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# The First World War and the Use of Memory in the Landscape of the Isonzo/Soča Front

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For the area that now forms the border between Italy and Slovenia, the First World War was the definitive moment out of the previous two hundred years, a period in which everything changed. Five years of war, the destruction of infrastructure, the change of government, and territorial shifts were the main elements that drove the Italians and Slovenians who were living in that area to seek new rules for coexistence. The war also marked the first involvement of the Italian State, established just over fifty years earlier. For the first time, all the inhabitants of all the regions encountered one another and collaborated in a single effort of which they all felt a part. To suggest that Italy and the Italians were formed through these four years of conflict is not an exaggeration. For this reason, the memory of the First World War and, above all, of the dead, represented an important element in Italian society in the decades that followed, and its use became an instrument of economic, social and political control over the territory.

Italy entered the war almost a year after its former allies, and the Italian Army fought in the north-east of the country, along the 600 km line that followed the Alps, from Lake Garda to the Gulf of Trieste. The most important battles took place at the two ends of this line: in the Dolomite region and in the Isonzo/Soča valley, with the latter location extending to the Karst plateau. The main difference between the two fronts was their differing terrain (mountains versus low hills) and their diverse climates, which only permitted year-round activity in the Isonzo valley. For these reasons the battles on the Isonzo/Soča Front were the bloodiest, and resulted in the highest number of deaths, despite the fact that the fighting there lasted just a little over two years (Isnenghi, 1970; Fabi, 1994; Sema, 1995). Over the course of eleven battles, from June 1915 and October 1917, the Italian and Austro-Hungarian Armies lost more than a million men, including the dead, the wounded and those lost or imprisoned. These losses were concentrated around the battlegrounds of the Karst, and were caused by the senseless methodology of the battles, as well as the limited space, the frequency of combat, and the impossibility of finding safe refuge during bombings. In addition to these figures, there were 30,000 deaths and 300,000 imprisonments on the Italian side alone, in October 1917, as a result of the Caporetto retreat.

Before 1914, Isonzo and Karst were, from Italy's perspective, two names that alluded to distant places beyond the eastern border with Austria; somewhere north-east of the country, more or less in the upper part of the Adriatic (Marinelli, 1921; Cattaruzza, 2007). The only familiar place name in that area was, perhaps, Trieste: the city on the sea that was known as a place inhabited by Italians in a German State (Ara, Magris 1982; Apih, 1988; Millo, 1990; Sapelli, 1990; Zilli, 2012). From the outbreak of the war, the names of unknown places, such as Monfalcone, San Martino, Doberdò, Gorizia, Sabotino, San Michele, etc., emerged from that unknown territory and entered into the daily conversation of Italians through stories, descriptions in newspapers, from the news and, most of all, the letters that came from the front, as well as the telegrams which announced the death of soldiers (Ermacora, 2005; Maranesi, 2014; Mondini, 2014). In this manner, the knowledge of these new places became necessary and resulted in a need for a new geography that explored and explained this new land.

Within the Habsburg Empire, however, those territories were well-known as part of the *Adriatische K nstenland* (Adriatic coast): the region on the south-west border of the state, formed of the County of Gorizia and Gradisca, the city (»Citt  immediata«) of Trieste and the March (»Margraviato«) of Istria (Aa.Vv. 2009). In particular, all the battles took place within the County of Gorizia, which stretched from the area near the current border between Italy, Austria and Slovenia, right up to the hills which overlook the port of Trieste, in the space which today marks the Italian/-Slovenian border. The most significant part of the Isonzo/So a Front: the area in which the first battles took place, was the land between Gorizia and the sea (Gortani, 1930; Zilli, 2013a). Fighting was possible here because this zone was the only part of the alpine arc without natural obstacles: it was possible to traverse this area without being inhibited by heavy snow. It was Italy's objective to penetrate to the mainland of the enemy territory via this route and from there to arrive in Trieste and Ljubljana. The distance from where the Italian soldiers began to fight in June 1915, after having crossed the Isonzo River and the furthest point of advance, close to Mount Hermada, is nearly ten kilometres. Here, they fought for 28 months without victory on either side, and here hundreds of thousands of soldiers stayed and died until, after the Caporetto retreat, the front moved by more than one hundred kilometres, to the Piave river, within Italian territory.

At that moment, the fighting entered Italy, but the Italians continued to believe that the war had previously taken place against the Austrians, in Austrian territory. The general public did not know that the people who lived in those lands were Habsburg subjects, but of Italian and Slovenian nationality. On the contrary, the official propaganda in Italy dedicated much attention to those who had escaped from those lands, and had subsequently volunteered to fight in the Italian army. These people, a few thousand in total, came from Trentino and Venezia Giulia and comprised a tiny proportion compared to those who had entered the ranks of the Imperial Army as faithful subjects of the Habsburg reign in 1914 (Todero, 2014). The majority of those living in the *Adriatische K nstenland* were not in favour of becoming subjects of Italy, and this fact heavily influenced the management of the annexed provinces after the end of the war (Vivante, 1912; Rutar, 2003; Salvador, 2014).

There were approximately 5,000,000 Italian soldiers involved in the First World War, of which 560,000 were killed and 1,200,000 were wounded, out of a population of 35,000,000 inhabitants. Almost half of these were involved in the battles of Isonzo, and this was the reason behind the requests for information on those places and events which came from all over Italy.

The families of soldiers and the dead knew the areas where their loved ones had been sent to fight, where they had died or disappeared (since for many identification or burial was impossible) and finally – where possible – the location of their graves, far from home. The long and numerous battles on the Isonzo/Soča Front took place in small spaces, and the vast number of dead produced led to a large number of war cemeteries, built directly next to the trenches (Fabi, Toderò, 2004). These spaces on the front were products of war just like the fortifications and the trenches and, following the peace treaty, they were included in the provinces annexed to the Kingdom of Italy. After having been a subject of interest for those who had heard them talked about during the conflict, they became places to visit for those who wanted to see the battle zones and/or to pay tribute to the tombs of their relatives who had died or been lost fighting.

Already by 1919, tourist guides to the battlefields and other places made famous by the war were beginning to be produced, in order to satisfy popular demand. These were published by important national publishing houses (such as the Touring Club Italiano) and by smaller local publishers, with numerous print-runs, reprints and new editions (Aa.Vv 1919; Touring, 1929). Each of these guides featured proposed itineraries around the places of battle, the chronology of the events, the actions of the Italian soldiers, and a description of the places where the cemeteries were located and how to find and distinguish them. The popularity of the guides, alongside that of survivors' diaries, official accounts, and the stories of the journalists invited to the front, further fuelled interest in the conquered zones and were essential for getting to know these areas. At the same time, the victory conferred a greater value on the soldiers who had died than on the survivors. The dead were celebrated in every village and city in the country, great or small, where monuments and stones were erected in which the names of those who had died in battle were engraved: a substitute for family tombs and the private memory of the dead. In this way, the memory of the war was not only celebrated in an official and public manner, but it became a perennial part of the urban Italian landscape, which continually recalled those four years which had indelibly marked the life of every Italian family. In addition to these memorials, the names of the places of war were introduced into the local place names of every town and city in the country. Even the smallest villages built in the 1930s within the spaces reclaimed in the Agro Pontino, the biggest reclamation work in Italy of the twentieth century, had the same names as the places that had become famous from the battles of the Isonzo/Soča Front (Sciarretta, 2014).

In practice, in a more or less conscious manner, a territorial marketing campaign within an Italy which was no longer the same as it had been before the war had begun. After 1918, Italian society demanded major changes of a political, social and cultural nature, and the two years that followed the peace brought such changes to the country.

The expectations, hopes and illusions fed by those four years of overturned the fragile balance within the country and created the conditions for the vast political transformation which that led to the Fascist regime. In the eastern provinces annexed after the peace treaty, which included the Isonzo/Soča Front, the upheaval was still greater, due to the movement of power from the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the Kingdom of Italy, and also due to the significant changes in the composition of the population, which was caused by the departure of those who were not Italian or Slovenian, and their substitution with people from other Italian regions (Zilli, 2015). Here, in a climate that was far from peaceful, fascism took hold before it did in the rest of Italy, using the methods of obtaining power that, a few years later, would see

fascism control the whole of Italy (Vinci, 2011). In order to reach this objective, the events and outcome of the war were adopted by fascism as a tool and an opportunity for political control, and to impose a particular ideology on the local population. The key part of this action was the transformation of the memory of the war into a celebration of victory. This memory morphed from the view that the war had been a violent and devastating disaster, which had affected both sides in more or less equal measure (the »senseless murder«, according to the pope of that time, Benedict XV), to one in which there was a victorious side, who had been in the right; and a defeated side, which as such, had to passively accept the choices of the victor.

This approach led to the eradication, in the new Italian provinces, of any remnant of the losing state, even though it had governed in those territories for over five centuries, and despite the fact that the people who lived there had been, until the final moment, proud citizens of the Habsburg Empire, even if they were Italian or Slovenian nationals. After the expulsion of citizens of other nationalities, there followed the physical removal of the Habsburg memory, from the administrative structures to the place names and, later, personal names, when the Italianization of foreign surnames was imposed (Apih, 1966).

Even the most fundamental elements of war were subject to these actions, and great care was taken to ensure that everything which related to the presence of these people among the ranks of the Imperial Army was destroyed. Within the Karst and the Isonzo valley, all the monuments built by the Habsburg soldiers were destroyed, even those that memorialised the dead outside the cemeteries, and there were no stones or memorials in any village or town in the *Adriatische Küstenland* to pay tribute to the local men who had died in the imperial uniform: in stark contrast to the innumerable monuments for Italian soldiers in Italy. Up until the end of the 20th century, there was just a single stone, on the hill of San Giusto in Trieste, which recorded those in the Habsburg army in the coastal region who had died. Only in the summer 2014 was a modest monument inaugurated in the railway station in Trieste to remember the tens of thousands of soldiers from the coast who had left from that very station to fight on the faraway eastern front in Galizia. The only celebrations in honour of the soldiers from this area were reserved for those who had abandoned their fatherland – where they were considered traitors – to fight as volunteers in the Italian army. These men had streets, squares, schools and monuments named after them, and they were commemorated in a wide range of ways: for example, even today in the *Museo della Grande Guerra di Gorizia* (the Museum of the Great War in Gorizia) there is a list of all the names of the dozens of volunteers of that area who joined the Italian ranks, but there is no reference whatsoever even to the order of magnitude of how many men from the same county had fought under the imperial banner.

There was, therefore, a double and contrasting phenomenon: on the one hand, the local memory was denied, and on the other there was a great celebration of the other story, that of the winners: a different memory that signalled the triumph of the new state over the former one (Cumin, 1929; Massi, 1938). A strange aspect of this political use of memory involved the dead: the control of memory (both public and private), the war cemeteries and the monuments of the soldiers who were considered the most important (Bortolotti, 1995). Even today, there is no precise count of how many died within the narrow strip of the Isonzo/Soča Front, but the figure of 500,000 dead across the two armies can be considered to be near the truth. The vast numbers of corpses were mostly buried in cemeteries, the majority of which were fairly small and built by the soldiers themselves in the available spaces near the battlefields. These places were predominantly areas viable for farming. Since such spaces are rare in the Karst due to its particu-

lar terrain, after the end of the war it was necessary to return these areas to civic use. This led to the construction of large cemeteries in which the bodies of the dead were brought and reburied. Examples of such structures include Redipuglia (the first such large cemetery) and Oslavia and Caporetto/Kobarid (later examples), which collected the bodies of almost 150,000 soldiers, nearly all of whom were Italian. For the Austro-Hungarian dead, there was only a small designated burial area near Redipuglia with approximately 14,000 graves; while the majority of the (temporary) cemeteries built by imperial soldiers were left as they were. At the same time, the Italian government began a process of monumentalization of the theatre of war – both on the Dolomite Front and the Isonzo/Soča Front – which involved the construction of imposing structures, veritable signs on the landscape, which introduced a schema of reading the countryside whose only possible interpretation was Italy's total dominion, even over the inhabitants who did not speak Italian or share Italian culture. The objective was to ensure that these signs were immediately identifiable. The two most famous mountains of the war, located in spaces inhabited by Slovenians – the Sabotino mountain (680 m) above Gorizia and the San Michele Mountain (270 m) on the Karst – were acquired by the Italian government and declared »sacred zones«. On the top of each mountain, museums of war were constructed, stone paths laid and monuments created which paid tribute to the actions of the Italian soldiers, avoiding (almost) all mention of the enemy army: effectively deleting them from memory. A striking example of just such a visible sign was intended for the San Michele mountain, where a double monumental set of stairs was planned in white stone, which would climb, for more than 500 metres, from the riverbank of the Isonzo River to the top of the mountain, culminating in an imposing statue of an infantryman on the summit. This monument was blocked just before work began, because the leader of the then government considered it too pitiful and not sufficiently celebratory of the figure of the victor (Fabi, Todero, 2004). In these architectural works, the Italian soldiers were recorded with their names and surnames, their ranks, places of birth, dates of birth and dates of death, while the other soldiers were defined as the »enemy«, and, at most, defined as either Austrian or Hungarian. No mention was made of the presence of the other national groups though they had been recognised and protected as such within the Habsburg Empire.



Figure 13: Italian military ossuary in Kobarid/Caporetto, Slovenia (Photo: S. Zilli).

Within these monuments, one stands out (even physically): the cemetery in Redipuglia. Redipuglia is a small village rising out of the western slopes of the Karst, within the Italian part of the former County of Gorizia, which was only involved in the battles during the first weeks of the war (Fabi, 2002). From 1918, on a hill near the town centre, the corpses from the surrounding Italian war cemeteries that had been created during the battles on the Karst were collected in a single site. By the early 1930s, there was a total of 100,000 bodies. A structure was created, composed of a continuous succession of tombs that stretched from the bottom to the top of the slope in a single spiral route. Every stone was unique, and each had a different inscription so that the individual dead were recognisable and could be distinguished from one another. This cemetery, completed in 1924, was soon considered to be inadequate in light of the image the new Fascist regime wanted to present of the war, since it was overly geared towards pity for the dead, rather than celebrating the greatness of victory. In 1938, Benito Mussolini inaugurated a new memorial in its place, built only a few metres away from the previous one, which transformed the entire side of the hill into an imposing set of stairs which were 200 metres high and 400 metres long, in which the remains of the soldiers were contained in identical spaces, with the word »Presente« (»present«) inscribed on every step. The visual impact of this monument, which remains intact to the present day, is strong: it hits the observer and clearly expresses the intentions of the man who called for its creation. Still today, every November 4th, a senior state official, either the President of the Republic or the Senate; the Head of the Government or of the Ministry of Defence, goes to the Redipuglia monument to celebrate the national day of victory, though the local participation in the event is highly limited in comparison to 25 years ago, when all the steps were covered with thousands of people who had travelled from the whole of Italy to remember the relatives who had died on the Isonzo/Soča Front (Dato, 2014).



Figure 14: Sredipolje/Redipuglia First World War cemetery, Italy (Photo: S. Zilli).

Other war museums were opened in the area, including in Redipuglia itself, in Gorizia (with the name, already by 1917, of »Museo della Redenzione«, »The Museum of Redemption«), and several towns had their names changed to underline their involvement in the con-

flict. For example, Sdraussina, a small Slovenian village on the left bank of the Isonzo river, became Poggio Terza Armata, or »small hill«, the point of support for the third regiment of the Italian army: a name that remains today. This network of structures that stand alongside the remains of the war (the trenches, tunnels, caves and armories which survived the battles) became a powerful path of memory that transformed the theatre of war into a sort of macabre tourist attraction.

The growing knowledge of a previously unknown area, which had become part of the Kingdom of Italy, developed first with words, stories and images and then through the propaganda that formally displayed these places of war, and was used to impose control over the territory and those living there: in particular on the Slovenians and those »new« Italians who disagreed with Fascist politics (Collotti, 1974; Sluga, 2003; Aa.Vv 2009). The complete power of the regime, which led – from 1923 to 1928 – to the abolition of the Province of Gorizia, the area which contained almost all the sites of memory, allowed this behaviour to extend to the other territorial results of the war. This became a function of Fascist politics, with the aim of imposing a reassessment of the border territories in the rest of the country. It certainly was no coincidence that Mussolini had inaugurated the new Repiduglia Memorial in the same tour of Venezia Giulia in September 1938 in which the racial laws against Jews were announced in Trieste and the city was proclaimed the new seat of the Italian University (Cossu, Venza, 2014).

This series of actions fed the memory of the conflict for the entire inter-war period, maintaining Italy's interest, and the continuous flow of »tourists« to the places of battle. The local populations, however, did not seem to appreciate this politics and the choice to introduce such »signs« on the territory. These memorials had denied them a place to pay tribute to the dead who had fought in the Habsburg ranks. Indeed, they had deleted them from public record. The regime's image was made to coincide with the »official« memory, in which war and Fascism were presented and therefore experienced as two sides of the same coin: this weighed heavily on the local populations (Cumin, 1929; Massi, 1938). Finally, the »signs of war« indicated a national difference and imposed a vision of Italian superiority on the citizens of Slovenian language and culture, who had already been badly affected by the laws prohibiting them from using almost any public institution, including schools, the press, their language, and even their names, which marked them out in Italian territory as »alloglotti« (»allophones«), i.e. people who talked in a different way (Zilli, 2013b). This led to the destruction of several of these monuments during the Second World War, including the alpine refuge built on top of the Nero/Krn mountain (2,245 m), in the upper Isonzo valley, which was destroyed by Yugoslav Partisans precisely because of its symbolic function.

In 1947, the new border between Italy and Yugoslavia divided the 1915–1918 front into two parts, and the memories of the First World War began to be used in a new and different way by the two governments that followed the Fascist era (Andreozzi, 2004; Zilli, 2005; Caturuzza, 2007; Verginella, 2008; Woersdorfer, 2009). On the Italian side, the continued memorialisation of the places of the Great War was used to focus on the annexation of thirty years earlier, and was intended to highlight the loss of territory, and the present government's starkly different stance to the Italy that had appropriated the land. On the other side, however, the fact that the »signs« were the work of Italy meant that they fell into oblivion. There was also no attempt to reconstruct the memory of the Slovenian soldiers in the Habsburg Army, since this would have meant re-evaluating an era before the state organisation of the Yu-

goslavs, and so this conflict was forgotten since it was considered extraneous to the new state. On both sides of the border, however, it was significant that this location coincided with the final tract of the Iron Curtain, which divided Europe into two opposing parts, in which it was essential to maintain an active distinction between the internal system and that of the »other«. Along the border, each state deployed vast numbers of armed troops (until the final decade of the 20th century more than a third of the entire Italian Army was stationed in Friuli Venezia Giulia). This space came under military control, which focussed on guarding the border, and ensuring there was no unauthorised trespassing, even by civilians, across the multiple border crossings; however, the military had no desire for any discussion of the conflict to move beyond the soldiers and their actions (Baccichet, 2015).

In this period, the memory of the events of the First World War declined and, with it, the tourist use of the places of war; however, both sides actively continued to create »signs« in the landscape that outlined the new territorial powers. An example of this new series of signs is the city of Nova Gorica, which was built in 1947 in an empty space near to the borders of the old Italian Gorizia within the Yugoslav state. It was designed with the intention of showing the Italians the differences of the new socialist society (Zilli, 2004). Even the sanctuary of Monte Grisa on the Triestine Karst, at an altitude of 330m, which was built in 1966, is part of the series: an enormous Catholic church that stands above Trieste, the most secular and multi-faith city in Italy, placed in a dominant position on the gulf and therefore highly visible: a stark warning to the atheist, Yugoslav Istria. A further example was the huge »Nas Tito« sign, which was written in block letters made of white stone on the southern side of the Sabotino Mountain, above Gorizia and Nova Gorica. This was created to mark a visit by the president Josip Broz Tito during the early 1970s and remained in place until a few years ago, long after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the birth of the Slovenian Republic. A similar piece of writing on the Slovenian Karst, overlying the valley of the Vipacco/Vipava River, remains visible today. Analogous signs did not stop with the end of the Cold War, their original cause. Instead, they continue to appear even in the new millennium. In 2000 near Dosso Fajti / Fajti Hrib, at an altitude of 343m on the Slovenian Karst, the local government of Miren Kostanjevica and the Minister for Culture for the Republic of Slovenia oversaw the start of construction for a large square tower, more than thirty metres tall, to function as a monument for the »defenders of the western border«. This definition is very strange, since the newly created Republic of Slovenia did not have any interest in celebrating its »defenders«, unless it wished to refer to the Yugoslav era (from which it had distanced itself) or the Habsburg period. In either case, it was marking its counterposition with Italy, which was probably the actual motive behind the project: a response to the fact that in those years some members of the Italian Government had openly talked about a revision of the treaty that had introduced the border line in 1947 and therefore sanctioned the loss of those territories. In effect, the monument, which is now called »Cerje«, dedicated to the defenders of the Slovenian homeland and transformed into a museum of the First World War, is not very prominent in the Slovenian landscape, but is highly visible from the Friulian plain, from Gorizia and from the Gulf of Trieste: a testimony of the way in which these places belong to the Republic of Slovenia.





Figure 15: The memorial to the defenders of the Slovenian homeland at Cerje, Slovenia (Photo: S. Zilli).

The memory of the First World War has accompanied the events of the area that is now on the Italian-Slovenian border, throughout the entire 20th century. The disasters and the dead of the war have been used for political control of the territory, culminating in the control of the populations who lived there and the construction of a politicised landscape, through the introduction of great »signs«. The events of the battles and the effects of conflict have been recorded, celebrated and studied in a consistently distinct way, according to two approaches that have produced diversified narratives. Even the program of actions put in place for the centenary of the conflict was unable to provide instruments for a shared perspective, which demonstrates the weight exerted by the legacy of the 20th century, and the risk is that the attitude towards the events that dominated the last century will find new fuel. To date, the only moment in which the First World War has been shown to all as it truly was, the death of millions of people, was the visit of Pope Francis to two military cemeteries, one Italian and one Austro-Hungarian, in Redipuglia on 13th September 2014, in which every type of rhetoric fled before the reaffirmation of that »senseless murder«.

