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14

A Dire Warning to All Ethnic Minorities of Europe?

Fascist Repression in South Tyrol and the Formation of Swedish-Speaking Anti-fascism in Finland¹

KASPER BRASKÉN

It has been argued recently that “Fascism was not a common enemy for ethnic minorities and nationalities all over Europe.”² The relation between ethnic minorities, fascism and anti-fascism during the interwar period was indeed highly ambiguous, including both fascist and anti-fascist responses and sympathies. The complex relation between minorities and anti-fascism still remains under-explored and especially the analysis of the ways in which minority anti-fascism was articulated needs more scholarly attention. This chapter will contribute to the analysis of instances in which ethnic minorities in interwar Europe had a particular concern to criticize fascism and the Italian Fascist dictatorship during the 1920s. The history of anti-fascism has been dominated by accounts dealing with the international political left, including militant and direct responses from anarchist, communist, and social democratic parties and groups.³ These important histories have been com-

1 The chapter was written within the research project Finland-Swedish Anti-Fascism based at Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland, and is funded by the Swedish Society of Literature in Finland. I would like to thank the participants at the “Antifascism in a Transnational and Comparative Perspective” conference in Koper, 27–28 May 2021, for their most helpful comments.

2 Xosé M. Núñez Seixas, “Unholy Alliances? Nationalist Exiles, Minorities and Anti-Fascism in Interwar Europe,” *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 25, no. 4 (2016): 617. The article remains one of very few studies that generally deals with the relation between anti-fascism and national minorities, and forms, therefore, a pivotal starting point for the discussion.

3 See e.g. the latest international volumes: Nigel Copsey and Andrej Olechnowicz, eds., *Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Inter-War Period* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Hugo García et al., eds., *Rethinking Antifascism: History, Memory and Politics, 1922 to the Present* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016); and Kasper Braskén, Nigel Copsey, and Da-

plemented with new research on liberal and conservative forms of anti-fascism that have broadened the field and challenged the understandings of anti-fascism as a more variable phenomenon.⁴ An additional way to deepen the understanding of the varieties of anti-fascism in interwar Europe is to include the perspectives of ethnic minorities. After all, all fascist movements were extremely nationalist and ethnocentric and claimed an “inherent collective superiority for their nations,” which could trigger anti-fascist responses from ethnic minorities.⁵ Such minorities could thus be identified as crucial ‘others’ that were directly confronted by Fascist Italy and by fascist-inspired movements across the continent. Efforts to homogenize and nationalize the state were naturally not restricted to fascist states or movements, but they constituted nevertheless a sustained predicament for radical nationalists as the ideal of the nation-state did not correspond to the social reality within their state borders. This was particularly true in the successor states created after the fall of the Romanov, Ottoman, and Habsburg empires after World War One, when the founding idea of national self-determination nonetheless left the new independent state formations with complex nationalities problems.⁶ It is important to note early on that national minorities were neither sharply bounded nor internally unified groups. They constituted complex and fluid constellations of groups, identities and political and economic interests that intersected class and ethnic boundaries in various and changing ways.⁷ In Italy, this presence of ethnic others was publicly acknowledged by Benito Mussolini already in September 1920 when he underlined that *Italianità* (Italianness) was the “first fundamental pillar of Fascist action.” This also meant in the Italian northern borderlands, from Julia Venezia to South Tyrol, that the non-Italians needed to become Italians through processes of Italianiza-

vid Featherstone, eds., *Anti-Fascism in a Global Perspective: Transnational Networks, Exile Communities, and Radical Internationalism* (London: Routledge, 2021).

- 4 Philip Williamson, “The Conservative Party, Fascism and Anti-Fascism 1918–1939,” in *Varieties of Anti-Fascism*, eds. Copsey and Olechnowicz, 73–97; Vesa Vares, “From Allies to Opponents. Conservatives Facing Fascism in Finland in the 1930s,” *Scandinavian Journal of History*, Vol. 46, no. 2 (2021): 224–247.
- 5 Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914–1945* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1995), 11.
- 6 John Connelly, *From Peoples into Nations: A History of Eastern Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2020), 362–89.
- 7 Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 62.

tion, which caused distinct counterreactions from the minorities living in the borderlands.⁸

Rather than looking directly at the peoples of these regions, I will implement a transnational minority perspective. The basic idea of this chapter is to investigate the reactions spurred by the *denial* and *oppression* of ethnic, cultural, and political rights—or even merely the fear of an impending suppression—among members of another ethnic minority community. The classic example of a transnational anti-fascist minority is the international Jewish community during the 1930s.⁹ However, in Italy antisemitism was not initially a central part of the fascist movement’s ideology. It first gained influence with the rise of National Socialism (Nazism) in Germany and the establishment of the Third Reich in 1933. The passing of the racial laws in Italy in 1938 finally made antisemitism an official part of Italian Fascism.¹⁰ That said, Fascism remained from its origins a chauvinistic and racist construct that singled out the Italians as a people meant to rule over others in both Europe and Africa. For the study of interwar minority anti-Fascism it is therefore important to note that the first targeted ethnic minorities were not the Jews, but the people living in the Italian borderlands.

The chapter approaches the question from a case study drawn from the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland. Although, among the conservative parts of both the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland there was initially much understanding for Benito Mussolini’s so-called ‘righteous’ fight against communism in Italy, the increasing levels of terror, the decay of democratic rights, and the treatment of ethnic minorities in the Italian borderlands became pivotal issues that challenged the positive assessment of Fascism among the Swedish-speaking minority. At the end of the chapter I will show how these observations from Italy affected the Finland-Swedish responses to the rise of a domestic Finnish fascist movement during the late 1920s and early 1930s that envisioned an ultranationalist, monolingual Finland. Thus, the Swedish-speaking

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- 8 Roberta Pergher, *Mussolini’s Nation-Empire: Sovereignty and Settlement in Italy’s Borderlands, 1922–1943* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1–2, 202.
- 9 Moshe R. Gottlieb, *American Anti-Nazi Resistance, 1933–1941: An Historical Analysis* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1982); Nigel Copsey and Daniel Tilles, “Uniting a Divided Community? Re-Appraising Jewish Responses to British Fascist Antisemitism, 1932–39,” *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History*, Vol. 15, no. 1–2 (2009); Anna Koch, “Exile Dreams: Antifascist Jews, Antisemitism and the ‘Other Germany,’” *Fascism*, no. 9 (2020).
- 10 Patrick Bernhard, “The Great Divide? Notions of Racism in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: New Answers to an Old Problem,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, Vol. 24, no. 1 (2019).

minority's critical analysis of Italian Fascism can be seen as crucially entangled with its own fight against fascism in Finland too. Could one thus argue that the Italian example still offered a transformative forewarning to all ethnic minorities in Europe to resist fascism and to defend democracy instead? I will analyze articles in newspapers and journals from the 1920s that were published in Swedish in Finland, especially identifying stories showing how the Swedish speaking minority's press reported on the oppression of the German minority at the borderlands to Austria in South Tyrol.¹¹

Finland and the Swedish-Speaking Minority

Finland, a country in northern Europe was for centuries an integral part of the Swedish Kingdom. As a consequence, a distinct Swedish-speaking population was concentrated along the coastal areas in Southern and Western Finland and the Åland Islands. The Napoleonic Wars resulted in the cession of the Eastern half of Sweden to Russia that consequently forged the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland in 1809. A century later the dissolution of the Romanov Empire provided the Grand Duchy with an opportunity to break free. One month after the Bolshevik revolution, in December 1917, Finland declared its independence. In the decades before Finland's sovereignty, social and political turmoil in the Russian Empire, especially in 1904–1905, had resulted in new political privileges. In 1906, all men and women over 24 years of age in Finland gained voting and representation rights. However, the following decade was not characterized by progress, but dominated by an intensifying Russification drive that stalled all democratic and progressive developments. When the First World War commenced, the Grand Duchy of Finland initially remained outside the battles, but in the closing months of the war Finland was ultimately drawn into the conflict between the German Empire and Russia. Parallel to the Finnish declaration of independence in December 1917—followed by a short but extremely violent Finnish Civil War (from January to May 1918)—the new Soviet Russian government insisted on an immediate armi-

11 The newspapers have been consulted and searched through the digital database of the National Library of Finland, digi.nationallibrary.fi.

stice and peace with Germany and the Central Powers. Notably, Imperial Germany's long list of demands included the establishment of independent states in the Polish and Baltic territories that until then had been a part of the Russian Empire. On 3 March 1918, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was finally signed which stipulated that the Bolsheviks withdraw all remaining Russian troops from Finland, ultimately making the new states in the North East a part of the German sphere of influence. A month after Brest-Litovsk, General Rüdiger von der Goltz of Germany's Baltic Sea Division landed in Southern Finland to aid the White side to a fast-track victory in the Finnish Civil War.¹²

While independent Finland as a society was marked by continued class divisions after the Civil War, it was also a state with inherited linguistic divisions. Until 1906, the Swedish-speaking elite had by historical legacy enjoyed a markedly powerful role in Finnish politics, but it was increasingly contested by a Fennomane cultural campaign. The language struggle between the two groups was closely entangled with Finnish nationalism and there was a perceived overrepresentation of Swedish speakers in the business elite, sciences, the arts, and cultural life. The situation was vexing for the advocates of a mono-lingual and mono-cultural Finnish Finland. Still, both Finnish and Swedish speakers were united in their joint struggle against the Russification of Finland, which facilitated crucial moments of collaboration and the joining of forces for the nation-building process in Finland. This cooperation has often been mentioned as a fundamental factor that contributed to the formation of Finland's democratic constitution of 1919 where it was declared that the country had two national languages: Finnish and Swedish. The language legislation approved in 1922 secured the official rights of the Swedish speakers, providing the same rights to both language groups that were interpreted as one and the same nation. In practice this meant the right to use Swedish in communication with all authorities and secured all their cultural and societal needs, such as schools and higher education. The Swedish speaking part of the country's population constituted at

12 The German troops left Helsinki in December 1918, after the collapse of Imperial Germany. See further in Pertti Haapala and Marko Tikka, "Revolution, Civil War, and Terror in Finland in 1918," in *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War*, eds. Robert Gerwarth and John Horne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Tuomas Tepora and Aapo Roselius, eds., *The Finnish Civil War 1918: History, Memory, Legacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

that time 11% of the population.¹³ Linguistically Finnish and Swedish are, however, completely different. While Finnish belongs to the Uralic language group, Swedish is an Indo-European language and a part of the North Germanic branch of the language family.¹⁴

As a background to the “benevolent” treatment of the Swedish-speaking group one should note also the ambition of the League of Nations to secure the rights of all ethnic minorities, especially in relation to the successor states. By 1922–23, the League had agreed on guarantees for minority rights in Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes.¹⁵ The multinational states were founded on the belief that assimilation and toleration of minorities would be guaranteed in accordance with the Wilsonian principles. However, the minorities treaties ended up being all too weak when confronted by increasingly intolerant ethnic majorities, that were often motivated by the desire to consolidate state power and to sacrifice the ideal of democracy in the process.¹⁶ Among the successor states, Finland constituted an exception in this sense as democracy prevailed in the years of crisis in the late 1920s and early 1930s and stability was finally found through social democratic and peasant party alliances that formed the foundation of the later Nordic welfare state model.¹⁷

Finnish democracy was put under extreme pressure by the rise of the far right Finnish Lapua Movement in 1929 that, in the spirit of Mussolini’s followers, organized a March to Helsinki in 1930. Due to the extra-parliamentary pressure brought to bear by the Lapua Movement Finland outlawed communism in 1930. A failed coup d’état by the right-wing radicals followed in 1932 after which the Lapua movement transformed itself into a far right party called the *Patriotic Peoples’ Movement* (Isän-

13 See especially Henrik Meinander, *A History of Finland* (London: Hurst & Company, 2011), 133–35; and Henrik Meinander, *Nationalstaten. Finlands svenskhet 1922–2015, Finlands svenska historia* (Helsingfors: Svenska Litteratursällskapet i Finland, 2016), 9–18.

14 Besides Swedish, recognized minority languages are Saami, Karelian, and Finnish Romani. https://www.kotus.fi/en/on_language/languages_of_finland. On the history of minorities in Finland, see Mats Wickström and Charlotta Wolff, eds., *Mångkulturalitet, migration och minoriteter i Finland under tre sekel* (Helsingfors: Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland, 2016).

15 F. S. Northedge, *The League of Nations: Its Life and Times 1920–1946* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1986), 76.

16 Zara Steiner, *The Lights that Failed: European International History 1919–1933* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 256–260.

17 Nik Brandal, Øivind Bratberg, and Dag Einar Thorsen, eds., *The Nordic Model of Social Democracy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

maallinen Kansanliike, IKL) that had a distinct fascist program and outlook.¹⁸ Although the fascist party never gained power, the Swedish-speaking minority was placed under increasing pressure by the true Finnish radical nationalist sentiment which was entangled with the Finnish fascist movement. The so-called radical Fennomans, also called true Finns, pushed already during the 1920s for a more radical Fennicisation of Finland. Crucially, it was not only limited to gaining linguistic purity within the country's existing borders, but its most radical advocates in the student association *Academic Karelia Society* envisioned the formation of a Greater Finland with substantial territorial gains from Soviet Russia. As described by leading Finland-Swedish historian Henrik Meinander, the divisions between Finnish- and Swedish-speaking groups during the 1920s were partly improved by the remembrance of the many Swedish speakers efforts and sacrifices for the White side during the Finnish Civil War, but as will be shown below the merger of radical nationalism and fascism proved to be a major concern for the Swedish speakers too.¹⁹

During the interwar years, a vibrant Swedish speaking public sphere flourished with a multitude of newspapers and journals that transmitted news in Swedish and debated culture and politics in Swedish in Finland. These publications also took an active part in defending the Swedish language and culture in Finland which, as a consequence, led to the stronger articulation of a Finland-Swedish community. Therefore, both the Finnish radical nationalists and the Swedish-speaking political and cultural elite helped in their own way to transform the Swedish speakers into a more distinctly identifiable minority, as argued by Meinander.²⁰ Already in 1906, representatives of the Swedish speaking group had formed a political party, the *Swedish Peoples' Party* (*Svenska Folkpartiet*, SFP), that strove to represent the Swedish speakers as widely as possible and to defend their right to use Swedish as their mother tongue and to guard and preserve their culture and traditions in Finland. However, despite being a minority population, the Swedish speakers did not perceive themselves as a national minority as defined in many other parts

18 Lauri Karvonen, *From White to Blue-and-Black: Finnish Fascism in the Inter-War Era* (Helsinki: Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters, 1988); Oula Silvennoinen, "Home, Religion, Fatherland'. Movements of the Radical Right in Finland," *Fascism*, no. 4 (2015):134–35.

19 See especially Meinander, *A History of Finland*, 133–35; and Meinander, *Nationalstaten*, 9–18.

20 Meinander, *Nationalstaten*, 23–27.

for Europe, but as an integrated part of one Finnish nation (together with the Finns). In some more ethnically inclined interpretations, the Swedish speakers were called Eastern Swedes or a Germanic minority in Finland. Despite the unusually good position of minorities in Finland, the need to guard and protect their cultural, political, and linguistic interests did not disappear after 1919, but on the contrary needed an increasingly active defense in parliament and public life. Although the SFP had a clear conservative political profile, its main mission during the 1920s was to protect the rights of the Swedish-speaking minority. In parliament they could even compromise with the communists if it came to language policy interests, which resulted in strong expressions of dissent from the Finnish conservative side.²¹

Warnings from the Mountains of South Tyrol

The history of anti-fascism in Finland and the Nordic Countries is a relatively new field,²² while the history of anti-fascism among the Finland-Swedish minority is even less known.²³ While the previous focus in Finland has been on the responses to the Lapua Movement and anti-fascism mobilized around the events of 1930 and later, I will here use the much lesser known example of South Tyrol (Alto Adige)²⁴ during the 1920s that illustrates how the fate of the German minority in North Italy could be used to enhance an anti-fascist minority position in Finland. Significantly, it must be stated that the cultural relations between Finland and Germany were especially strong, which could explain why there was such an emphatic response to the Italian oppression. In comparison, it seems clear that reports about the Italian oppression of the Slovenes at

21 Vesa Vares, Mikko Uola, and Mikko Majander, *Kansanvalta koetuksella, Suomen Eduskunta 100 vuotta* (Helsinki: Edita, 2006), 177.

22 See Kasper Braskén, Matias Kaihoviirta, and Mats Wickström, "Antifascismen i Norden. Ett nytt forskningsfält," *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland*, Vol. 102, no. 1 (2017); and Kasper Braskén, Nigel Copley, and Johan Lundin, eds., *Anti-Fascism in the Nordic Countries: New Perspectives, Comparisons and Transnational Connections*, Routledge Studies in Fascism and the Far Right (London and New York: Routledge, 2019). On Jewish responses, see Pontus Rudberg, *The Swedish Jews and the Holocaust* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

23 A pioneering study in the field was Matias Kaihoviirta and Mats Wickström, "An Anti-Fascist Minority? Swedish-Speaking Finnish Responses to Fascism," in *Anti-Fascism in the Nordic Countries*, eds. Braskén, Copley, and Lundin, 55–71.

24 Anny Schweigkofler, "South Tyrol. Rethinking Ethnolinguistic Vitality," in *German Minorities in Europe: Ethnic Identity and Cultural Belonging*, ed. Stefan Wolff (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000).

the Eastern borderlands gained much less attention and much less sympathy in Finland.

One of the first notes about fascist oppression in South Tyrol came from the liberal weekly *Nya Tidningen*. In an article published on 16 October 1922 on fascism – the movement “all of Europe was talking about”—it noted that, now that the “red menace” had been largely quashed by the Fascists in Italy, the Fascists had shifted focus to reinvigorating Italian nationalism. The author, Axel Grönvik, who later would take over leading positions in the Swedish speaking press in Helsinki, noted that Fascism had now taken the form of a ruthless fight against all things German in the new territories in the north. Although anti-Bolshevism was described here as a healthy strain of fascism, the author argued that it was necessary to get rid of its “blind” hate of the Germans.²⁵ Those conservatives and nationalists who only four years earlier had fought on the White side in the Finnish Civil War had also resorted to extreme violence against the Reds. They were thus in no position to condemn the Italian fascists for doing the same. Hence, many Swedish speaking conservatives applauded Mussolini in the beginning for taking such a firm stance against Bolshevism. This first example directly illustrates how ambiguous the relation with Fascism was in the early 1920s, when the Fascists’ class politics were on the one hand approved, but their nationalities politics on the other hand started to cause serious suspicions and condemnations.

In another example, the economist Axel Gadolin made a rather spectacular suggestion in January 1923 when he advocated something he called “minority fascism,” which strove for collaboration between all Germanic national minorities. Although Gadolin acknowledged that many national minorities had gained independence in the new postwar order, he claimed that, for one particular minority, everything had turned for the worse. This was the Germanic nation, and it was in this category that he also placed the Swedish-speaking minority.²⁶ Gadolin

25 Axel Grönvik, “Fascisterna – Europas risare,” *Nya Tidningen* 1 (16 October 1922).

26 Although Swedish as a language belonged to the North Germanic language group, to speak of the Swedish speaking population as Finland’s Germanics became a highly problematic racialized category during the interwar period. Moreover, the race biological studies made in the 1920s finally concluded that the ‘racial differences’ were non-existent between the Finnish and Swedish populations in Finland. The Swedish speaking minority had therefore to be defined via cultural and linguistic parameters. See further in Markku Mattila, “Det får ej finnas dåliga svenskar i detta land!” Rasbiologi och rasygien som vetenskapliga vapen i språkstridens Finland,’ in *Mångkulturalitet, migration och minoriteter i Finland under tre sekel*, eds. Mats Wickström and Charlotta Wolff (Helsingfors: Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland, 2016), 271–311.

claimed that under five years of independence the Swedish speaking people in Finland had lost more of their influence than under a century of Russian oppression. Gadolin identified two stages in the formation of minority nationalism or small state nationalism. The first was a more healthy work on one's own group, while the latter shaped itself as a need to assert oneself at the expense of others. While observing Italian Fascism, Gadolin had, like Grönvik, been sympathetic at first when it strove to "save" Italy, but then turned repellent when it targeted the German minorities in South Tyrol. The main point was to strive for a "positive nationalism" and Gadolin suggested that all Germanic minorities in Europe, including the Eastern Swedes (aka the Swedish population in Finland), Flems, Balts, and Germans in Romania could start cooperating in the form of a "international Germanic national (minority) fascism." Gadolin even imagined that the Finland-Swedes could take on a leading position in such a community.²⁷ The aforementioned Axel Grönvik was quick to retort in the subsequent issue of the journal that, although the Finland Swedes needed to approach the Germanic minorities in Europe with sympathy and perhaps even study their problems, Gadolin's solution remained outrageous. The question was how it would be useful for the Finland-Swedes to mobilize the support of these dispersed Germanic minorities in foreign lands. The fight for the Swedish speaking minority in Finland could not be established on "shared misery,"²⁸ but had to be constructed in places where Swedes dwelled (including Sweden), in his view. The inclusion of the term fascism in Gadolin's proposal revealed to Grönvik that the suggested community was not meant to be a "discussion club,"²⁹ but a unity for action. Grönvik claimed that to endorse fascism for the minorities problem, was the same as to endorse violent methods. The example from the South Tyrol illustrated this again as the Fascist regime had convinced the majority to oppress a national minority. Grönvik even noted how it was clear that the German fascists (National Socialists) in the Weimar Republic and Austria aimed to root out the minorities, most explicitly expressed through its antisemitism. Cru-

27 C. A. J. Gadolin, "Minoritetsfascism. Ett förslag till samarbete mellan germanska nationella minoriteter", *Studentbladet. Organ för Finlands Svenska Studenter* no. 1 (29 January 1923). On the German minorities, see Wolff, ed., *German Minorities in Europe*. Note that the idea of 'Germanic' and German minorities differed, where the idea of the Nordic-Germanic race was incorporated into Nazi race theory.

28 Axel Grönvik, "Minoritetsfascism," *Studentbladet* no. 2 (12 February 1923)

29 Grönvik, "Minoritetsfascism."

cially Grönvik concluded: “Nowhere has fascism ... had a protective tendency towards minorities.”³⁰ Grönvik’s intervention seems especially important as he noted, early on, that both Italian and German fascisms were targeting minorities as the enemy.

Beginning in early 1926, the Swedish-speaking newspapers were riddled with news about the “Fascist oppression” in South Tyrol.³¹ On the front page of the main Swedish speaking newspaper in Helsinki, *Hufvudstadsbladet*, it was noted on 19 January 1926 that only Italian surnames were henceforth permitted in South Tyrol, and that the Fascist regime was pushing for the Italianization of all family names in the region.³² Later that month it was reported that German had been forbidden in the schools in Trentino.³³ The front page of the regional newspaper, *Nyland*, now with Axel Grönvik as chief editor, devoted major room for a story on Mussolini’s preparations for more violent measures against the Germans in the South Tyrol. It reported that Mussolini had threatened to confiscate all property of Tyrolean Germans who refused to become Italian citizens and Italianize their names. Even more disconcerting were the reports that German newspapers in the region were banned.³⁴

One article of relevance from a minority perspective was entitled “broken promises” and treated the Italianization of the Germans in the South Tyrol. Or as the author explained, it was even forbidden to call it South Tyrol now; one had to call the region Upper Adige (Alto Adige). The Italianization of place names was seen as a direct attack on the minority. Above all, it was underlined that the German minority in the area lived under a constant threat of Fascist aggression, that could be executed without risk of punishment to the persecutors. The major concern was, however, that Italy, after the end of World War One, had made guarantees to respect the German language, culture, and economic interests in South Tyrol. It was in light of these guarantees that the Wilsonian principles had not been implemented in this instance and that the predominantly German area had been handed over to Italy. The Italians had

30 Grönvik, “Minoritetsfascism.”

31 The timing coincided with the heated exchanges between Gustav Stresemann, the German foreign minister, and Mussolini over the German minority rights in South Tyrol, see: Alan Cassels, “Mussolini and German Nationalism, 1922–25,” *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 35, no. 2 (1963): 154–57.

32 “Fascistregimen i Sydyrolen,” *Hufvudstadsbladet*, no. 17 (19 January 1926).

33 “Fascistpolitiken i Södra Tyrolen,” *Hufvudstadsbladet*, no. 25 (27 January 1926).

34 “Mussolini förbereder ny våldspolitik mot tyskarna i Tyrolen,” *Nyland* no. 13 (4 February 1926).

from this perspective a *moral* duty to treat the Germans well. Merely four years after the Versailles peace these promises had been thrown out the window, which of course more generally shattered the belief in the League of Nations as an effective instrument to protect these rights. If this was permitted to occur in Italy, what guarantees were there left to the other minorities in Europe?³⁵

In many reports the interest in minority questions can be interpreted more indirectly, but in other cases this is explicitly stated. For example, one regional newspaper stated on its front page that: “The conditions and treatment of national minorities in different parts of the world are of especial interest for us Swedes in today’s Finland.”³⁶ It polemicized how paradoxical it was that, when it came to the rights of the Swedish-speaking population, the Finns disregarded them as a marginal minority that need not be considered, but when the successes and privileges of the Finns were concerned, then the Swedish speakers suddenly were presented as major obstacles. The newspaper article continued with examples dealing with the fate of South Tyrol under Italian Fascism that, according to the newspaper, was “doing everything in its power to oppress the national minorities.” A direct comparison was made between “Mussolini’s methods in minority questions” and the Finnish politics and lawmaking advanced by the “true Finns” and the Agrarian party: They together form a “national fascism,”³⁷ it was stated, that did not differ much from Italian Fascism. Telling examples from Finland were listed, including the Fennicisation of names, language oppression in various forms, hostility to Swedish schools, the transformation of the universities into exclusively Finnish-language institutions, the unjust discrimination against Swedish talent, hate campaigns in the Finnish press, and an immature jealousy of everything Swedish. Nothing seemed more important than giving more room to the Finn under the sun. The newspaper argued that the general mistreatment of national minorities in Europe should be spotlighted more, especially as states guarantee to foreign observers that all is well, while the most upsetting mistreatments continued behind the scenes on the domestic front.³⁸

35 “Brutna löften,” *Åbo Underrättelser* no. 53 (23 February 1926).

36 Hr. Nagel, “Tidsbetraktelser,” *Syd-Österbotten*, no. 16 (3 March 1926).

37 All quotes from Hr. Nagel, “Tidsbetraktelser,” *Syd-Österbotten*, no. 16 (3 March 1926).

38 Hr. Nagel, “Tidsbetraktelser,” *Syd-Österbotten*, no. 16 (3 March 1926).

The Swedish-speaking social democratic yearbook for 1927 included an extensive article on “Fascism and how to fight it” by the Labor MP Dr. Mikko W. Erich. He had earlier been in parliament as a representative of the National Coalition Party, a conservative party, but turned to social democracy during the mid-1920s. He too stressed the urgency of recognizing fascism as a threat on an international scale. While communism did not represent a significant threat in Europe any longer, according to Erich, the threat of fascism was identified as much more tangible. While Erich dismissed the threat of fascism in the Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark) he observed how it had inspired right-wing military dictatorships in Spain and Hungary, adding Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Portugal to the group of countries moving toward fascism. For Finland, Erich noted how the Social Democratic press in Finland had early on identified the spread of fascist ideas in the Civil Guards (Suojeluskunta) and the military. Although the article does not write about the ethnic minorities in Italy, a reproduction of an important caricature illustrates how Mussolini was dominating a stereotypical German from South Tyrol: “As known,” the caption read, “Mussolini has enforced a ruthless oppression of the German nationality in northern Italy.”³⁹ Again, although the parallel to the situation in Finland was not directly drawn, it was most likely meaningful for representatives of another minority who could read about it and thereby gain an understanding of Fascism’s treatment of minorities not only as an Italian phenomenon, but internationally. The example from the Social Democrats illustrates that, although their major concern was the Fascist assault on the Marxist working class, they too acknowledged the suppression of minority rights which might have provided an additional reason to fight fascism among the Swedish-speaking working class in Finland.

For Swedish-speaking conservatives in Finland, the National Coalition Party’s turn to a more open true Finnish sentiment in the late 1920s meant that the old fronts of 1918 were being partly renegotiated. After ten years of independence the conservative party had turned from moderation to an intolerant position vis-à-vis the Swedish minority and many leading true Finns had gained central positions within the party.⁴⁰ Such fears were openly confronted in *Kotka Nyheter* in June 1927. It was

39 Mikko W. Erich, “Fascismen och dess bekämpande,” in *Folkkalendern 1927* (Helsingfors: Finlands Socialdemokratiska Partibyrås Förlag, 1926), 64–71.

40 Meinander, *Nationalstaten*, 42–43.

stated that they, as Swedish speakers, feared that a true Finnish drive would lead to an ultranationalist victory and the formation of a true Finnish dictatorship or nationalist fascism in Finland. The newspaper assessed that there was a veritable risk that such right wing forces would come to power and, if that happened, the first blow would be aimed against everything Swedish in Finland. Alarmingly, the newspaper stated that the danger was grave and that the Swedish speakers could not stand idle: “A people like ours,” it declared, “could be wiped out.” Such explicit comparisons between Fascist Italy’s active oppression of the German minority in South Tyrol and the feared undoing of the Swedish speaking minority in a future fascist Finland was used to mobilize unity within the Swedish speaking group.⁴¹ This striking example provides direct proof that the fascist oppression of one minority could give rise to an anti-fascist consciousness in another.

In another piece titled “Between Brenner and Salurn,” the state of the German minority in South Tyrol was discussed in more detail, throwing important light on the Fascist policy vis-à-vis minorities. The article presented arguments from both sides, allowing Fascist Italy’s arguments about South Tyrol first, followed by responses articulated by the Germans in South Tyrol themselves. Taking Mussolini’s talking points from his speech in parliament on 6 January 1926, the article reported how Mussolini had been utterly dismayed by all allegations about the Fascist regime’s brutal acts in South Tyrol. This was, according to him, a distortion as the Fascists were merely pursuing an Italianization policy. “Mussolini perceived the people in South Tyrol as Italian citizens and treated them accordingly.”⁴² If this was not put into effect, then the regime would have a state within the state—which was an unbearable solution. The aim was to make the area Italian in its geography and in its historical development. The Germans in the area thus did not constitute a national minority from the Italian perspective, but more of an ethnic relic. The by-then defunct state of Austria-Hungary was identified as the main culprit that had caused the current situation, according to the Fascists, who alleged that the Dual Monarchy had ruthlessly Germanized South Tyrol and Trentino in the late 19th century. Now, if left as a self-governing entity, the main fear was that the people would ac-

41 “Den brutna fronten,” *Kotka Nyheter*, no. 46 (21 June 1927).

42 Harald Tapenius, “Mellan Brenner och Salurn”, *Finsk Tidskrift*, no. 6 (December 1928), 396.

tively pursue reunification with Austria. Although these views were presented, the author's sympathies clearly lay with the German minority. While the perspectives from the Fascist side were drawn from official speeches, the report on the German minority's arguments were based on the author's personal impressions after a visit in the area. For him it was clear that "the German people, the German tongue and German hearts" extended all the way to Salurn (Salorno), and that it could never be separated by Italian fascists. The memory of Andreas Hofer (1767–1810) was here also brought up as a German (Austrian/Tyrolean) hero who had raised a peasant army to inflict a defeat on the Napoleonic Army when it invaded these German speaking lands.⁴³

In interviews with locals in South Tyrol the author reported how they, in fact, had no wish to abandon their German heritage and become Italian. He claimed that they had accepted the peace terms on the condition that Wilson's principles were to be implemented. Instead, they had been betrayed and handed over "like cattle"⁴⁴ to Italy. In examples relevant to the Swedish-speaking minority, the locals in Tyrol were devastated that Italy had not honored its pledges to sustain German as a school language and to permit German to be used in the courts and public administration. These promises had been kept during the first years after the war, "but when fascism came to power, life became nearly unbearable for us,"⁴⁵ the Germans exclaimed. Local self-government was annulled, being replaced by Italian officials appointed by the Italian government. With concern he reported that, even if the Italian judges in the courts were decent men, how could they possibly function when they did not understand German and the people did not understand Italian? The worst aspect of it all was identified as the oppression of the German language. German was not permitted in public life and only one German-language newspaper was preserved and it was made to serve as the mouthpiece of the Fascists and the anti-German hate. Even so, the story concluded with a hopeful belief in the strength of the German people in South Tyrol to bide their time and, while Fascism might be temporary, their will to reunite with the Germans in the north was eternal. Just as the Poles never

43 Tapenius, "Mellan Brenner och Salurn," 395–96.

44 Tapenius, "Mellan Brenner och Salurn," 399.

45 Tapenius, "Mellan Brenner och Salurn," 400.

became Russian or German, so it was believed that the people of South Tyrol never would become Italian.⁴⁶

In a final example, the newspaper *Svenska Pressen* discussed the situation in South Tyrol in October 1929 that, in a significant way, bore comparison to the situation of minority rights in Finland. The author of the piece noted that it was with a certain sense of hesitance that a Swedish newspaper in Finland took notice of the minority oppression taking place in Europe. Even the reporting of ruthless oppression could in fact be used against the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland. The act could provide the Finns with the opportunity to argue that the Swedish speakers were in fact well off and that other national minorities had to cope with much worse circumstances. This was, of course, deemed a highly unjust perspective, as large-scale oppression in foreign lands could not be used to justify oppression on a smaller scale in Finland. The case of the South Tyrol was still used as an opportunity to ridicule the fascists. Paraphrasing the Swedish author Per Hallström, *Svenska Pressen* defined the fascists as “brave heroes who first appeared – when the war was over.” Now, when it came to oppressing the national minorities, the Fascists wanted to project the appearance of being brave and strong. The latest Italianization measures in South Tyrol were deemed “hysterical” by the author, and were even compared to violating a people’s soul. The author deemed that there was a certain comfort in the fact that any regime compelled to execute such oppressive orders, revealed at the same time its inherent weakness. For the sake of human justice, the author hoped that the Germans of Tyrol had the national resilience to survive and to preserve their culture. Despite the intensifying cultural and political oppression, there was a sense of hope that Europe understood that it had a moral duty to step in to protect this minority and even remove Mussolini from office or at least limit him to oppressing his own people.⁴⁷

Sadly, such hopes were illusory and Europe did not save South Tyrol. Contrary to the logic of pan-Germanism, South Tyrol never became a major point of conflict between Fascist Italy and the rising Nazi movement in Germany either. Somewhat paradoxically, Hitler was one of the few Germans who in 1927–1928 did not complain over Italy’s oppression of the German minority in South Tyrol. Hitler envisioned instead a fu-

46 Tapenius, “Mellan Brenner och Salurn.”

47 “I veckans marginal,” *Svenska Pressen*, no. 243 (19 October 1929).

ture alliance between Germany and Italy and the first stepping stone in the process was the acceptance of Italy's hegemonic rule over South Tyrol.⁴⁸ For Austria, the annexation of South Tyrol remained a major point of contestation until 1928, when the Austrian chancellor declared that Italian policy in South Tyrol was now perceived as Italy's internal affair. Here again, Austria's foreign policy needs trumped the interest of the protection of the German minority. The process was completed by a friendship treaty between Austria and Italy in 1930. The Swedish-speaking minority in Finland did its part to raise awareness about the oppression of the German minority, but the main interest for the Swedish public was perhaps to use this dire warning from the mountains of South Tyrol for domestic purposes and for needs to consolidate the Swedish speakers behind the *Swedish People's Party*. By showing that the threat posed by the radical true Finns together with Finnish fascist politics was of major concern for the very survival of Swedish culture and society in Finland, the Swedish-speaking press could effectively motivate an anti-fascist minority position. For these purposes, South Tyrol became an utterly useful but later overlooked international example.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that, although the rise of Fascism in Italy was due to its anti-communist credentials, credentials, initially applauded initially applauded by many conservative Swedish speakers in Finland who had stood on the White side in the Finnish Civil War, the example of South Tyrol quickly revealed that the Fascist revolution was a two-step program. First it targeted communism, later it attacked the national minorities. This crucial transnational lesson for the Swedish speaking public was explicitly brought forward in the hundreds of press reports about the Fascist oppression of the Germans in South Tyrol. When then the fascist Lapua Movement gained momentum in 1929 it did so in a very similar pattern. While the first mobilization was implemented with anti-communist slogans and rhetoric that engaged many Swedish speakers too, several of the main leaders of the *Swedish People's Party* strove to show that the Lapua Movement was in dangerous ways inspired by Italian Fascism and thus,

48 R. J. B. Bosworth, *Mussolini*, 2 ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 216-17.

after the anti-communist stage, was most likely turning its assault against the Swedish speaking minority in Finland. One of the party's main leaders, Ernst von Born, noted in 1930 that, although anti-communism was, at the time, the main program of the Lapua Movement, it would not last long until it would form a direct threat to everything Swedish in Finland and dismantle the Swedish speaking minority's rights and interests.⁴⁹ The chapter has thus shown that the example of South Tyrol played a perhaps surprisingly meaningful role for the consolidation of an anti-Fascist minority position in Finland and likewise showed how the rise of fascism would lead to the betrayal of the promises and guarantees previously secured under more propitious circumstances.

49 Ernst von Born, *Levnadsminnen* (Helsingfors: Söderströms, 1954), 100–102.