that the young, not being conditioned by the past, were more open to Italian penetration and to assimilation. Learning at school was supplemented by the activities of the regime's youth organisations, which attempted to take children and youngsters away from the influence of their families and the Church in order to italianise them more fully .

In the document of May 1927, Minister Fedele identified assimilation and spiritual conquest of the new generation as the main task of Fascist educational policy. However, the violence implicit in the concept of assimilation was, in itself, in strident contrast with the idea of spiritual conquest. In trying to attain its objectives, the regime naturally did not hesitate to use all the means at its disposal in order to suppress the languages and cultural traditions of the minorities. The consequence of this violence was a reaction which produced exactly opposite results, namely the strengthening of the very identity Fascism wanted to see eradicated. The failure of its assimilation policy was openly admitted by the regime itself, at least insofar as Upper Adige was concerned. In 1934, Mussolini decided to create an industria] area in Bolzano with the hope of creating an Italian speaking majority in the region through a wave of immigration of Italian workers to the main south Tyrolean city . Later on, in 1939 the *Duce* tried to solve the still unresolved problem of the character of this area through an agreement with Germany, the so-called Options Agreement, which paved the way for the emigration of a part of the German speaking population from south Tyrol.

Also from the educational point of view, the attempt to enforce at a very early age the study of Italian, a foreign tongue, upon children from minority groups who did not understand it and only possessed an oral knowledge of their own mother tongue, ended in failure. Children did not learn their mother tongue correctly and they also learned very poor Italian, which in many cases they completely forgot once they finished the school. The method used at the same time by French authorities to introduce, or reintroduce French, in Alsace-Lorraine, starting from the mother tongue in order to outflank it and later to replace it with French, proved to be more efficient than the brutal and violent method imposed by Mussolini. The Fascist school system condemned to a double illiteracy the youngsters of the minority groups belonging to the socially weakest classes. The school policy of the Fascist regime was a great human and cultural tragedy for national minorities, but it also clearly demonstrated the total failure of attempts at assimilation. The moral and physical violence Fascism used was, in turn, the cause of similar violence which so tragically affected the Italians of Istria and Fiume in 1945 and in the following years.