



## ***Irredenta* on the map: Cesare Battisti and Trentino-Alto Adige cartographies**

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Received: October 2017 – Accepted: November 2017

### **Abstract**

The geographer and cartographer Cesare Battisti (1875-1916) is regarded as one of the main intellectuals to have addressed the issue of the so-called *Terre irredente* (unredeemed lands). His main scientific contribution is the understanding of Trentino, part of the Austrian Empire until after the WWI, as an Italian region.

This paper examines his most significant cartographic work – the atlas *Il Trentino* (1915) – considering in particular three maps in which Battisti recognizes the entire region southern of the Alpine watershed as belonging to the Italian Nation. In so doing, Battisti also included the central part of former Austrian Tirol, the area north of Trentino nowadays identified as Alto Adige/South Tirol, in his survey.

In terms of the theoretical and methodological references underlying these cartographies, I consider firstly the role of Italian regional geographical paradigms in shaping Battisti's understanding of geography and the cultural *milieu* that conditioned his political views. More generally I examine the concealed political, didactic and propagandistic role entailed in using cartography as a scientific instrument.

**Keywords:** Political Geography, Cartography, First World War, Irredentism, Nation-building, Borders, Italy, Regional Geography

### **1. Geographies, Maps and the Nation-State**

“Western bourgeoisie spin tales of world regions in an effort to explain, to justify, to defend a world they believe is both theirs and under attack” (Wood, 2012, p. 12).

This paper discusses an example of cartography that contributed to the scientific definition of Italy as a nation-state. My exploration begins with the analysis of theoretical regional models developed by Italian geographers after national unification and proceeds with an examination of some of Cesare

Battisti's geographic and cartographic work. I consider in particular three maps from Battisti's most significant cartographic publication in which the author partially discards his previous theoretical positions to instead support the recognition of the Alpine watershed as an Italian geographical and political border.

With the radical but incisive observation quoted above, D. Wood highlights the geographical and cartographical regionalisation of the world, a spatial partitioning that entails a particular political will. The understanding of

regions as politically connoted and historically determined facts has been a central point of critical geography in the last fifty years, a perspective developed in opposition to positivistic claims that frame regions as natural scientifically determined areas or statistically defined compartments (Gambi, 1964).

During the long 19<sup>th</sup> century, many European countries such as Italy and Germany gave rise to particularly liberal urban bourgeoisie that played a key social role in leading national unification processes (Meriggi and Schiera, 1993). In addition to political and economic features, this had an important effect on the organisation of knowledge: in the Italian case, for instance, the Italian Scientist Congresses organised in many cities between 1839 and 1847 contributed significantly to the establishment of a national scientific community. After national unification in 1861, this intellectual community promoted both an educational process aimed at transforming society and a research system for the social and economic development of the country (Casalena, 2004; Giovannini, 2012).

In opposition to the former, absolute aristocratic-feudal state, the bourgeois nation-state also required a new understanding of geography (Farinelli, 1992). In exploring the relationship between science and nationalism, I draw on the theorisation of C. Withers and his argument that geography as a scientific discipline is inextricable from its methodological application to nation-building processes, thereby stressing how geographical discourses and representations have contributed to nationalism and imperialism. In this context, the analysis of specific geographical concepts highlights the ways they have reinforced a spatial understanding of the nation-state. State politics then serve to promote the circulation of geographical knowledge which in turn participates in reinforcing the very idea of the nation (Withers, 2001). After Italian political unification, the establishment of academic geography and development of geographical theories and survey methodologies were thoroughly permeated by this discourse.

The geographical definition of the nation-state obviously entails its cartographic representation; indeed, cartography constitutes a causal precondition

for this process. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the nationalisation of the masses and emergence of new political demands called for new communicative practices and symbols (Mosse, 1975). Cartography and thematic maps, ethnographic and linguistic ones in particular, began to contribute to nation-building processes, especially in the period from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to WWI (Boria, 2016). According to T. Winichakul, cartography became not only a representational tool for shaping specific, realistic images of identity but also an instrument that drove and transformed administrative and military processes (Winichakul, 1994).

As a final theoretical premise, I would like to highlight the idea of cartography as a process which goes beyond the objectivity of maps and their reality as documents with their own authorial and ideological content to also entail an analysis of the different practices that lead to the creation of maps as well as their social use and reinterpretation:

“Rather than cartography being narrowly understood as the scientific pursuit of how best to represent the space of the world (focused on issues such as form and accuracy), cartography becomes understood as the pursuit of representational solutions (not necessarily pictorial) to solve relational, spatial problems” (Kitchin and Dodge, 2007, p. 343).

In stressing the contingent nature of cartography, this assertion goes beyond the traditional critical perspective that understands cartography as merely an expression of authorial will. Rather, cartography should be interpreted as an instrument for shaping reality that contributes to territorial processes through a variety of practices (Boria, 2016). In this context and for the purposes of such an analysis, it therefore makes sense to analyse and interpret the different steps that lead to the creation of maps as well as the elements that shape the final cartographic product: images, discourses, texts, comparisons, debates, discussions, techniques, etc. (Kitching et al., 2013).

Battisti's explanation of regional and border issues takes place precisely through his use of cartography, the final result of which is shaped by his cultural background and political ideas and the historical context in which he worked but also his technical abilities, debates and discussions with other scholars, exchanges of information and

opinions, the publisher's editorial guidelines, and the choice to use specific instruments, texts and images. All of these elements contribute to the cartographic product, a document which is then disseminated in society where it generates new images and different interpretations, producing approval and dissent, contributing to political processes and reinforcing spatial territorialisation more generally.

## 2. The understanding of Italy as a unified geographical entity

Beginning at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Italian geographers launched extensive inquiries into regional issues. Scientific geography's main goal was considered that of providing a comprehensive description of the earth by synthesising its most significant phenomena. These elements had to be collected and classified in multiple ways, including by representing their spatial distribution. According to Giovanni Marinelli (1846-1900) and his son Olinto (1874-1926), the purpose of this methodology was to depict a synthetic regional outline of geographical phenomena as a preliminary step that would set the stage for the formulation of general theories (Proto, 2014a). These ideas arose from a specific understanding of physical geography as a synonym for general geography and were borrowed from the American geographical sciences and geomorphology, influenced above all by the work of William Morris Davis. For Davis hydrology in particular constituted the main explanation for terrestrial morphology (Marinelli, 1908).

A region was therefore understood as a set of specific physical and human conditions. By means of direct observation and cartographical interpretation, the task of the geographer was to locate the limits of a single geographical element or geographical phenomenon. This in turn revealed the so-called *regione elementare* (elemental region) conceptualized as the basis of regional geography. Having noted the areal distribution of distinct elements and phenomena on the map, geographers were able to distinguish the *regione complessa* (complex region) whose interaction went on to determine the *regione integrale* (integral region),

considered to constitute a unified geographical entity (Marinelli, 1916; Proto, 2014a).

At the beginning of WWI Olinto Marinelli stressed the importance of subordinating the concept of the border to the concept of the region. Borders were therefore understood as depending on the recognition of a specific region. Furthermore, he argued that integral regions represented the more or less coincident coexistence of natural-physical and historical-anthropogenic elements within a given territory. It followed that if the combination of historical-anthropogenic elements could easily amount to a nation, an integral region might therefore correspond to a nation-state. As part of the same work Marinelli also definitively specified a conceptualisation of geographical borders. The main problem was how to reduce the complexity of the interaction among different phenomena to a single line. Regional borders appeared as more of areas than lines, because there was no overlapping of geographical elements (Marinelli, 1916). This issue had gone unresolved in Friedrich Ratzel's political geography as well:

“If we want to draw on a map this border, as we individuated it, then we have to sketch more or less larger belts [...]. The border belt is the reality, the border line is only its abstraction” (Ratzel, 1897, p. 448).

In order to identify borders that could be used for diplomacy and political purposes, geographers were required to reduce the multiplicity of regional characters to a single line, which could be depicted on a map. This issue involved many European geographers in this historical period, for example Otto Maull in Germany (Maull, 1925). Olinto Marinelli finally solved this problem by drawing on the methodology of scientific experimentation and defined the geographical border as the element that produced a substantial decrease in regional characters. For instance this element might take the form of a natural feature, such as a large mountain chain, and this development confirmed the pre-eminence of the empirical experimentation, that is, knowledge developed according to natural sciences principles and the positivist reason (Marinelli, 1916).

Consequently, most Italian geographers accepted this theory as a paradigm and began to work from an understanding of Italy as an integral region whose terrestrial border clearly coincided with the Alpine watershed (Proto, 2014b).

### 3. Cesare Battisti and Trentino regional geography

Cesare Battisti was born in Trento – at that time, part of the Austrian Empire – in a well-heeled merchant family. He belonged to the liberal bourgeoisie, the class that played a significant role in bringing Irredentism to the fore as a political-social phenomenon (Cattaruzza, 2011). He attended university in Florence, graduating in Geography under Giovanni Marinelli in 1897, and while there joined the Socialist Party. His first surveys were dedicated to his native region of Trentino and after graduation he began engaging intensely in politics, founding a local session of the Socialist Party and rising to a position in the Austrian parliament in 1911.

His first monographic work, edited in 1898 as a development of his final dissertation in Florence, depicted Trentino as an Italian region, bounded to the fatherland by historical, cultural and physical-natural connections. However, distancing himself from the main argument of Italian geographers, Battisti refused to extend this connotation up to the Alpine watershed. He therefore recognised the existence of a natural and social border at the Salorno gorge, which at that time served as the administrative border between the Trento and Bolzano districts in the Austrian Land of Tyrol. In so doing Battisti delimited the Italian national territory to the area in which Italian was, in fact, the main language (Battisti, 1898).

In contrast to this assertion and in keeping with Marinelli's regional theorisation, one of the few maps in the book (Figure 1) depicts the Adige river basin as a unified geographical area: in this physical sketch, the internal border between Trento and Bolzano is not made visible and the entire region is depicted as a whole up to the Alpine watershed.

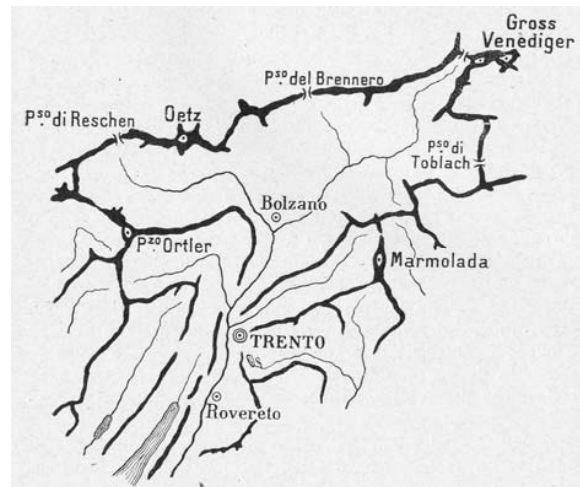


Figure 1. Physical-natural region based on river Adige basin upon Battisti, 1898. Source: Battisti, 1898.

Battisti's political view was strongly characterised by anti-colonial and anti-imperialist perspectives, positions he shared with the leftist-republican geographer Arcangelo Ghisleri and with the liberal-socialist historian Gaetano Salvemini (Ferretti, 2015). In his view, nationalism represented the first step towards the emancipation of the lower classes, by dismantling the feudal structure of the old empire: people self-determination was therefore the premise for working-class liberation (Cali, 2003).

European geographical ideas also played a significant role in shaping Battisti's understanding of regional geography. As stated above, his education in Giovanni Marinelli's positivistic school proved highly significant. In Florence he was also introduced to Friedrich Ratzel's thinking and began to translate Ratzel's most renowned book *Politische Geographie* into Italian. Thanks to Ratzel, Battisti developed a great interest in the historical evolution of geographic phenomena and, more specifically, in organic conceptualization of the state and the movements that characterise geographical unity (Ratzel, 1897). With this background, Battisti began from his first publications to question the difference between the natural region and the historical region: the first basically stable and the second varying in time and space, enlarged and diminished by wars, conquests, migrations, etc.

In developing this paradigm, he began to investigate place names semantically in order to

uncover the historical processes concealed in toponymy (Battisti, 1899). This survey has some similarities with the contemporaneous investigations carried out by the geographer and politician Ettore Tolomei (1865-1952). Tolomei is regarded as the inventor of Alto Adige as an Italian region and is particularly renowned for his surveys into place names, which were finalized to disclose the Italian historical substratum in this territory (Tolomei, 1906, 1916). The contact established and information exchanged between Tolomei and Battisti on the eve of WWI are key for understanding Battisti's updated approach to defining Trentino geography.

#### **4. Conquering the Alpine watershed: the Italian geographical border on the map**

At the beginning of 1915, the publisher Giovanni De Agostini offered Battisti a place in an Atlas series devoted to the geography of unredeemed lands. The worsening international situation suggested that Italy's involvement in the European war was imminent. De Agostini's commitment was aimed at supporting political propaganda in relation to those lands outside of the Italian border that were considered the main political goal of national politics. Thanks to the communicative capacity of maps and images, a cartographic book was thought to constitute a powerful instrument for underlining the historical-cultural bond between Italy and those regions and spreading this idea to a wider public (Cali, 1988).

Battisti was entrusted with the volume about Trentino and he created the draft in May of 1915, with the atlas as a whole finally published by that autumn (Battisti, 1915). As evidence of its success, the first edition was sold out in few months and the book was reprinted twice, in 1917 and 1919.

Through this work Battisti challenged himself for the first time with the task of producing thematic cartography conceptualized as a complement to the written texts. The first fifty pages of the atlas are dedicated to Trentino's history, physical geography, statistics and demography, political and economic geography, summing up significant excerpts of his previous monographs and continually referencing the

attached maps for further explanation. All of these elements are presented to assert Trentino's belonging to the Italian Fatherland and frame the area's German cultural connection as irrelevant. The innovative character of Battisti's perspective lies in his choice to include Alto Adige in his political discourse, based on its common Roman heritage and, above all, geographical unity defined on the basis of physical and human geography. In fact, Battisti's argument is the first and one of the most significant examples of an empirical implementation of Marinelli's theoretical discourse about regional models outlined in section 2.

The cartographic annex composed of nineteen original maps, mostly at a 1:500.000 scale, based on Italian Military Geographical Institute topographic maps. Three of them represent Trentino together with Alto Adige. Cartography plays a significant role in this atlas by visually describing the theoretical model and its application in order to demonstrate the geographical unity of this region.

The first map (Figure 2) features a depiction of the different borders – political, administrative, ethnical etc. – which had historically characterized the region: the political border of Italy in 1915 (red with +++); the coeval Austrian administrative border between the Trento and Bolzano districts (green); the historical border of the Napoleonic Kingdom of Italy between 1810 and 1814 (orange); the ecclesiastical limit of the Trento diocese, which does not correspond to the administrative border (yellow); and the Alpine watershed (red). Another line (purple) is an ethnographic border that delimitates the areas with more or less significant Italian populations.

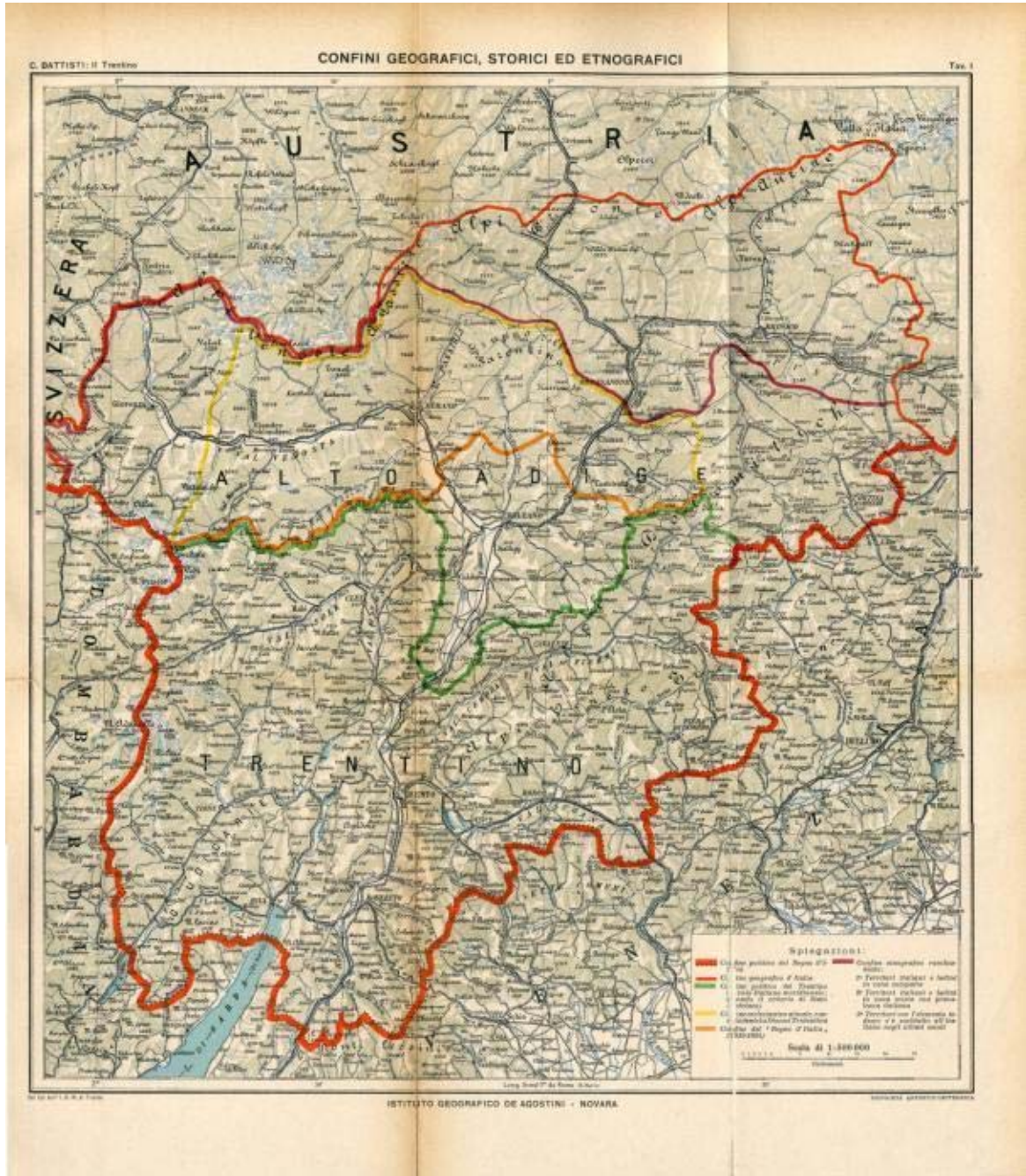


Figure 2. Map of historical, administrative and ethnical borders in Trentino-Alto Adige. Source: Battisti, 1915.

In defining this border delimitation Battisti discussed the issue with Tolomei, who pushed him to also include most of Alto Adige in the supposed Italian region. According to Tolomei’s investigation, a significant part of this region had only been colonised by German people in the last

few centuries, a fact which meant it should be regarded as fundamentally an Italian region (Cali, 1988). As emerges from their correspondence, Battisti himself was eventually persuaded by this argumentation:



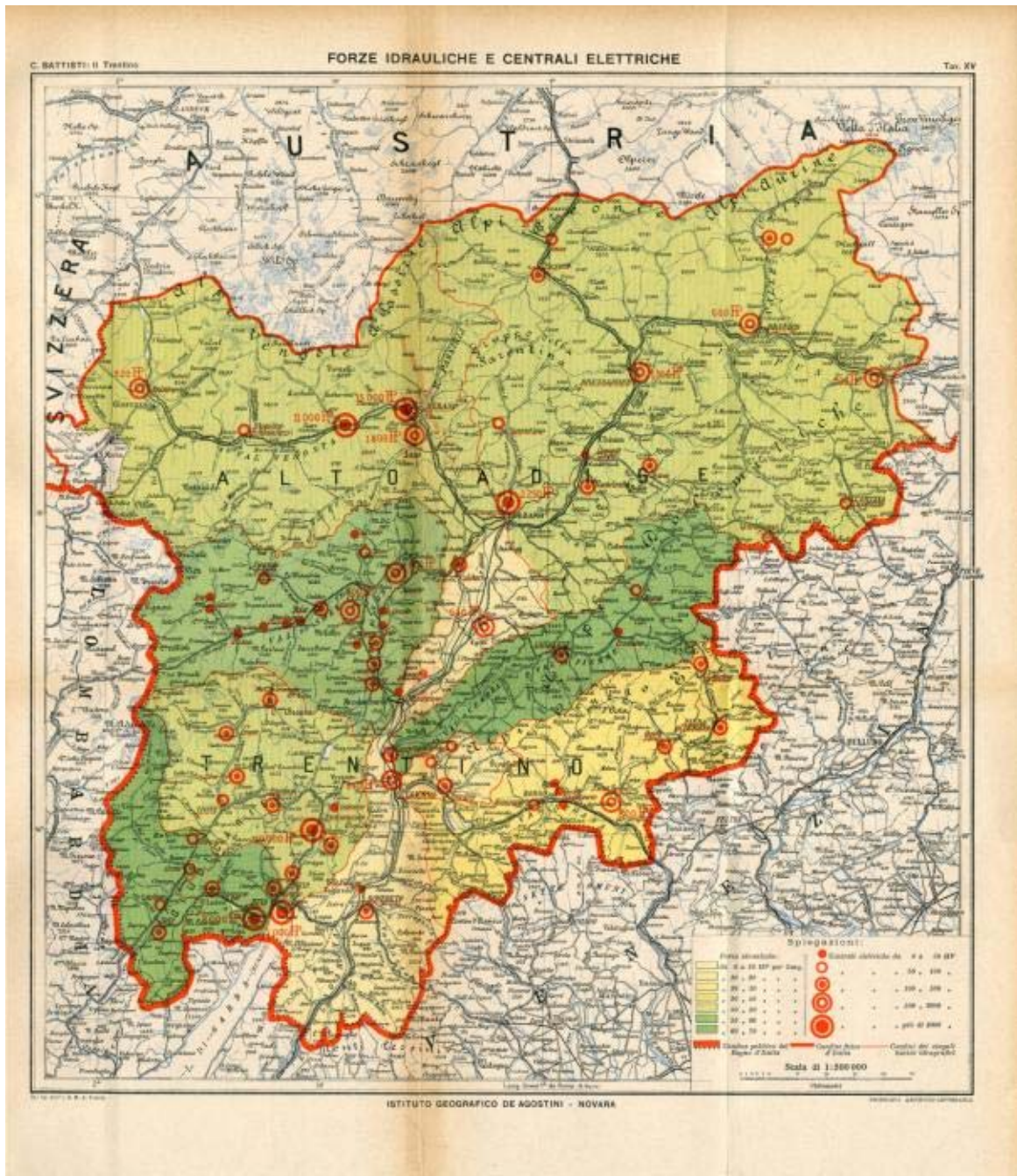


Figure 4. River basins and hydropower in Trentino-Alto Adige.  
Source: Battisti, 1915.

The second map (Figure 3) concerns the linguistic distribution in the region, split between Italian and German speakers. This map is drawn from a very famous 1:500.000 map created by the cartographer Achille Dardano that was immensely popular at that time (Dardano, 1915).

As Dardano's original map, Battisti decided first of all to also include Ladin speakers in the Italian linguistic group, thus considerably enlarging the Italian area. He then represented the population distribution up to 1.300 meters of elevation. In this way, given the more elevated elevations of



the Bolzano district as well as the use of colours (red for Italians, light blue for Germans), the result is that the German population appears in the map as only a few meagre lines.

The last map of Trentino Alto Adige (Figure 4) is both physical and economic, representing water resources management for hydroelectricity generation. In order to highlight the exploitation of hydropower, the map depicts the different river basins with their respective limits and watersheds while also indicating the main Alpine watershed as in the other maps. The physical shape of the Adige river basin draws attention to regional physical unity, since water management depends on drainage divide. Hydropower made up 90% of the country's energy stores and thus represented a strategic resource at that time, but the reference to river basins and the related watershed – as stated above – was also a central point in Italian regional theorisation.

## 5. Conclusions

If we were to print out these maps on tracing paper and overlap them, the result would provide definitive proof of the regional model theorized by Olinto Marinelli. In fact, these comparative analyses made it possible to assert the geographical unity of the whole Trentino-Alto Adige region, based on the collection and representation of different geographical phenomena. The result was an integral region whose population was or had been in majority Italian; therefore, an Italian region.

Looking at Battisti's maps, it becomes easier to also accept the Alpine watershed as the scientifically established Italian political border.

Political opportunities and the need to unite the irredentist movement undoubtedly played a key role in shaping Battisti's transition to more radical views about the Italian border. In this context, the collapse of the Socialist Party after the beginning of WWI contributed to informing his thinking. As mentioned above, Battisti was also very close to Gaetano Salvemini, one of the leading figures of the so-called *interventismo democratico* (democratic interventionism). According to this perspective, the Great War was perceived as a struggle against the *ancien régime* in favour of people's self-determination (Salvemini, 1915; Frangioni, 2011).

More generally, the scientific definition of the state proceeded hand in hand with the development of geographical paradigms. What geography produced was – at least apparently – a neutral and quantitative description of the relationship between humanity and the environment which, employing a secular, scientific, empirical approach, was capable of transcending the feudal state and universal power. This entailed deleting the borders of the old states based on different juridical traditions, political alliances, ancestries etc. to present – as Carl Ritter would have said – a living picture of lands, nature and human beings developed by means of comparison (Ritter, 1806).

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the referees and the editor for their constructive comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I also wish to thank Angelina Zontine for the linguistic review of the manuscript. This work was in part funded by the SIR Programme (grant number RBSI14UPSV), a research programme financed by the Italian Ministry of Education.

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