

Michael Wachtler

The First World War in the Alps



Michael Wachtler



Michael Wächter

A life is extinguished. An Alpi soldier lies dead in the snow in the Lares ridge gap on the Adamello.

"The lamps are going out
all over Europe;
we shall not see them lit again
in our lifetime."

Sir Edward Grey 3rd August, 1914
British Foreign Minister

Of war in the mountains or the quest for peace

This war in the mountains of the eastern Alps was a war with a difference. Never before had men been expected to resist the elements at altitudes reaching almost 4,000 metres for months on end in bitter cold and snow. It is precisely for this reason that the war in this battlefield has taken a special place in history. It was an anachronistic struggle: the battles were still for the most part man against man, for no tank or other armoured vehicle could penetrate into these regions. Impartial nature entered the fray as a third, perhaps most terrible adversary. Avalanches swept thousands to their deaths, cold wore down men's spirits, lightning and thunder storms cowed the combatants.

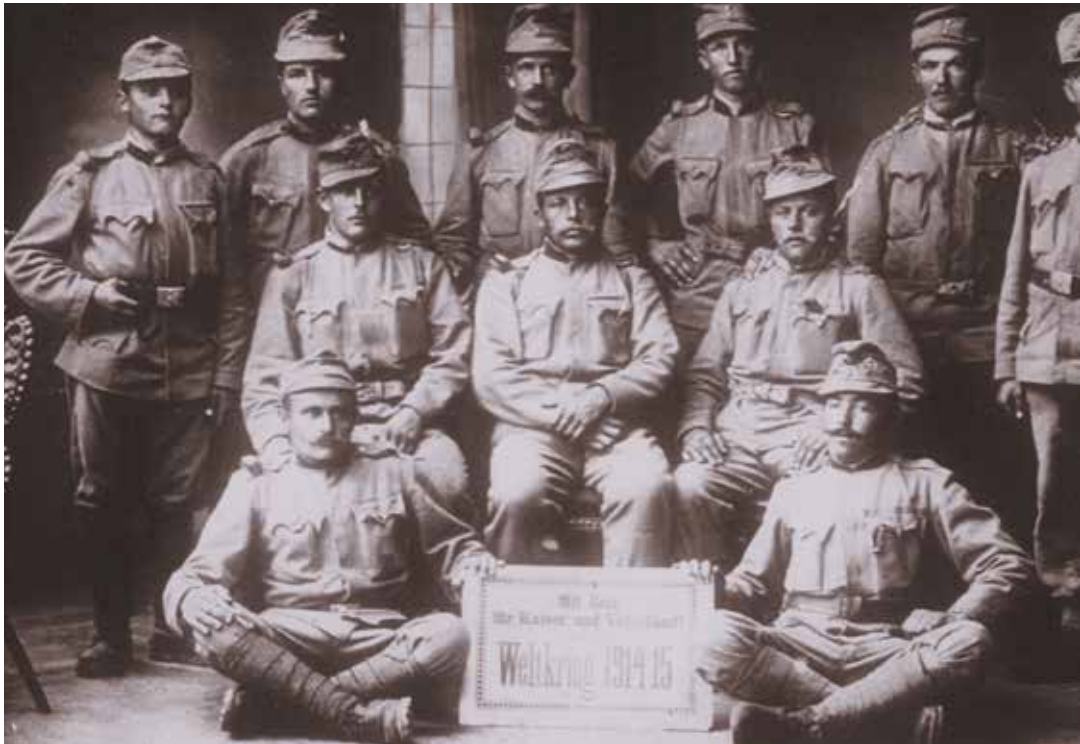
Perhaps for this reason there were so many examples of comradeship and peace initiatives on these mountains, even if they only occurred between isolated groups and small numbers of men. And did not nature induce men to fraternise once again when a separate, secluded world came into being during the long winter months? When for months on end no news arrived from below and likewise no news reached the enemy? Very often individual soldiers, whether Italian or Austrians, all of the same social class, had no idea why they were fighting. So why should they not fraternise? In this spirit this book also tells of small and isolated attempts at making peace. There are many examples of a kind which today still move us to tears. There are the diaries of the eighteen-year-old Karl Mayr of the Standschützen (civil defence corps), or of the young Giacomo Perico, soldier in the Italian Alpine (Alpini) corps. All contributed to strengthening our faith in human goodness. The horrors of war appear even more brutal and senseless when described by men who took part. The racing heartbeat of a soldier who knows he will only survive this day by an extreme fluke of fortune, the wide-open eyes of a dying comrade, riddled by bullets, torn apart by shellfire. This book attempts to tell the story of the First World War in the Alps with the help of the most telling photos chosen from numerous archives. The events here contributed little to the Great War's outcome, though in their own way they were highly significant. Spectacular underground towns were created in the glacier ice with kilometre-long connecting corridors, entire mountain-tops were blasted out of existence in attempts to dislodge just handfuls of opponents. This war set the course for winter tourism. Aerial cableways and lifts transported men and equipment into the high regions and skis became important means of locomotion in battle.

In the meantime these mountains have become enveloped in myth and legend. Still the struggle these men endured against the power of nature and the blind sway of dictatorial systems will remain unforgotten forever.

Of war in the Alps

The landscape was so beautiful that it began to attract tourists in their thousands. Some were drawn by the desire to climb the peaks and become enshrined in the mountaineering hall of fame, while others were excited by the allure of adventure. Tectonic forces caused the earth's surface to upheave over millions of years to form the Alps, building a natural and formidable barrier in a region of the world where people of diverse language groups settled. Some peoples managed to form their own nations, the French, the Germans and Italians. And still linguistic groups found

themselves as ethnic minorities inside larger territories. A case in point is the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. At the beginning of the 20th century the empire comprised a wild potpourri of peoples of the most diverse languages, religions and other cultural peculiarities. Italians, Ladins, Slavs, Croatians, Hungarians, Germans, Serbs, Czechs, Slovaks and plenty more besides were forced to get along with each other and in spite of enormous efforts and, for the times, astonishingly tolerant government the undercurrents for future turmoil were gaining strength



“With God, for Emperor and the Fatherland – World War 1914-15” reads the inscription. Italy has just entered the war. The photo is of a motley crew of Standschützen, or civil defence militia. They believe they will be back home in time for the late summer hay harvest. A fateful illusion.

beneath the surface. Emperor Franz Joseph I had governed this multiracial commonwealth for decades. So long that most subjects had never known any other ruler. However it is wrong to regard this odd entity as the precursor of a united Europe, as it is often praised by authors, in as much as it was basically a colonial empire under Austrian rule.

War came because it was inevitable and desired on the most diverse sides and for the most diverse reasons, and was supposed to last less than a week, at the very most until Christmas 1914. It developed initially in the east, far away from these mountains, even if the hearts of these mountain people began to bleed as soon as the first war dead were brought home from Galicia.

A lonely war

At the outset Italy remained calm, even though there were plenty of signs that this increasingly powerful nation was thirsting to throw off centuries of humiliation. Finally in May 1915 a completely new kind of conflict was born: high altitude mountain war. It is true that Hannibal crossed the Alps 2,000 years earlier to attack the Romans from their rear, though nobody had previously imagined that men could wage war among these precipitous rock faces, in places at elevations exceeding 3,000 metres. In fact it was nobody's intention. Italy's strategy was to cross the passes quickly and then to advance at speed through the valleys to Vienna. However, events turned out differently. It became a secluded, "lonely war" as the German military historian Heinz von Lichem described it, and the line extended from the Julian Alps in the east, across the Kärnten (Carinthian), Carnic Alps, the Dolomites, Lake Garda to the Adamello and on to the Ortler as far as the Swiss border. It became a "front among rocks

and ice", to use the words of war veteran Gunther Langes. At the time Austria and Italy shared an approximately three hundred and seventy kilometre border. This massif – comprising a large part of the Alps – formed a natural bulwark separating the Italian troops on the one side and the Austro-Hungarian army on the other. Nature quickly joined the combatants in these inhospitable regions as a third, and perhaps most terrible adversary.

A fatal hesitation on the part of Italy, perhaps brought about by the nation's overhasty entry into the war in May 1915, meant that the strategy of overrunning the surprised and not yet organised Austrian troops was doomed to failure from the



Museum 1915-18 K\"Tschuach-Mauthen

The soldiers quarters on the Wischberg in the Julian Alps are situated beneath metres-high walls of snow.

outset, the intention of breaching the defences on one of the many passes, whether the Plöcken and the Kanaltal valley, or the Kreuzberg Pass, or through the Höhlenstein Valley to enter the broad Pustertal valley, or to advance towards Vienna via Villach. For the so-called *Freiwillige Schützen* (volunteer homeland defence corps) in Kärnten, and the

their intimate knowledge of the local terrain, they began to occupy strategically important peaks and ridges. Though apart from their skills at shooting the *Standeschützen* had hardly any military training. All of a sudden 50,000 defenders which nobody had reckoned with were available, 38,000 *Standeschützen* and 12,000 *Freiwillige Schützen*. From then

on villages in these areas were deprived of their menfolk, though for the most part women, children and the elderly quickly took over their tasks and cultivated the fields. They also ensured that men on the front were kept well-supplied with food and other provisions.

A series of salients and permanent fortifications, some antiquated, lined the entire frontier from the *Stilfser Joch* pass, *Gomagoi*, *Riva*, *Lavarone*, *Tre Sassi*, *Landro*, *Sexten*, *Malborghet*, *Raibl* and *Predil* with the purpose of warding off eventual Italian attacks. They had been built many years previously, obviously in anticipation that the 30-year-old treaty of friendship might not hold forever and that a war between the Austro-Hungarian empire and Italy could ensue. Italy was of course the hereditary enemy of the Habsburg monarchy and certainly no new opponent of the empire. Perhaps a heavier and more resolute Italian push across one of the lower passes or into one of the central valleys would still have resulted in the all-too-weak Austrian

lines being penetrated. Such a tactic served the Austrians well later in autumn 1917 when they routed the demoralised Italian forces in the valley basin of *Caporetto* (called *Karfreit* by the Central Powers, now the village of *Kobarid* in Slovenia). However the Italian commander-in-chief, General *Luigi Cadorna*



Museum Sanico Trento

Italian Alpine troops (Alpini) bury one of their comrades. Wooden coffins were far from the norm, very often fallen soldiers were buried in mass graves.

Tyrolean *Standeschützen* (men aged over 45 and youths under 18 - too old or too young for active service), were quickly deployed. Alpine born and bred, using

advanced far too cautiously and slowly, - perhaps failed by his own intelligence service – and also through being disoriented by Austrian columns at the outset of the war. They marched and countermarched, constantly on the move between the Gailtal and Pustertal valleys with the sole purpose of misleading the Italians as to the strength of their forces. At least this feckless General Cadorna succeeded in one thing: tying up Austrian battalions for years which were desperately needed on other European fronts. Following the defeat on the Isonzo river he was eventually replaced on 8th November 1917 with General Armando Diaz in agreement with the Allies. Unlike Cadorna, who was just as much a political animal as he was a general, Diaz was more of a ‘soldier’s soldier’, determined to pursue the war with tenacity and according to modern concepts rather than become involved with political intrigues in Rome.

With no sense of foreboding of what was to come, the combatants became bogged down in futile skirmishes for insignificant territorial gains. As the war progressed both sides became more and more entrenched in well-constructed and defended positions. The Italians were the assailants faced with the task of overrunning Austria. A heavy burden which inevitably led to the defeat of the Italian troops, an army randomly recruited from simple labourers and farmhands. However, it would be wrong to assert that Italian Alpini or Bersaglieri (light infantry) troops were weak adversaries. They made up for their lack of experience in mountain terrain partially through courage – after all, for the first time they were fighting for their own strong nation – and partially through the sheer numbers of men thrown into the conflict as cannon fodder. Consequently

casualties among Italian soldiers were far higher than those suffered on the Austrian side. Not counting the deaths caused by nature, through avalanches, rockfalls, by supplies being interrupted by severe weather, or other natural disasters. Nature claimed higher numbers of casualties than did the actual fighting in this ‘Great War’, as it still frequently called.

The Julian Alps

The main battleground in the Julian Alps was the Krn mountain, 2,245 metres high overlooking Caporetto, as the Italians christened the village of Kobarid in Slovenia once they had taken it (Karfreit in German). This summit soon became transformed into an impregnable and, for the times, highly mechanised fortress. The summit was of enormous strategic importance, for the entire Carinthian front



Museum 1915-18 K. Tschischach-Mauthen

Italian and Austrian troops face each other in makeshift defences and fight fiercely on the Kleiner Pal. The picture shows an Italian position.

could have collapsed had the Italians succeed in taking this position. Throughout the entire war the Austrians found keeping open the lines of supply to be a far greater bane than being harassed by their Italian adversaries,



Massimo Turbheimer, Foto: E. Turbheimer

A moment of relaxation for these Italian officers with their dogs. They are standing in front of their relatively comfortable huts. A privilege enjoyed by the few. Common soldiers did not even have a bed of their own. They slept wherever they could find room.

above all when they were cut off for weeks on end due to the harsh winter weather. The Krn represented the cornerstone on the Isonzo front, the Rombon massif, almost equally high located near Flitsch, the other. The Italians actually managed to take the Rombon summit in August 1915 but were subsequently driven back. During the winter of 1916 it changed hands several times with heavy casualties and was only taken once and for all by the Carinthian defence troops following the breakthrough at Flitsch-Tolmezzo in October 1917. This hard struggle for every rock and stone encapsulated the entire action on the frontline and continued across the neighbouring mountain summits. Heroes were born equally on the Wischberg, the Montasch massif and the Grosser Nabois, all of them summits at altitudes between 2,500 and 2,700 metres above sea level, just as they were in the Dolomites further west, the Adamello and the Ortler. Daring mountain climbers such

as the engineer Ferdinand Horn undertook first ascents which few people deemed possible in order to penetrate behind the Italian positions and send back secret messages to their own troops using optical signals. Above all in the Montasch massif Austro-Hungarian troops attacked well-positioned Italian machine gun nests incurring high casualties.

The Italians had laboured for years to transform several mountain summits into invulnerable bastions which obstructed the route through the Isonzo Valley.

These summits are associated with the rise of a brilliant German strategist who was later to gain even greater renown in World War Two as the 'Desert Fox': First Lieutenant Erwin Rommel. He arrived in this area with the Württemberg Alpine battalion. In a surprise attack on 25th October 1917 he took the Kolovrat near Tolmein (Tolmezzo), a formidably constructed summit fort which hermetically sealed off the area. The victory fed the



The Rederlechner family from Sand in Taufers in their parlour. Each had to do what they could to contribute to victory. Women mend worn-out war uniforms, the men enjoy their leave from the front.

young officer's ambition and appetite for action. A day later Monte Cragonza was captured. His fatigued men were allowed no respite. The next in line was Monte Matajur, a fortress with even stronger defences than all the others. This too fell to the German, completely unexpectedly and as an enormous surprise on both sides. Even then his assaults were based on independent, lightning-fast pincer movements followed by a swift retreat, his troops only to reappear at another position where the front was deemed weaker. Erwin Rommel received for his deeds the highest German military decoration, the Pour-le-Merite medal, – also known as 'The Blue Max' and his enterprises opened the way into the northern Italian plain. Twenty-five years later Rommel used the same tactics of speed and surprise as commander of the German Africa Corps in the desert and the Middle East. He became revered both for his military prowess and the chivalry he showed towards his adversaries. After a

defeat at Rommel's hands the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill told the House of Commons: "We have a very daring and skillful opponent against us, and, may I say across the havoc of war, a great General".

In October 1917 Italy was to be dealt a fatal blow in the Julian Alps theatre, a success which Austria-Hungary hoped could be turned into a decisive victory. Paradoxically the crushing victory at Caporetto and breakthrough into the northern Italian plain sealed the fate of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. In a very short time the frontier was reduced from 370 kilometres to a mere 130 and the Central Powers began talking reverently of the "wonder at Caporetto". However, the subject soon became the "wonder of Italy's resurrection". The demoralised Italian troops may have been lacking motivation while fighting a war of expansion, but now enemy forces had broken through onto their national territory. Venice,



Museo Storico Trento B 14/621



Austrian outposts on the fiercely contested Elfer in the Sexten Dolomites. Today these mountains are still remembered more for the mountaineering feats of individual soldiers than for large-scale combat.

Verona, perhaps even Ravenna and Bologna were threatened. Under their new commander Diaz their spirits suddenly rallied. With allied support and a reinvigorated fighting spirit, soldiers began to protect the front and win back lost territory.

The Carnic Alps

The main ridge in the Carnic Alps runs from the Plöcken Pass near Kötschach-Mauthen to the Kreuzberg Pass. Mountains including the Grosse and Kleine Pall, the Rauchkofel, the Torkarspitze as far as the fiercely defended heights around the Kreuzberg Pass formed the front which hardly moved throughout the war years in spite of constant attacks and counterattacks with shocking losses on both sides. Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary on 23rd May 1915 and on 24th May Italian soldiers already occupied the heights of the Carnic ridge, though equally unexpectedly regiments of the German Alpine Corps from Bavaria arrived with two battalions a day later on 25th May. The Germans were not yet at war with Italy.

On the same day the Italians captured the weakly-defended Cima Frugnoni, the Pfannspitze and the Porze. Basically there were two means of penetrating the Austrian lines: either across the relatively low 1,360 m (4,462 ft) Plöcken Pass or via the 1,636 m (5,367 ft) Kreuzbergsattel pass. The Italians attacked both with such vehemence that the terrible losses made this one of the bloodiest battles in the Alpine war. The adversaries were often only a few metres apart sheltering in hastily dug trenches.

This front sector also brought forth popular heroes. Their deeds did not affect the general war situation but have gone down in history and popular legend. Such as the farmer Stremitzer and ingenious Karl Prusik who managed to capture a small rock on the Wolyerkopf just a few metres from the enemy, or the district police chief Simon Steinberger who took the Cellon in a surprise attack, or the volunteer militia, the Kärntner Schützen who worked for eight weeks burrowing a 780 m long tunnel through the snow towards the Italian



Museo Storico Trento B 14/589



Above centre: Italian prisoners of war on the Elfer in the Sexten Dolomites. Right: in the Cinque Torri area the NCO Edoardo Turkheimer has his beard shaved. He is well provided for, with a walking stick and wash basin in front of the tent.

customs house in spring 1917 with the intention of surprising the troops guarding the border. The Italians defended their positions courageously, there were dead on both sides, the Austrians had to retreat through their snow tunnel just as quickly as they had come. Still the memory of their exploits lives on, like many others.

The Dolomite front

It was the magnificence of these mountains which quickly turned these valleys into a world-wide tourist attraction in the 19th century. The peaks had already been conquered before the war, while the valleys subsequently attracted holidaymakers in search of pure air, curative waters, though also adventurers, explorers and with them the aristocracy. Railways were built and an impressive road even crossed the Dolomite passes. When Italy declared war on Austria many people turned their attention to this region which they knew from their travels. For strategic purposes the village of Cortina d' Ampezzo, the unproclaimed capital of the Dolomites,

was abandoned to the enemy without a fight, a moral-boosting godsend for the Italians. However, cruel disillusionment soon followed. They were unable to push forward, soon nobody believed any more in a fast advance on Vienna. Shortly after the outset of hostilities the mountain guide Sepp Innerkofler from Sexten fell on the Paternkofel on 4th July 1915. Too old at 54 to be called up for active service, he fought in the Standschützen. However what followed was stalemate rather than a modern military campaign. This conflict in the high regions of rock is remembered above all for the many daring and risky actions which took place on both sides, for example the first storming of the Sextner Rotwand by Italian troops, or the capture of the Serauta ridge gap in the Marmolata area. It became fixed in people's souls leaving lasting reminders in the mountain faces and summits which were simply blasted away, including the Col di Lana, the Lagazuoi, the Schreckenstein, and of course the memory of the thousands who were swept to their deaths by avalanches



Kaiserjäger-Museum Berg Isel, Innsbruck (2)



Above left: an Austrian position in the rocks on the Lagazuoi. Above right: building of living quarters in the Tre Sassi area. We still marvel at the spectacular logistical achievements of those times.

during the war winter of 1915-1916. In places up to twelve metres (40 feet) of snow fell. Around 300 deaths were caused by a single avalanche on the Gran Poz in the Marmolada area, almost as many in another deadly avalanche catastrophe in the Höhlenstein Valley.

Viktoria Savs fought in the Drei Zinnen area disguised as a man. She was a small, petite girl who was determined to play here part on the front line. Here right leg was crushed in a rockfall and had to be amputated below the knee. It was only in the field hospital at Sillian that the 16-year-old Viktor Savs turned out to be in fact Viktoria. She was decorated several times for bravery and lived until the ripe old age of 80. Anton von Tschurtschenthaler stood his ground tenaciously on the Col di Lana, even when it was blasted away by Italian troops on 17th April, 1916. This mountain went down in history as the bloody mountain. In an audacious action Italo Lunelli, Giovanni Sala and Antonio Berti captured the Sentinella ridge gap near the Sextner Rotwand. Even at this point it became apparent that the ethnic Italians in Trentino,

at that time the southernmost part Tyrol, were torn between allegiances. The Austrian Italo Lunelli fought on the Italian side under the name Raffaele Da Basso. There was a further ethnic minority in the Dolomites with their own language, the Ladins, who were likewise distrusted by Austrians, while the Italians found their loyalty to the Monarchy baffling.

The Marmolada, the highest summit in the Dolomites became legendary. In the wake of battles with mounting casualties the Austrian engineer Leo Handl had the ingenious idea of building a network of tunnels through the glacier. In this way entire citadels came into being in the ice. This enabled supplies and reinforcements to be brought up to the high regions unhindered and soldiers were better protected against severe weather and avalanches. Even before burrowing in the ice had begun work was underway excavating tunnels extending for hundreds of kilometres in the hard Dolomite rock. Almost immediately the mountains, the Paternkofel, the Tofana, the Lagazuoi were in many places penetrated by networks of galleries. Here,



Archivio arch. Fabio Ortolani. Foto cap. Achille Rovica



Above right: an Italian officer poses with an unexploded shell. This war consumed enormous quantities of valuable materials made of iron and copper. Even church bells were melted for this purpose.

too, the Italians were unable to achieve any significant breakthrough. Finally the crushing defeat suffered by the Italians at Caropretto resulted in their troops being withdrawn from the entire Dolomite front, and so a third winter of fighting in these mountains was averted.

The Vicenza Alps

A front line had developed in the form of a triangle from Val Sugana westwards to the Adige Valley with the important towns of Trento and Bolzano/Bozen well in the Austrian rear. This area of high plateaux, peaks and valleys witnessed the horrors of war unfold at their most hideous. Heinz von Lichem wrote of combat on Monte Pasubio, a extensive massif to the east of Rovereto: "That was hell on earth: mines, raging avalanches, constant hand-to-hand fighting, soldiers vegetating wretchedly under arctic conditions in the depths of winter." In this area both the Italians and Austrians had built strong defences – seemingly intended to last forever. However, once fighting started in earnest the two sides preferred to retreat to their much

safer shelters in hastily-blasted caverns in the rocks. The fortified positions on the Austrian side, Verle, Lusern, Geschwendt, Cherle and Serrada faced the Italian forts Verena, Campolungo, Casa Ratti and Campomolon. The high plateau of the 'Sette Comuni' or 'Seven Villages' was fortified to protect the Austro-Hungarian Empire against a possible Italian breakthrough into the Adige Valley and to defend South Tyrol. This expanse of highland saw the launch in spring 1916 of the so-called 'Strafexpedition' or 'Punitive Campaign', a name invented by the Italians to strike fear into their own people. The aim was for the Austrians to break through the south-eastern Val Sugana defences and penetrate deep into Italian territory, a counteroffensive of Austria-Hungary to wreak vengeance on their perfidious partners who had torn up a long-standing treaty of friendship and sold out to the highest bidder in the hope of obtaining territory at Austria's expense. This plan was to be accomplished with the help of German troops. However it ended in a fiasco: the German ranks on the Western Front had

lost vast numbers of soldiers fighting at Verdun. The dead there needed to be replaced, while in Russia General Brussilow had started a huge offensive, causing havoc on the Eastern Front. Austrian troops were needed more urgently elsewhere and so this 'Punitive Campaign' ended ingloriously in June 1916. On 16th June 1916 the chief of staff Conrad von Hötzendorf gave the order to halt the offensive and on 18th June even ordered his troops to retreat to their well-defended positions from where the campaign had started.

passwords and were thus able to take advantage of surprise to break in and entrench themselves. It was only after fierce fighting that the Austrians managed to dislodge the foreign defenders. Bitter conflicts raged everywhere in this area. On 10th June 1917 the Italians attacked the positions of Ortigara on the 'Seven Villages' high plateau with 1,500 pieces of artillery, though after 19 days of attacks and counterattacks and useless sacrifice nothing was gained.

Monte Corno to the east of Rovereto on

the other hand attained doubtful renown, for it was here in July 1916 that the irredentist Cesare Battisti was taken prisoner following a bold but unfortunate attack by the Italians. Cesare Battisti came from Trento. He had received a doctorate from the University of Innsbruck, had studied in Graz, Florence and Turin, and had been elected to the National Assembly in Vienna in the



Museo Storico Trento B 12 287

The Italian fort Verena bombarded by Austro-Hungarian troops.

The position of Carzano in the Valsugana valley has taken its place in the annals of this war because the Italians succeeded – partially through cunning and partially through betrayal by the Czech First lieutenant Pivko and several of his countrymen and after several weeks of planning – in taking this outpost. The Italians wore Austrian uniforms, knew the German

service of Austria. In spite of being an Austrian subject Battisti had joined the Italian army at the beginning of the war. Immediately after his capture he was condemned to death at Trento after a show trial on 13th July 1916. He quickly became a martyr in the eyes of the Italians, while the Austrians despised him for being as a deserter and saboteur.

With its two main summits the Pasubio towers like a 2,250 metre high fortress. Whoever managed to completely control this high plateau could command the Adige Valley between Trento and Verona as well as large areas of the northern Italian Alpine Foothills.

After bitter and bloody struggles the Austrians and Italians each occupied one of the two summits. The Austrians blew up the Italian positions here in the largest explosion in this Alpine war, an event which cost the lives of 2,000 Italian soldiers in 1917.

There was nowhere for soldiers to easily entrench themselves in the limestone rock, each trench and dugout had to be laboriously blasted into the rock. Relentless wind and storms raged across the region, and to make matters worse the winter was the most awful in living memory. Then from November 1917

until the end of the war Monte Grappa took Monte Pasubio's

place as the mountain of horrors. Italy's strength was seriously sapped in the wake of a devastating defeat in the 12th Battle of the Isonzo. Troops retreated disorderly, left enormous quantities of artillery behind and Italy only struggled to its feet again after asking for support from her British and French allies.

The war had now moved on from these dreadful, hostile mountain summits into the lowlands and plains. There the Italians proved more effective adversaries. By the first days of November 1917 the battle-trying Italian Alpine troops (Alpini) and light infantry (Bersaglieri) which had been transferred south from the Dolomite front were already entrenched on Monte Grappa, the Asalone and Monte Tomba.

In spite of constant assaults by Austrian troops the Italian positions held and the



Museo Storico Trento

A soldier is treated in the hospital at Levico. Emaciation and symptoms of malnutrition are clearly visible.

beleaguered army even began to make unexpected gains. Once they were fighting on Italian soil defending their home country the Italians proved formidable adversaries in the way the Kärnten and Tyrolean defenders had when protecting their own villages two years earlier.

The war around Lake Garda

A part of Trentino to the west of the river Adige survived relatively unscathed from the war. It comprises the Giudicarie Valleys and the Brenta Dolomites (now famous for the ski resort Madonna di



Exposed Italian cabins on the Corno di Lagoscuro in the area of the Tonale Pass.

Campiglio), bordered to the north by Adamello massif, and the region of Lake Garda to the south. In this theatre the Italians never planned to overcome the Austrian troops even though Lake Garda at an elevation of only 67 metres above sea level was the lowest point in this Alpine war. There were occasional mock battles, even half-hearted assaults, though

otherwise troops which were assigned to protect the fortifications in this region lived out the war in relative safety. The actual fierce front action in this theatre took place farther north towards the glacier regions of the Presena and the Adamello massif with its peak at 3,554 metres elevation.

The glacier war in the Adamello massif

Throughout the history of mankind protracted wars had never been fought in Alpine glacier regions, though this changed dramatically when the expanses of eternal ice in the Adamello and Ortler massifs were transformed into a theatre of battle. The Tonale Pass was strategically important for both the Italians and Austrians. From there it was possible to penetrate into Lombardy and take control of its industrial centres, while on the Trentino side the town of Trento could be reached via the Val di Non and the victor could have significantly shortened this section of the front. For this reason from 1860 onwards the area surrounding the Tonale Pass had been extensively fortified. After a hesitating start to the war both sides soon concentrated their main efforts on fighting pitched battles for control of the highest-lying glaciated summits. Unlike the Dolomite theatre there were no mountain roads, well-built cart tracks or footpaths in the region between the Adamello and the Ortler. A ten-hour march was often necessary to carry the most urgently needed supplies up to the high positions.

The very first battle in the history of warfare to be fought in glaciated terrain took place on 9th June 1915 on the Presena Glacier. The battle also saw the very first bold attacks by soldiers on skis. At the outset of the war the Italians had carelessly abandoned the Passo Paradiso and the

Museo della Guerra Bianca, Tenc3

Monticello ridge, giving the Austrians the advantage of being able to occupy these positions from where they had a commanding view of the deployment area on the Tonale and through the Val Camonica. A grave mistake which the Italians sought to rectify. However the first glacier battle in history ended in victory for the Austrian Kaiserschützen.

On 15th July 1915 the Austrian troops set out to take the weakly defended refuge Rifugio Garibaldi, full of confidence and certain of success. Surprisingly for all sides the assault was repulsed. From then on this mountain refuge became the Italian hub for all hostilities. Fighting came to a halt in the glacier regions during the winter of 1915-1916 with soldiers venturing onto the summits occasionally only to clear snow or to make sporadic reconnaissance tours. It was regarded as impossible to carry out strategic warfare there during the winter months. However during the following winters this attitude changed on both sides. In the Ortler and Adamello area the highest summits and strategic positions even at elevations beyond three thousand metres were fortified into winterised bulwarks. In contrast to the area between the Julian Alps as far as the Val Sugana where, in the wake of the lost battle of the Isonzo there was no fighting in the high mountains during the third winter of 1917-1918, in this area soldiers had to endure three fiendish winters with metres-high snowfall and temperatures down to minus 40 degrees centigrade.

The bell tolled for Calvi brothers in April 1916. In a daring attack requiring extensive mountain climbing Captain Nino Calvi seized control of the area from Lobbia Alta to Monte Fumo. At the end of April

the valiant Lieutenant Attilio Calvi was ordered to attack the line from Crozzon di Folgorida as far as the Passo di Cavento, dressed in normal grey-green military uniforms. A fatal mistake on the glacier: Attilio Calvi and his men were picked off by the Austrian marksmen as if at a shoo-



Foto Leo BK/Archiv Konrad Knoll

Soldiers trudge uphill towards the Ortler summit. With its 3,905 metre high summit this mountain went down in history as the highest battleground ever.

ting contest. The 13th December 1916 went down in the history of this high mountain war as the 'Black St. Lucia Day'. All of a sudden twelve metres of fresh snow fell, followed by a thaw, the perfect recipe for devastating avalanches.

Over the next few days thousands on both sides were swept to their deaths, often up to one hundred men per avalanche.

Two moving events took place in 1917. On 15th June the offensive began for the strategically important 3,402 metres-high Corno di Cavento. It was initially taken by the Italians, then almost precisely a year later the Austro-Hungarian troops captured it in hand-to-hand fighting and with heavy losses. The soldiers had dug a long tunnel through the ice and snow and

artillery as retribution for the shelling of some of their ammunition dumps in the Tonale area.

The Ortler region

At an altitude of 3,902 metres the peak of the Ortler was Austria's highest mountain. Throughout the history of mankind a summit at this elevation had never been a theatre of sustained combat. Italians and Austrians fought on these heights for over three years, undertook bold and courageous coups, while the seemingly impossible feats they performed in hauling heavy artillery up to the mountain tops and ridges still command enormous respect. Two powerful 10.5 cm guns were laboriously drawn first of all from Gomagoi to Sulden and from there via the Payerhütte refuge up to the summit area of the Ortler massif. From there 30 mountain guides and 30 Russian prisoners of war dragged the dismantled guns up to the peak in an act of superhuman exertion. The capture of the 3,859 metre high Königspitze is also the stuff of legends. In spring 1917 the Italians and Austrians both decided almost simultaneously to occupy this summit which they deemed strategically important. Neither side knew of the other's intentions as the soldiers set out on their mission. The

Kaiserschützen were a day faster than the Alpini, though this did not prevent the two sides from entrenching themselves 150 metres apart.

The story of the capture of the Hoher Schneid, a 3,434 metre high summit in the Ortler massif is even stranger. The first to occupy the peak were the Italians in



Museo della Guerra Bianca, Tomo 3

The year is 1921. Gaunt widows and sad war orphans kneel in the military cemetery of Pezzo in the area of the Stilfser Joch pass.

managed to completely surprise the well-entrenched Alpini units. However the Corno di Cavento was soon retaken by the Italians on 19th July 1918.

On 27th September 1917 the venerable village Ponte di Legno in Val Camonica was burnt to the ground. The Austrian troops hit it with firebombs and heavy

October 1916, from where they immediately trained their machinegun fire onto the Austrian positions. A breathtaking assault plan was drawn up. The soldiers began to dig a two kilometre-long tunnel in the ice to a position just beneath the Italian line. They worked day and night under top secrecy using hoes, picks and shovels. At temperatures around minus six centigrade, suffering continuously from oxygen starvation and constantly having to contend with the problem of disposing of the 4,000 cubic metres of ice without raising suspicion, the men drew close to the Italian troops. Then the incredible happened: nobody realised how close they were to their objective and the Alpini suspected nothing. On 17th March 1917 while the working party was taking a midday break an Italian soldier suddenly broke through the thin layer of ice and fell into the tunnel. The decision to attack was taken hurriedly with the aim of dislodging the nonplussed Italian summit team with a heavy hand grenade attack. All the same little changed on this front over the years apart from minimal territorial gains and alternations in the occupation of certain summits.

The end

The end came unexpectedly and remarkably. In October 1918 the revitalised Italians were pushing forward to the decisive battle supported by allied troops. The Austrian army stood with its back to the wall and were at the end of their tether. Events moved quickly: on 30th October 1918 Austria asked for an armistice. The Trentino was threatened in a pincer movement across the Tonale Pass as well as from Monte Grappa. On 2nd November Italy agreed to a truce to come into effect at midnight on 3rd

November. The Austrian troops were hurriedly informed. However the news leaked out that the armistice was not to come into effect until 3 p.m. on 4th November. Thousands of Austrians rushing back to their lines were taken prisoner. The Austrian Empire collapsed and a new



Museo Storico Trento

These women in Trentino begin the work of reconstruction amid the ruins of their houses.

world order came into being. The seeds for the Second World War and for many other intractable problems were sown.