

Trentino

By [Nicola Fontana](#) and [Mirko Saltori](#)

Summary

Trentino is an Italian-speaking region which was the southernmost part of the Tyrol. With Italy's entry into the war, it found itself in the front area. After the war it was annexed to the Kingdom of Italy.

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Introduction

The region of Trentino, today a province of the Italian Republic, was the southernmost part of Tyrol in the 19th century, on the south-western border of the [Austro-Hungarian Empire](#).¹ After the lands of Lombardy-Venetia were ceded to the Kingdom of Italy in 1866, Trentino became a border area wedged into Italian territory.

From an administrative perspective, there was no area identified as "Trentino": such an area coincided with the Italian-speaking part of South Tyrol, south of the Brenner Pass. It was, therefore, part of the *Land Tirol* and Innsbruck was its capital. Innsbruck was also the seat of the provincial diet, to which, in 1914, [Alcide Degasperi \(1881-1954\)](#) and [Cesare Battisti \(1875-1916\)](#) were elected.

Before World War One

On the eve of the First World War, the population of Trentino was 377,039. The economic structure was mainly agro-forestry-pastoral. There were manufacturing centres for tobacco processing, but in general there was no significant industry. Against this background, the crisis of the late 19th century triggered substantial migration, both seasonal and permanent. Greater rationalisation in agriculture was introduced at the end of the century. The same period also saw the development of the tourism industry, and the implementation of

consumer and credit cooperation, driven primarily by the Catholic movement. In general, the beginning of the new century saw an improvement in the population's living conditions.

A good level of literacy was achieved by state education reforms. The Catholic [Church](#) exerted a profound influence on the people of Trentino, especially in the valleys, by means of priests, whose presence on the territory was extensive.

The late 19th century saw the development of the press and the formation of political movements (first liberal, then socialist and Catholic) as well as widespread associationism. The political struggle was invigorated in particular by an aspect of the debate regarding the [nationalities question](#). The failure of initiatives to achieve self-government was among the factors which intensified public debate and created the conditions for widespread [irredentism](#) among the urban middle class and students, in an area densely populated with Italian-speakers. Such a movement viewed the population of the valleys as almost entirely extraneous, as their largely traditional Catholic outlook never went beyond the "little homeland", not so much tied to the idea of the Austrian state but rather the father figure of [Francis Joseph I, Emperor of Austria-Hungary \(1830-1916\)](#).

World War One

With the order of general mobilisation on 31 July 1914, military-aged men from Trentino were enrolled as *Kaiserjäger* and *Landeschützen* and sent to the front, mainly in Galicia. Many of them were taken [prisoner](#) by the Russians. Most returned to [Italy](#), after travels that took them to [China](#) or the [USA](#). 55,000 men from Trentino enlisted during the war.

At the same time, the first [food supply](#) problems began, while the available human resources were employed in military work. With Italy's declaration of war against the Austro-Hungarian Empire on 23 May 1915, Trentino found itself in the middle of [military operations](#). This brought civilian life to a standstill, while the towns of Trento, Rovereto and Riva del Garda were transformed into military strongholds.

Almost 700 men from Trentino volunteered with the Italian army. Among them was the socialist leader Cesare Battisti. The first operations divided the region into two parts: one under Austrian rule, and the southernmost area under Italian rule. The people living near the front were evacuated. The [refugees](#), around 110,000 in number, ended up either in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (e.g. Bohemia) or in Italy. Part of the population was interned or confined in camps for political reasons in both Austria and Italy. The Bishop of Trento, [Celestino Endrici \(1866-1940\)](#), was confined to Heiligenkreuz. This move cooled the loyalist sentiments of many Catholics from Trentino, already tested by the prolongation of the war and the activity of military courts.

Trentino became a war zone, especially in the south-east where the *Strafexpedition* was unleashed in the spring of 1916. Battisti was later captured there and executed in Trento on 12 July 1916. [Mountain warfare](#) became characteristic of this area. Supply problems continued and worsened due to the lack of a male workforce, despite the presence of Russian and Serb prisoners in the countryside, who were also used for military construction.

Conditions in Trentino and the plight of its refugees and prisoners were addressed with the reopening of [parliament](#) in 1917, particularly through the work of Catholic deputies. Trentino was eventually occupied by Italian troops on 3 November 1918, and formally annexed to the Kingdom of Italy on 26 September 1920. The war caused the deaths of 11,000 soldiers from Trentino, the destruction of entire villages on the frontline, and a tear in the social fabric that would prove difficult to repair.

Nicola Fontana, Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra

Mirko Saltori, Museo storico del Trentino

Notes

1. The region was also called “Welschtirol” by the German-speaking people; this term assumed, with time, negative acceptance. ↑

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External Links

- [Annunziata, Alfredo: Cesare Battisti: il martire di Trento, Naples 1918 \(The Central National Library of Florence\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Associazione Nazionale Trento Trieste: Cittadini! 1918 \(1418 - Documenti e immagini della grande Guerra\) \(Image\)](#)
- [Associazione Nazionale Trento Trieste: Direttive dell'associazione, leaflet, 26 March 1917 \(1418 - Documenti e immagini della grande Guerra\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Lorenzoni, Giovanni: Cesare Battisti and the Trentino, New York 1919 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Spinney, Laura: Melting glaciers in northern Italy reveal corpses of WW1 soldiers, 13 January 2014 \(World Web News\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Wilcox, Vanda: Mountain warfare in the Italian theatre of war \(British Library\) \(Article\)](#)

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Key Person(s)

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