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1 Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in studying immigration and emigration, both academically and publicly. The interdisciplinary field of migration studies has gained popularity, not just because of the increased movement of people worldwide due to war, environmental changes and catastrophes, but also as a result of globalization, which has facilitated the movement of humans, goods, technology, and information. However, despite this heightened attention to migration studies, it is important to note that within historical research, return migration or circular migration were neglected for a long time. Even in contemporary textbooks providing a global perspective on historical migration movements, this aspect of migration history has either received minimal coverage or been entirely omitted.[1] However, it must also be emphasised that since the 1990s, as the literary overview by Sarah Oberbichler and Eva Pfanzelter in chapter 2 shows, a growing amount of literature has devoted itself to the topic of return. Nonetheless, there is still much research to be done.

To contribute to filling this research gap with an in-depth analysis of a regional circular migration movement, the transnational and interdisciplinary project *ReMIGRA: Return Migration as an Interdisciplinary Research Area using the Example of the South Tyrolean "Return Option"*[2] (2020–2023), worked on by historians both at the University of Innsbruck in Austria and the Free University of Bolzano/Bozen in Italy, was designed. The ReMIGRA project aimed to improve the understanding of the complexity of return migration by digitizing, analyzing, and linking a wide range of administrative migration sources that had not previously been used for research. To put their methods and findings in context, in 2022, the ReMIGRA-team invited international experts to share their research and knowledge during a conference held in Innsbruck. This volume brings together the contributions of several conference participants with the aim of emphasizing the

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1 See, for example, Hein de Haas, Stephen Castles, and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, Sixth edition, reprinted by Bloomsbury Academic (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022); Jochen Oltmer, *Globale Migration Geschichte und Gegenwart* (C.H. Beck, 2012); Albert Kraler, "Zur Einführung: Migration und Globalgeschichte," in *Migrationen: globale Entwicklungen seit 1850*, ed. Albert Kraler et al., Globalgeschichte und Entwicklungspolitik 6 (Wien: Mandelbaum, 2007), 10–29; Heinz Faßmann, "Europäische Migration im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert," in *Migrationen: globale Entwicklungen seit 1850*, ed. Albert Kraler et al., Globalgeschichte und Entwicklungspolitik 6 (Wien: Mandelbaum, 2007), 32–54.
2 ReMIGRA Homepage, accessed September 11, 2023, https://www.uibk.ac.at/zeitgeschichte/remigra/index.html.de.

complexity and non-linearity of historical migration processes influenced by a range of personal, political, and social dynamics and reflecting on methodological possibilities for return migration research. The contributions in this volume therefore represent a significant step in expanding literature on historical return migration processes.

Being structured in three parts, **Digital Historical Remigration Studies** (part I), **Returnees, National Policies, and Individual Trauma** (part II), and **Socioeconomic, Cultural and Political Aspects of Return to Rural Areas After WWII** (part III), the volume consolidates as well as contextualizes central findings from the ReMIGRA project: Chapters 3, 5, 9, 13, and 14, which came out of the project, show how the South Tyrolean example fits into and adds to the research landscape on return migration, while the other chapters give an insight into examples of return migration, primarily focused on south/south-eastern twentieth-century Europe. These include migration in and out of Luxembourg (chapter 4), Italians returning to Europe from Italy's former African colonies (chapters 7 and 8), return migration to Sicily (chapter 10) and the Aosta Valley (chapter 11), return migration to Serbia (chapter 12), and return migration from the United States to Italy and Austria (chapter 6). The chapters, each focusing on different cases or perspectives of historical return migration movements, are grounded in statistical analysis, surveys, linguistic investigations, oral history, historical cartography, and network analysis and thus combine a wide range of quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Together, the contributions shed light on the close connection between power dynamics (mutual economic dependence, national interests, colonialist oppression and discrimination as well as border conflicts) and migration. While return migration, especially in the aftermath of World War II, was often highly regulated, entangled in conflicts of control, or supported for political reasons (see chapters 7, 8, 11, and 13), the migration process itself was often traumatic for the returnees as well as deeply shaped by economic aspects, the planning abilities and social connections of individuals (as explored in chapters 6, 9, and 10), along with the intricate dynamics of migration spaces (as shown in chapters 11 and 14). The contributions also show that return migration, especially in rural areas, had an impact on local economies, social structures, and even democracy (see chapters 10 and 12).

Finally, the volume invites to reflect on increasing data collections and the possibilities for digital research on return migration (see chapters 3, 4, and 5). The ReMIGRA project with the example of the South Tyrolean *Return Option* sought to raise awareness regarding the potential of migration data, and underscores the need for continued research and examination of the return migration phenomenon.

South Tyrol as an Example of Historical European Return Migration

The frame of this volume is the South Tyrolean *Option* and *Return Option* movement that took place between 1939 and (roughly) 1955. It is a migration and return migration movement that bears the signs of fascism, national socialism, and democratization, with the issues of going away and coming back containing voluntary and involuntary elements, and being both organized and unorganized.

The South Tyrolean *Return Option* and migration following World War II serves as a noteworthy instance of migration characterized by a nuanced interplay between voluntary and involuntary factors, alongside a structured and coordinated repatriation process. When annexing the South Tyrol after the Treaty of Saint Germain in 1919, Italy not only obtained more territory but, by moving its northern boundary to the main Alpine ridge, it also acquired a mostly German-speaking population. The inhabitants of the region, now renamed the Province of Bolzano, had been part of the Habsburg crown land Tyrol and resented their incorporation into the Italian state. After the fascists' rise to power in 1922, the Germanophone inhabitants were subjected to forced Italianization, a ban of the German culture and language, an influx of Italian laborers from southern areas, and increasing economic and political oppression. Despite the people's limited possibilities to counteract the fascist policies, the "South Tyrol question" remained a stumbling block between Italy and Austria during the 1920s and between Italy and Nazi Germany during the 1930s.

The two dictators, Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, therefore aimed at finding a permanent solution for the problem. As a result, in June 1939, the so-called *Optionsabkommen* (*Option* agreement) was announced: the German-speaking inhabitants of South Tyrol would be able to "opt" for an emigration to the German Reich and thus become German citizens or they could "opt" to stay in Italy and consequently accept the Italian language and culture. The "voluntariness" of the subsequent migration movement alone would later produce a flood of academic research and publications.[3] After months of bitter debate, around 86 percent of the eligible voters opted to move north of the Brenner Pass. It remains unclear how many people this concerned, with the only indication of the population residing in the Province of Bolzano in the 1930s provided by the census of 1936 – a census conducted in a fascist state with deliberate political intentions and limited

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3 Institut für Zeitgeschichte Innsbruck, "Literaturverzeichnis Option und Erinnerung," accessed April 14, 2023, http://www.optionunderinnerung.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Literaturliste-Option-und-Erinnerung.pdf.

methods of counting, which states a figure of 277,720 for the people living within the existing boundaries of the province.[4] There is, however, no indication of the language the people spoke. A reconstruction of historical statistical census data by the South Tyrolean statistical institute ASTAT from 2001 concluded that in 1910 – before the region's affiliation with Italy – 89 % of the population declared to use German as their colloquial language, 3–4 % to use Italian, and 4 % to use Ladin. By 1961, the numbers had changed significantly: 61 % used German, 34 % Italian and 3 % Ladin as their spoken language.[5] The expatriation of *Optants* (the people who had declared a desire to move to the Third Reich) began during the war in 1940 but slowed down considerably when war efforts were reinforced in the following years. After the fall of Mussolini's regime and Italy's change of sides in the war in 1943, the *Option* (as the expatriation came to be called) was stopped. At that point, around 75,000 people had already left their homeland to find an uncertain future in the German Reich – mostly in the neighboring regions of the former Austrian Tyrol, Vorarlberg, Salzburg, and Carinthia.[6]

After the war in 1945, the Province of Bolzano remained part of Italy although Austria brought forth a strong plea to the Allies to reincorporate the southern part of the Tyrol. The situation for the inhabitants of South Tyrol at this point was almost dramatic; all those who had opted for the German Reich were stateless, with the Italian government treating them as foreigners without civil rights and political representation.[7] Only the *Dableiber* (Remainers – those who had declared a desire to remain in Italy) and the *Non-Optants* (those who had refrained from opting at all) possessed Italian citizenship. It took arduous and lengthy negotiations until the *Optantendekret*, the law for the "Revision of the Options of the South Tyroleans" of February 2, 1948, reversed the *Option* agreement and created the legal basis for reassumption of the Italian citizenship for the *Optants*. The situation was more complex for those who had moved abroad; already during World War II, some South Tyroleans occasionally returned to their homeland, but their number was limited. Immediately after the end of the war, the emigrants faced an uncertain future; should they, who had now become stateless, go back to

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4 "Elenco dei comuni del Regno e loro popolazione residente al 21 aprile 1936," accessed March 3, 2024. https://ebiblio.istat.it/digibib/Censimenti%20popolazione/censpop1936/IST0005666Elencocomu niRegnoepopres21Apr936.pdf, 29.

5 "Südtirols Bevölkerung – Gestern, Heute, Morgen – Von 1936 bis 2010. Quadro Demografico Della Provincia Di Bolzano – Dal 1936 Al 2010" (Demographic Framework of the Province of Bolzano: from 1936 to 2010), (Bozen, 2001), 42–43.

6 Ibid.

7 Stefan Lechner, and Helmut Alexander, "Die Rücksiedlung," in Heimatlos: Die Umsiedlung der Südtiroler, ed. Helmut Alexander, Stefan Lechner, and Adolf Leidlmair (Wien: Deuticke, 1993), 181–273, 191.

their homeland, or should they try to strengthen their foothold in their country of immigration? In the first few days after the end of the war in May 1945, those who made up their minds quickly had the opportunity to illegally cross the newly re-inforcing borders between the occupying powers and find their way back to the Province of Bolzano via the Brenner or the Reschen Pass. After a couple of days, this illegal transition was only possible via the mountains, e.g., via the old smuggler and cattle trails in the Ziller Valley, or together with Italian returnees on resettlement trains.[8] Only after 1948 could those who had moved abroad apply for the reacquisition or retention of Italian citizenship and eventually move back to their country of birth.

The *Optantendekret* distinguished between three groups of *Optants*. First was the so-called "simple *Optants*," those who had opted for the German Reich, but never received German citizenship. This group had the possibility to revoke the *Option* and thus retain Italian citizenship (Art. 1). Second were the *Optants* who had acquired German citizenship, but never emigrated, who were able to revoke the *Option* and thus renounce their German citizenship to regain Italian citizenship (Art. 2). Third were *Optants* who had acquired German citizenship and emigrated from South Tyrol; whether they had returned to Italy or not, they were able to request the re-acquisition of Italian citizenship. The application for re-acquisition of Italian citizenship had to include the declaration of revocation of the *Option* and the surrender of German citizenship (Art. 11), however, those who had temporarily resided abroad for reasons of study, business, or military did not fall into this category (Art. 15).[9]

The return, however, was denied if the applicant had been a member of the SS, the Gestapo, the SD, or the SOD (the *Südtiroler Ordnungsdienst* was the South Tyrolean military police installed after 1943). The same applied if they had held a major position at the offices organizing the *Option* resettlement programme, the ADERSt (*Amtliche Deutsche Ein- und Rückwandererstelle*, Official German Immigration and Repatriation Office) or the ADO (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Optanten für Deutschland*, Working Group of *Optants* for Germany), or if someone had been convicted of war crimes. Also excluded were those who had demonstrated explicit "Nazi partiality" when making propaganda for the *Option*. This, of course, was a very vague phrasing, which allowed for subjective decisions and personal

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8 For the situation at the end of the war: Eva Pfanzelter, *Südtirol unterm Sternenbanner. Die amerikanische Besatzung Mai–Juni 1945* (Bozen: Edition Reatia, 2005).

9 Legislative decree of February 2, 1948, no. 23 – Revisione delle opzioni degli alto atesini (Review of Alto Adige Options), accessed March 3, 2024, www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1948/02/05/048U0023/sg.

judgments.[10] The number of those who were finally allowed, and still wished, to return is still unknown today, with historian Stefan Lechner estimating that about one third of the 75,000 emigrants returned to the Province of Bolzano after 1948.[11] If they came back, many returnees faced various difficulties and uncertainties, as it was not clear whether they would find jobs and housing and whether integration in their former homesteads would succeed.[12] The question of capital transfer also remained an open one; simultaneously, those who decided to stay in Austria and Germany were often faced with no less urgent problems. Here, too, the question of citizenship remained open for debate until the late 1940s and it was not clear until then whether the re-settlers would remain on an equal footing with Austrian citizens because by then they had a legal opportunity to return to Italy.[13]

The studies of the *Return Option* that are being interwoven with comparable studies in this volume here show striking similarities but also differences to other return migration movements.

Part I: Digital Historical Remigration Studies

Part I of this volume gives insights on how the advent of digitization has facilitated the gathering and analysis of extensive archival data sourced from diverse repositories and nations. Through case studies on the South Tyrolean *Option* and *Return Option* and remigration to Luxembourg, it will be demonstrated how the digitization enhanced the feasibility of investigating historically under-documented and under-researched phenomena, such as return migration, through more accessible archive holdings. Both cases demonstrate how the digitization, linking, and matching of previously "invisible" cultural heritage across borders and languages helps to understand the complexity and socio-economic dynamics of return migration movements as well as to reveal return migration practices that were not documented as such in the past.

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10 Legislative decree of 2 February 1948, no. 23 – Revisione delle opzioni degli alto atesini (Review of Alto Adige Options), accessed March 3, 2024, www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1948/02/05/048U0023/sg.

11 Stefan Lechner, "Alles retour. Rückoption und Rücksiedlung nach 1945," in *Das 20. Jahrhundert in Südtirol: 1940 –1959*, ed. Gottfried Solderer and Helmut Alexander (Bozen: Ed. Raetia, 2001), 76–87.

12 See Ivan Stecher's contribution in this volume.

13 Lechner and Alexander, "Die Rücksiedlung," 250–259.

Part I starts with comprehensive insights into the impact of the digital world on regional migration and return migration research by Eva Pfanzelter (chapter 3). Pfanzelter highlights the value of regional projects within the field of *Digital Historical Migration Studies (DHMS)* and their potential to contribute to a de-nationalized migration history. Using the case study of the South Tyrolean *Option* and *Return Option*, she shows how a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative analyses can help to deal with fragmented archival material and enhance our understanding of (re-)migration history. The fourth chapter by Machteld Venken and David Jaquet, who analyzed their recently created Nodegoat database of information on migrants in Luxembourg from the perspective of return, illustrates the potential of digital databases and analytical techniques to uncover hidden aspects of historical migration. Venken and Jaquet further provide digital hermeneutical reflections within the framework of examining the historical remigration practices of foreigners to Luxembourg. In doing so, they discuss the need for flexibility in research methods, emphasizing that as research questions evolve, new data searches, tools, dataset adaptations, and interpretations become necessary. They also reflect on the digital workflow they employed to address a phenomenon not prominently reported in historical records and show how network and spatial analysis can shed light on the circularity of migration movements. Part 1 concludes with Valerio Larcher's contribution (chapter 5) on the visualization of the movements of returnees and spatial networks via interactive maps. Larcher's chapter highlights the potential of using GIS-based technology to analyze and depict return migration, focusing on the South Tyrolean *Option* and *Return Option* between 1940 and 1952.

Part II: Returnees, National Policies, and Individual Trauma

The essays in part II of this volume delve into the policy approaches, conflicts of control, and debates of both sending and receiving countries, which revolve around managing, supporting, or controlling return migration in the context of decolonization, organized as well as voluntary return. Together the chapters show how states negotiate return migration in political debates and the media and how migrants themselves reflect on their return. Migration not only makes people "foreigners" in their new home but often also estranges them from their own homeland, while the homeland also becomes foreign to them. Return migrants challenge the conventional notions of social belonging, as they find themselves situated somewhere between being "newcomers" and "natives." The return

process proves to be challenging due to the discrepancy between what migrants have become during their migration and what they were before their migration.

In chapter 6, Sarah Oberbichler and Lorella Viola, by looking at both the perception of migration in the sending countries (Austria and Italy) and of the migrants themselves (in the United States), give insight into the interplay of national debates and the individual trauma of people who had moved overseas. Oberbichler and Viola use national and immigrant newspapers (1850–1950) to disclose aspects such as cultural identity, integration, and the challenges of dealing with different social and cultural contexts. They further show that the perception of return migration was deeply intertwined with economic and political aspects, sometimes connected with discussions of reintegrating into the home country or the return to the country of immigration (circular migration). National policies and conflicts of control have further especially played an important role in processes of decolonization.

Alessandro Pes' chapter (chapter 7) analyzes political debates on the return of Italian settlers to the former colonies, returnees who still had property and work there, and reflects on how, starting in 1946, labor emerged as the dominant trait in the institutional reconstruction of the Italian colonial past. This shows how the narratives were accompanied by an interpretation of Italian colonialism as a migratory movement of proletarians, different from that of other European colonial powers. Not only the narratives but also the process of decolonization and the return of settlers differentiated Italy from other colonial powers, especially through the length of the movement, as Emanuele Ertola shows in chapter 8. Italy did not face a single mass exodus but many stages of remigration over 30 years, however, Erola also highlights the similarities in the current international debate on settler return. For example, returnees in Europe shared the difficulties and trauma of uprooting.

Although the chapters in part II reflect on a mixture of forced and voluntary migration, the decision-making processes at the individual level are far more complex than the classic distinction between voluntary and forced migration would allow, as also Ivan Stecher was able to show in Chapter 9. On the basis of 25 interviews conducted with South Tyrolean *Optants* Stecher examines in detail the nuanced distinctions within the decision-making processes and at the same time discusses the essential characteristics of the reintegration of returnees. In particular, he emphasizes the role of time, alongside factors such as social networks, jobs, accommodation, gender, and age in the decision-making process of returnees.

Part III: Socioeconomic, Cultural, and Political Aspects of Return to Rural Areas After WWII

The last part of this volume highlights the importance of situating research on return migration within a broader framework that encompasses various socio-economic, cultural, and political factors of the country of return. Those factors-significantly influence whether migrants decide to return to their home countries and the extent to which they can serve as agents of change upon their return. Part III of this volume includes five chapters on return migration to rural areas after World War II (Sicily, Aosta Valley, Serbia, and South Tyrol) that shed light on how both the motivations behind returning to rural areas post-World War II and the subsequent impact of returnees on these regions are intricately linked to the prevailing conditions within the region of return.

The first chapter of part III, chapter 10, by Francesca Frisone, discloses newly discovered archive materials collected between 1964 and 1965, containing a representative survey on Sicilian emigrants who returned from the Federal German Republic to Italy and those who remained abroad. This survey set out to investigate whether these returning emigrants acted as catalysts for change in three rural villages near Enna. Frisone interprets and contextualizes the survey, while highlighting the importance of time and space when analyzing the impact of return migration. Alessandro Celi (chapter 11), on the other hand, analyzes interviews with returnees from the Aosta Valley, collected by a workgroup formed by the government of the Valle d'Aosta Autonomous Region, and identifies five key aspects of why people return. Celi further investigates the role of associations and politics for the return to the Aosta Valley and concludes that the real driving force for return was the dialogue between migrants, populations, and politicians. Milovanović Miloš further shows in chapter 12 how returning migrants can transform the economy, society, and politics of a country. Using the case of Serbia, Miloš concludes that a higher share of returnees from abroad can be associated with a decrease in infant mortality and the unemployment rate, while having a positive effect on both public investments per capita and educational level at the municipal level. In addition, the consequences of higher turnouts were greater competitiveness in the elections and a tendency for victory of the opposition party's candidate.

Using the case of the South Tyrolean *Return Option* once more, Verena Hechenblaikner and Katia Pedevilla show in chapter 13 what difficulties were involved in the organized return migration of South Tyrolean *Optants* to Italy after the World War II. Closed borders between Italy and Austria, and the slow implementation of the resettlement assistance due to different viewpoints between the

Italian and Austrian governments, led to high numbers of illegal returns. On the other hand, the example on South Tyrol also shows how, in the difficult situation after World War II, resettlement assistance successfully integrated returnees.

In the last chapter of this volume, chapter 14, Giada Noto investigates reasons for "non-return". Using the case of the Kanaltal (1930–1950), where statistical data shows that the majority of the people who left their home in the context of the *Option* agreement in 1939 did not return to their home villages, Noto shows how a series of overlapping events in the country of return were hindering return migration. The Kanaltal changed through intensive Italianization, with the economic conditions after World War II worsening and the lack of autonomy of the region resulting in a neglect of minority rights, all of which illustrates how the political and economic conditions in the sending country can act as barriers to individuals' return.

Overall, this volume brings together studies on return migration that certainly ask for a deeper reflection on migration as a one-way process, especially in regard to the period after World War II.

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