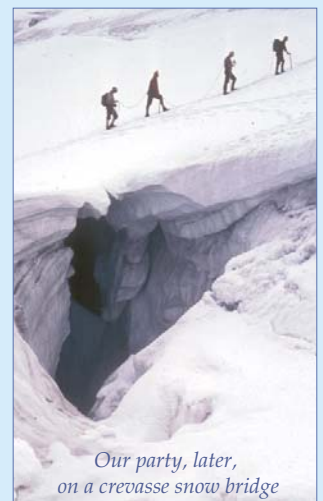


# Contexts: Italy, the Versailles peace, and the Tyrol

A concrete boundary marker on an Alpine hut ridge brings history to life for Fred Lawrence



It was July and 4.30 am at the Siegerland mountain hut. The sky was lightening over a jagged range at the start of a new, cloudless, mountain day. After a brief breakfast, four friends and I set off up the step, icy col to the Sonklarspitze. Three hours later, from the top, we saw the Becher hut on a ridge outcrop on the Übeltal glacier and, also in view, nestling below the lower south-west ridge of the Wilder Freiger, the Müller hut. Many huts, which are usually near the glacier line, had been built, with considerable difficulty, from the 1880s, most notably by German mountaineering clubs, when increased leisure and funds enabled the wish for healthy adventure. Our mountain hut guide mentioned that the Becher had been commandeered by the Italian Army to be a base for Alpine troops' training and the Müller usually opened late for the Alpine summer season.

Our descent to the glacier was enlivened by a tumble, but ice axes held the rope and we reached the Müller to find it had just opened and was looked after by a wizened granddad and an 11-year-old girl. It was freezing, the blankets to wrap round our sleeping bags on the floor were damp and throughout the night shutters banged in the wind but a tumbler of Schnapps (granddad

wasn't good with measures) brought the balm of sleep.

Next morning we were pleased to leave. Our destination was the heated Hildesheimer hut and we set off for the east ridge of the Wilder Pfaff (Wild Priest). And then it happened. My boot struck a concrete marker. Close inspection showed that it defined the border between Italy and Austria and my mind took me to a misty memory of a dusky afternoon in the A-Level class. I had stumbled on the new boundary that was established by the post-First World War peace negotiations at Versailles.

With the defeat of Austria in 1866 and the subsequent uniting of Venetia, there remained Italian-speaking areas in the north-east, *Terre Irredente* - unredeemed provinces. Italy used the Versailles peace conference to seek to absorb within Italy these 'unredeemed provinces'. The Italians' place of relative privilege at the peace conference was the result of a carefully-weighed decision to join Britain and France in war against Germany and Austria. Italian connection with Germany and Austria in the Triple Alliance, 1882, did not oblige her to join those powers in war in 1914. Britain, keen to have Italian support in the war, bribed Italy with the promise of

territory: Trentino and the Tyrol south of the Alpine divide, Istria, part of Dalmatia, islands in the Adriatic and Adalia in Turkey (if Turkey was divided up) and colonies in Africa. This agreement was formalised in the Treaty of London, 1915. Italy declared war on Austria in May 1915 and Germany in 1916.

Italy expected to receive her rewards from the Versailles peace conference but, in the meantime, United States' intervention brought President Wilson and his wish to make 'the world safe for democracy'. If German-speaking South Tyrol was made part of Italy, Wilson saw that one of his 'Fourteen Points', self-determination, would be contravened but he recognised, also, the sense of a natural frontier. This was how some 200,000 German speakers in the Tyrol became citizens of the Italian State, how the Brenner Pass became the Italy/Austria border crossing and why the Becher hut became a barracks. Italy also gained the provinces of Trentino and Istria. Excluded from Italian gains by the Treaty of St Germain, September 1919, were the port of Fiume (which had not been promised but became the centre of a nationalist incident in 1919 that, subsequently, was used by Mussolini and the Fascists) and parts of Dalmatia which were added to the new state of Yugoslavia.

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**Please note:** The procedure to access the two password protected sections of our website will be changed from 1 December 2001. In future a sub screen, as illustrated, will appear: please add the user name 'web', and then enter the existing 2001/2 password.

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