

The White War - About the war in the Alps 1915-1918

Introduction



The Italian museum *Museo Storico Italiano delle Guerra* at Rovereto Castle is dedicated to the First World War, and has both a permanent exhibition and changing special exhibitions. In the period February 2004 to January 2005, the special exhibition *La patria estrema, 1915-1918 Soldati sul fronte delle Alpi*, which dealt with the war in the Alps, warfare under the most extreme geographical and climatic conditions, was shown.

This article will thus introduce visual material from the museum and the exhibition and the packaging is a newspaper article by Kristian Lindberg, which was published in *Berlingske Tidende*. The clipping that has come into my hands is unfortunately undated, but judging by the information on the back and other mention of the events, it was taken at the end of August 2004.

The White War

The Tyrolean Alps became the scene of one of the lesser-known confrontations of the First World War, the so-called White War.



High mountain posts served as bases in the War of Position between Austria-Hungary and Italy, and in the first year of the war it was fought almost entirely by local guides who had been conscripted into the two armies. Many of the combatants knew each other personally, and at the start of the war a certain "conduite" was shown towards the enemy.



Later, they began to build front lines directly in the ice. Transporting supplies and munitions in the rough terrain was very difficult, especially in winter, when troops risked being isolated by the snow for weeks at a time.

For both parties, the war was about conquering the highest points in the landscape, such as Monte San Matteo, at 3,678 meters, believed to be the world's highest battlefield.

When the war ended, it was long over in the Alps. The starving Austro-Hungarian soldiers who had not yet perished in avalanches, frost and fighting had simply left their posts and gone home to their families.

The last patrol

For a historian, it is a find of the type that only happens once a decade at most, and which can provide valuable new knowledge. For others, the gruesome discovery of three frozen soldiers from the First World War would be enough for many nights of nightmares.

At the end of last week, the director of a small military museum in the northern Italian town of Peio, the 46-

year-old Maurizio Vincenzi, and studied the Forni glacier with his binoculars. His attention was caught by a spot in the ice that he couldn't immediately explain. After a hike up the ice masses, he got so close that he could make out the details.



Like giant bats, the bodies of three people hung upside down, with most of their bodies frozen in the ice.

The bodies turned out to be the remains of three Austro-Hungarian soldiers who had died in a battle in the First World War. Although the soldiers' nails and hair had disappeared, the bodies were in good condition. The rescue team also found a quantity of military equipment, such as leather belts, a gas mask and winter hats.

It is believed that the soldiers were killed in their trench by shells in one of the last dramatic skirmishes of the war, which took place at an altitude of over 3,000 meters on 3 September 1918 at Punto San Matteo.



On this day, the Austro-Hungarians succeeded in recapturing two observation posts in a battle believed to be the highest-situated theater of war in history.

Austro-Hungarian soldiers receive medals.
Postcard from the Museo Storico Italiano delle Guerra.

Maurizio Vincenzi, who is an amateur historian and member of the local mountain rescue team, calls his find unique. "No people have been found in the ice for many decades", says Vincenzi. Two of the mummified soldiers have been laid to rest in military fashion in a local war cemetery. They have not been identified. The third body has been taken to a hospital in Bolzano for a closer examination.



The archaeological museum in Bolzano houses the 5,300-year-old stone age hunter, called Otzi, who was found in the ice in the same mountains as the Austro-Hungarian soldiers in 1991. By comparing the body of the soldier, researchers can learn more about Otzi's life in the Stone Age.

Italy's last infantryman dead

Berlingske Tidende, 25 January 2005

Reuters, Rome: Italy this week lost its last World War I veteran when Carlo Orelli, popularly known as "the last infantryman", died aged 110, the government said yesterday. Orelli fought as a foot soldier in the trenches around Trieste, which is now part of northeastern Italy. As Italy's oldest survivor of the 1914-1918 war, he was a minor celebrity, and last year a book based on his wartime diaries was published. Italy entered the war in May 1915 on the same side as Great Britain, France and Russia against Germany and Austria-Hungary, with whom it had been allied until earlier that year.

Museo Storico Italiano delle Guerra

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Website: www.museodellaguerra.it (Can be translated via www.altavista.com, for example.)

Postscript

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Per Finsted

