



Introduction: World War I

It's been almost a century since the First World War started, but its memory still resides in most people's conscience like very few other past events.

The 1914-1918's war was extraordinarily ferocious. It produced and spread all over the world the horrors and anxieties of the 20th century, involving millions of soldiers as well as citizens, leaving a terrible trail of death behind, using new and more devastating weapons, destroying the territory and creating enormous artistic emergencies.

Besides the injustices, the frustrations, the seeds for new wars that the first conflict left as inheritance to Europe, it also gave birth to a grief-centered, bellicose, barbaric and full of hate culture.



The Italian front of this huge conflict is usually remembered abroad thanks to the battle, and the resulting defeat, of Caporetto. History books narrate about the military strategies, statistics list the slain, the disabled and the widows.

To Friuli Venezia Giulia and Veneto though, as well as to Austria and Slovenia, the memory is even more intense and upsetting. The war walked over these territories, it shred people and feelings and drained all natural resources.

These are the territories where most of those terrifying battles took place. These are the territories where so many young people, coming both from the Kingdom of Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, found death. Here, from May 1915 to October 1918, for twenty-nine endless months, the two armies fought harshly. The Julian and Carnic Alps, but above all the Karst, witnessed to twelve bloodthirsty battles. The plain, on the other hand, became, at first, an enormous rear guard for the Italian army, and then, an invasion-field for Austrian troops.

In the meantime, on the high plateau of Asiago and on Mount Grappa, the Austrian assaults smashed Italian alpine troopers.

After the defeat of Caporetto and the following withdrawal of Italian troops, the frontline moved on the Piave where three massive conflicts took place: the "Arrest battle", that stopped the Austrian; the "Solstice battle" the ultimate great onslaught that struck the enemy, and the



following "Final battle" in Vittorio Veneto that led to victory and to the armistice.

Local people's lives were deeply and irrevocably changed by war. Many evidences still testify war's passage over this region, as well as the courage and the spirit of sacrifice shown by those who were called to arms: abandoned fortifications and shelters, trenches and paths, posts, milestones, monuments and museums represent just as many memories, through which is possible to recall and recollect emotions, hopes and fears of those who were involved in the war.

The route: the province of Vicenza

Bassano del Grappa

Coordinates: 45.777345, 11.731676

During WWI, especially after the defeat of Caporetto, Bassano was directly involved in the conflict: more than 7.000 persons left the city, terrified by bombardments. Austro-Hungarian troops though, have never reached the city, stopping a few kilometers away. The city remained safe thanks to success on Monte Grappa's front, which killed about 22.000 soldiers. 50.000 were wounded, imprisoned or lost. In 1928 Bassano became Bassano del Grappa as to honor those who died during the last year of war.



Inside Villa di Ca'Erizzo, along Brenta's banks, is located the Great War Historic Museum. The magnificent edifice was built in the fifteenth century and in 1918 became the "Section One" for the American Red Cross ambulances. This is the only museum in the whole country that gives evidence of USA's intervention in the war. Inside its five rooms many relics (mostly photographic) are collected, which show how the U. S. participation was not limited to volunteer doctors, but was also close to the Italian fighters in the last year of the war.

Large panels, rich in historical explanations, photographs, testimonies and unpublished documents, that can't be found in any similar museum, evoke the conflict's key stages and the increasing involvement of American troops: the role of the ARC (American Red Cross) in the Great War, the ambulance service on the Grappa's forefront, ARC's places of refreshment in the immediate rear guard; the relationship between U. S. soldiers and the Italian population.



The entrance hall is dedicated to Ernest Hemingway, one of the most famous writers of the 900s, who took part in the Great War as a member of the ARC. Another section is devoted to participation of the American airmen and their commander, Fiorenzo La Guardia, an Italian-American who became famous after the war as mayor of New York.

(45.777345 - 11.731676)

The history of Bassano's bridge, called Ponte Vecchio or Alpine's bridge, begins long before the Great War. It was built in 1209 and swept away by floods in October 1567, it was rebuilt two years later and was designed by Andrea Palladio who wanted to use wood, so that its flexibility could resist to the raging of river Brenta.

The structure, of great visual impact, lies on 4 wooden triangular shafts, aligned with the water flow, and is covered by a roof. During the First World War, the famous bridge was crossed by the Italian

troops of General Luigi Cadorna to deal with the defense of the territories of Seven Towns's plateau. It was on this bridge that an unknown soldier-poet, lived or imagined the love story told in the song "On Bassano's Bridge", that became a symbol to alpinists involved in the war.

(45.767381 - 11.730898)

After the first world war, in the cemeteries around the foothills of Monte Grappa, many soldiers had been provisionally buried and waited to be given a definitive and presentable accommodation.



The cathedral, an imposing red brick, neo-Gothic building, dating back to the early '900, with a double bell tower and a pinnacles decorated façade, that dominates the Cadorna square, was thus used as an ossuary. The inauguration took place on May 13, 1934 in the presence of Crown Prince Umberto of Savoy. Inside are buried the remains of 5,405 soldiers, 236 of which decorated, that were taken by numerous cemeteries scattered on the Grappa's slopes in the '30s.



In the crypt there are other 1,136 niches including the sarcophagus of Umberto of Savoy-Aosta, who died of Spanish flu in October 1918 in Crespano, a village on the slopes of Monte Grappa.

(45.763526 - 11.733553)

The National Monument dedicated to the Boys of '99, opened in October 1974, was built on the initiative of an ex-combatants committee. The monument consists of a bronze statue, almost 4 meters high, depicting a geared infantryman with helmet, cape and rifle on his shoulder, that tends his left arm out to Mount Grappa. Behind him there is a large bronze bas-relief which depicts the most important moments of the last year of the war, further in back there's a second and smaller bas-relief, where the front line was traced as well as the main battles' places.

During the First World War, "Boys of '99" was the name given to conscripts who turned eighteen in 1917 and could therefore be used on battlefields.

They were the last soldiers possessed by Italy. They consisted of 270,000 children, divided into 108 battalions and distributed across the fire line. The firsts were sent to the front in the days following the battle of Caporetto, when they had not yet turned eighteen.

Those very young recruits were added to the troops on the Piave and on Mount Grappa, and allowed Italy's recovery and liberation that culminated in the Battle of Vittorio Veneto, which ended the war.



"I saw the boys of '99, they went at the forefront singing. I've seen them come in small band, and they still sang!" (Armando Diaz, Chief of Staff of the Army).

(45.770262 - 11.736632)

Monte Grappa

Coordinates: 45.870544, 11.799744

The adverse conclusion of the Twelfth Battle on the Isonzo, that ended with the defeat of Caporetto and the withdrawal of our worn out and exhausted troops on the Piave, brought the Monte Grappa in the forefront, on the barricade between the Brenta and the Piave.

In spite of the fatigue and the severe logistical conditions and tactics, our soldiers were able to build a new defensive barrier to permanently stop the enemy.

The first battle took place between November and December 1917: the Austrians, after a massive and violent artillery preparation, attacked our forces using all means of destruction in their possession, from large caliber shells, to flamethrowers and poison gas. Despite the attacks' ferocity, the enemy was stopped and rejected on its previous position.

During the winter lull, our defensive organization was reinforced with many rock work (including the famous Vittorio Emanuele III tunnel, below the top of the massif), trenches, posts and fences, in anticipation of even more intense attacks, the most violent of which came on the night of June 15, 1918 and took the name of Solstice's Battle.

Austro - Hungarians were immediately blocked by Italians, that on the next day, managed to drive the enemy back, determining war's outcome against the Austrian Empire.

At the dawn of October 24 1918, the Italian command began the third and decisive battle.



Five days later, in conjunction with the great offensive battle on the Piave, the troops on mount Grappa, swept all remaining resistance.

The Monumental area of Monte Grappa, on which the last bloody year of war was fought, includes: the Military Memorial, the "Vittorio Emanuele III tunnel" (which develops below the summit) and the "Milan Barracks".

The imposing Military Memorial, designed by Giovanni Greppi (the same architect of Redipuglia), and inaugurated in 1935, was built to collect the remains of Italian and Austro-Hungarian soldiers killed from October 1917 to November 1918 on the Grappa and on the Piave that were temporarily buried in a myriad of cemeteries that stood near the battlefields or in the rear, near the military hospitals: there are 12.500 Italian soldiers and 10.000 Austro-Hungarian, mostly unknown.

The memorial consists of a semicircular series of steps that develop on the slope from the road that leads to the shrine's top, on which lies the Shrine of the Madonna del Grappa (the helper virgin placed on the top on August 4, 1901 by the Patriarch of Venice, Giuseppe Sarto, later Pope Pius X).

From the square of this small temple departs Via Eroica, which runs for 250 meters between two rows of boundary stones on which are carved the names of the places related to the most famous battles on Mount Grappa.

Immediately below the mountain top develops the Vittorio Emanuele III Tunnel, a great fortification. It

is 5 km long and structured on a main corridor from which you can take numerous side corridors that



housed artillery mouths, observatories and machine-guns, but also supplies and troops. For its construction, which began in November 1917 and continued uninterrupted for 10 months, it



was necessary to remove approximately 40.000 cubic meters of rock.

The Tunnel could host 15.000 men with all their technical logistic equipments, as well as 72 guns and about 70 machine guns capable of firing on both sides of the top.

Through a tunnel that branches off from the Gallery you will reach the "Milan Barracks" that, during the conflict, gave accommodation to the workers involved in the construction and maintenance of the fortifications which now houses a historic museum with

relics, weapons, maps and period photographs that reconstruct the battles' fundamental moments. (45.870544 - 11.799744).

Texts by Enza Chiara Lai (bibliographical references on www.ciaoin.com)