Petra Svoljšak

The social history of the Soča/Isonzo region in the First World War

The Slovene soldiers[1]

Slovenian participation in the Great War (1914–1918) is a classical case study of how an ethnically defined community experienced and survived this war. The inhabitants of the provinces of Carniola, Styria, Carinthia, and the Littoral served (mostly) in the Austro-Hungarian army and assumed various roles characteristic of life in uniform – on all four fronts they became prisoners of war, deserters, and rebels. The Slovenes from the Slavia Veneta, citizens of the Kingdom of Italy, were mobilised into the Italian army, which also brought them to the Soča/Isonzo battlefield. Slovenian soldiers for many reasons also joined so-called volunteer forces: Austro-Hungarian citizens of Slovenian, Croatian and Serbian nationality joined the Serbian army during the Balkan Wars to support the Serbian cause, and later, during World War I, to prevail in the struggle for the creation of a new Yugoslav state. In order to undermine Austria-Hungary's strength both militarily and as a state, volunteer military units were gathered on the Italian-Austrian front under the command of the Slovenian Reserve Lieutenant Ljudevit Pivko, and for the same reason Slovenian (Yugoslav) volunteer troops were organised in North America.

With 7.800.000 to 8.000.000 drafted men during World War I, Austria-Hungary ranked fifth among the belligerent countries, which had conscripted a total of 70 million soldiers. In peacetime, the Austro-Hungarian army kept 36.000 officers and 414.000 soldiers on the active list. On 31 July 1914, when Austria-Hungary ordered general mobilisation, 54.000 military and administrative officers and 2.846.000 soldiers aged between 17 and 52 were conscripted for military service. Thus, at the beginning of the war, a total of 3.350.000 men were called up for active service, 2 million of them were sent to the front.[2] Austria-Hungary entered World War I with 102 joint infantry regiments, whose number would increase to 141 by the end of the war.[3] The review of the national composition of the Imperial Royal Army (infantry and cavalry) reveals that as of May 1918[4] most Slovenian soldiers had served in 50 joint Austro-Hungarian infantry regiments, including the 17th Infantry Regiment of *Kranjski Janezi*,[5] the 47th Lower Styrian Infantry Regiment, the 87th Celje Infantry Regiment, the 97th Trieste Infantry Regiment, the 27th Ljubljana *Landwehr* Infantry Regiment (2nd Mountain Rifle Regiment), the 26th Maribor-Celje *Landwehr* Regiment (26th Rifle Regiment), the 7th

1 Übersetzung aus dem Slowenischen von Manca Gašpersišič und Catherine Baker.

2 Österreichisches Bundesministerium für Heereswesen/Kriegsarchiv Österreich (ed.): Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg: 1914–1918, Vol. II: Das Kriegsjahr 1915, Wien 1931, table 4.

3 Janez Švajncer: Svetovna vojna 1914–1918, Maribor 1988, pp. 31–32.

4 Richard Georg Plaschka/Horst Haselsteiner/Arnold Suppan: Innere Front. Militärassistenz, Widerstand und Umsturz in der Donaumonarchie 1918, Vol. II, Wien 1974, pp. 335–357.

5 In the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy the name Kranjski Janez (Janez from Carniola) denoted the 17th Infantry Regiment; today, it stands as a jocular term for a young Slovenian man (trans. note).

Hunter Regiment, and the 26th and 27th *Landsturm* Infantry Regiment, i.e. Slovenian regiments under the III Army Corps based in Graz. In general, Slovenes served in almost every branch of the Austro-Hungarian army. In terms of linguistic majority, two infantry regiments, the *Kaiserjäger* Regiment and the *Feldjägerbataillon*, were designated as exclusively Slovenian military formations.[6] As indicated in Austrian official reports Slovenian soldiers had, despite existing pro-Yugoslav tendencies, adhered to the Emperor's proclamation that their loyalty would be rewarded with political independence,[7] because they "*never lacked the devotion to make the greatest sacrifices to the last. Slovenian young men are found in every battlefield shedding blood for their beloved country. Therefore we are most confident that we shall not be deprived of our rights as a Slovenian nation*".[8] Out of every 100 soldiers in the Imperial Royal Army, 25 were Germans and 2 Slovenes. By the end of the war, on the list of commissioned officers there were 5 Slovenian officers on active service and 8 Slovenian reserve officers out of every 1.000 men. The exact number of Slovenian soldiers who joined the battle "*For God, Homeland and the Emperor*" wearing the Austro-Hungarian military uniform is still unknown. Some estimates indicate that, at the beginning of World War I, 100.000 soldiers, including 30.000 Slovenes, were sent to the front from the III. Army Corps area.[9] After the war, Wilhelm Winkler produced three official statistical records on the fallen soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy classifying the fallen Austro-Hungarian soldiers by nationality, age and profession.[10] The statistics by nationality are somewhat misleading, because they were based exclusively on the language of communication (just like the population census in 1910) rather than on the mother tongue, and also because the author disconsidered the last three, very bitter battles fought by the Austro-Hungarian army. The author's primary objective was to demonstrate the high blood tax that German troops had to pay in comparison to other soldiers of the Monarchy. Winkler generated the statistics on the basis of the lists of losses incurred between 1 August 1914 and 19 April 1918 and a sample of 120.000 fallen Austro-Hungarian soldiers from a total of 1.200.000. Taken in relative numbers, the highest losses by province were suffered by Carinthia with 36 fallen soldiers per 1.000 inhabitants, followed by Carniola (24 per 1.000) and Gorizia-Gradisca (20 per 1.000), while Istria (13,3 per 1.000) and Trieste (12 per 1.000) recorded the smallest number of casualties. The Austrian average amounted to 23,3 per 1.000, and the Hungarian average reached 25,7 per 1.000. Rough estimates suggest that 36.000 fallen soldiers (28 per 1.000) came from those provinces whose population spoke predominantly Slovenian.[11]

6 Petra Svoljšak: Poizkus ocene vojaških in civilnih izgub (žrtev) med 1. svetovno vojno, in: Stane Granda/Barbara Šatej (eds.): Množične smrti na Slovenskem, Ljubljana 1999, pp. 225–240, p. 227.

7 Österreichisches Bundesministerium für Heereswesen/Kriegsarchiv Österreich (ed.): Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg: 1914–1918, Vol. I: Das Kriegsjahr 1914, Wien 1930, p. 42.

8 Slovenec, no. 279, 5 December 1914, 1.

9 Jurij Mušič: Ognjeni Krst slovenskih fantov 1914 (ob petdesetletnici), in: Kronika XII/2 (1964), p. 84.

10 Wilhelm Winkler: Die Totenverluste der öst.-ung. Monarchie nach Nationalitäten. Die Altersgliederung der Toten. Wien 1919; Idem: Berufsstatistik der Kriegstoten der öst.-ung. Monarchie, Wien 1919.

11 Svoljšak: Poizkus ocene, pp.229–229.

The percentage of Slovenian soldiers in Austro-Hungarian military uniform is also indicated by statistics on disabled war veterans and war widows. According to the 1921 census, there were 29.249 disabled war veterans in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, including 11.467 Slovenes; within the new Yugoslav state framework, Slovenes made up as much as 15,4 percent of all disabled war veterans, even though Slovenia accounted for only 8,5 percent of the entire Yugoslav population. In the Slovenian part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes one fifth of Slovenian families were faced with such long-term consequences of the war; 31.039 war widows had to maintain 49.182 family members incapable of earning a livelihood.[12]

The war "absolutism"

The everyday public and private life of Austro-Hungarian citizens during World War I was affected by a special wartime regime that became known as military absolutism. The regime subjected public civilian life to martial law, eliminated fundamental human rights and assumed broad dictatorial powers to run both state and military affairs. The Austrian military and civil authorities attempted to use military absolutism as a tool for the internal consolidation of the state, to suppress any form of anti-militarism, and to exert pressure on everyone suspicious or controversial, especially within non-German national movements. The measures propagated by military absolutism had an enormous effect, not least because they provided the setting for unwritten rules to emerge which undermined the validity of traditional moral rules. The imperial decree of 21 July 1914 (RGBl. no. 186)[13] gave the commander-in-chief of the Austro-Hungarian army special authority to issue ordinances and orders across provincial presidencies for the sake of protecting military interests. This decree applied to the territories in the immediate rear of the front line; following Italy's declaration of war on 23 May 1915 this meant all Slovenian-speaking provinces (Carniola, Styria, Carinthia, and the Littoral). The Slovenian provinces passed under the regime of the so-called "military battlefield area", in which the military authority was empowered to appoint a summary court-martial to try civilians. When martial law was imposed in Carniola on 6 March 1915, Ljubljana/Laibach obtained its court-martial as well. Although courts-martial were in principle obliged to observe the general penal code, they nevertheless followed military procedures. Thus they could arbitrarily delay a trial and close it by pronouncing a capital sentence with immediate effect, provided that the defendant was found guilty. Any possibility of granting amnesty was rejected. Until 1916, the military authorities would even authorise trials based on anonymous charges; thereafter, anonymous charges too were required to contain material information. Executions took place at the military firing range; Slovenes made up nearly one half of the 14 convicts who were put to death.

12 France Kresal: Invalidi in vojne vdove kot trajne posledice prve svetovne vojne, njihov status, število in struktura, in: Granda/Šatej: Množične smrti na Slovenskem, pp. 307–314, p. 307.

13 The Reich law Gazette (trans. note).

A circular distributed by the then Prime Minister Count Karl Stürgkh incited the provincial governments and citizens to commit acts of denunciation; even before 1914, lists had been made of politically suspicious persons who were to be eliminated should war break out. The main forms of persecution were imprisonment, trials, confinement and internment, subject to which, most notably, were Slovenian priests, teachers, and other promoters of national identity. The police performed their tasks with great vigour, cramming the Gorizia/Gorica/Görz and Trieste/Trst/Triest prisons full; beginning in mid-August 1914 political prisoners, and convicts sentenced to imprisonment by courts-martial, were committed to Ljubljana Castle, where many notable Slovenes served time, e. g. the professor Fran Ilešič, the writer and representative of pan-Slav thought Fran Mislej Podlimbarski, the former mayor of Ljubljana Ivan Hribar, the painter Ferdo Vesel, and the writer and politician Ivan Cankar, just to name a few. Such persecution during the first two years of the war prompted the South Slav deputies to step up their pressure on the government when the Vienna Parliament reconvened on 13 May 1917 and demanded an investigation of the persecution of Slovenian, Croatian, and Serbian inhabitants of Austria-Hungary. After the Parliament's session of 30 May 1917, an amnesty for political crimes was finally issued on 2 July.

Austrian censorship constituted one of the foundations for military absolutism.[14] Censorship was not confined to an administrative or bureaucratic procedure with regard to various forms of communicative networks, like media, assemblies, and associations, but served as an instrument of control over the population and individual national units within Austria-Hungary. The censors played a crucial role in controlling public opinion by creating large white spaces in newspapers, prohibiting periodical publications and imposing a ban on any kind of social criticism in literary magazines. However, no other form of censorship penetrated the most intimate pores of human existence to the same extent as the censorship of correspondence, which violated the intimacy of every single individual, controlled their movement, thoughts, distresses and the rare joys they could savour amidst the turbulent, uncertain and gloomy reality of the war.

The most extensive and accurate form of censorship, almost flawless due to its intensity, was the examination of correspondence among prisoners of war. Censorship concentrated on preventing the exchange of news that could prove detrimental to the Monarchy or its allies and, likewise, on detecting and intercepting news of a military, economic and political nature that could prove beneficial to the Monarchy or its allies. The initial aim was to use supervision and investigation to set up an information barrier. However, once the office realised what an enormous benefit could be derived from the censored material, it went on the offensive. Transforming into an important reporting station, it intercepted a wide range of information that not only served military purposes but, as the war progressed, became increasingly crucial in determining the state of affairs within the Monarchy. Based on a systematic investigation of messages produced by individual groups who were subject to censorship and of so-called analytical messages concerning individual matters, a report was

14 Petra Svoljšak: Slovenci v primežu avstrijske cenzure, in: Peter Vodopivec (ed.): Velika vojna in Slovenci, Ljubljana 2005, p. 109–127.

drawn up on 20 June 1916 by the head of the Censorship Department that indicated the following about the Slovenes: "The evidence clearly shows that this nation does not belong within the average framework of the idea of a Greater Serbia. It may be claimed that the agitation has reached intelligentsia, but not the general population itself. The stance of individual Slovenian cities can be characterised as irreproachable."[15]

Living the War

Censorship kept a close and keen eye on the changing sentiments of the civilian population across the Monarchy. Censors received an ever increasing number of grievances and complaints about the miserable living conditions. The Slovenian censorship group's report stated that the Slovenes were yearning for a victorious peace; that they believed in a triumph of Austrian arms, but nevertheless complained about the famine, prices, lack of labour, and draught animals.[16] The situation in the countryside was downright deplorable. Wartime yields were poor, and the weather conditions unfavourable. With draught animals and labour lacking, women, children, and old people were forced to perform hard physical work. Requisitions posed a major problem for the countryside as well, and were most severe in Lower Styria. Nevertheless, a handful of peasants were able to make high profits from the lack of food by selling their produce to the urban population. This even enabled some of them to pay off their debts in a short period of time.

Much like anywhere else, in Austria-Hungary, too, the initial enthusiasm for the war soon gave way to a great deal of confusion and economic hardship which had already been triggered by the mobilisation of the workforce at the very outset of the war. By the end of March 1918, 60 percent of the men aged between 18 and 35 had been conscripted in the Austrian part of the Monarchy alone.[17] Already, the Military Service Act of 26 September 1912 had provided for placing the whole industry, including the workers, under military control should a war break out,[18] and some industrial branches devoted their entire production to military purposes (e. g. the railways and the postal and telegraphic services). The deteriorating economic situation was further aggravated by the blocking of savings accounts, the increase of interest rates on loans, the declaration of a moratorium on debts incurred by drafted soldiers, and the creation of provisional instruments for the promotion of the credit trade, which all exacerbated the instability of the monetary market.[19] Prior to the war, the Austro-Hungarian gov-

15 Österreichisches Staatsarchiv (ÖSA), Kriegsarchiv (KA). Armeeoberkommando (AOK), Evidenzbüro 1915–1918, Kart. 3789, Bericht des Leiters der Zensur – Abteilung für Kriegsgefangene Korrespondenz K. u.K. Major Theodor Primavesi. 20 June 1916. Cfr. Svoljšak: Slovenci v primežu avstrijske cenzure, p. 116.

16 ÖSA, KA. AOK, Evidenzbüro 1916, Kart. 3741, Res. 3630. Stimmung im Hinterland nach bei der Zensurleitung eingelaufenen Berichten der einzelnen Zensurgruppen. 29 March 1916.

17 Edith Rigler: Frauenleitbild und Frauenarbeit in Österreich vom ausgehenden 19. Jahrhundert bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg, Wien 1976, p. 81.

18 Petra Iglseder-Hesz: Aspekte der Frauenarbeit während des Ersten Weltkriegs, Wien 1990, p. 29.

19 Žarko Lazarević: Vojno gospodarstvo, in: Slovenska kronika 20. stoletja 1900–1941, Ljubljana 1995, p. 187.

ernment had tried to compensate for the existing severe labour shortages by employing women, children, and refugees, extending working time, repealing the Act on Prohibiting Sunday and Holiday Work and employing unqualified workers to perform demanding tasks, which caused an increase in accidents at work. Women remained employed in traditional branches of industry (textiles, food, sugar, tobacco, cleaning, office work, home working). Most of them were undereducated and, being mothers, were also less mobile and competitive. However, at the turn of 1914 and 1915, an acute labour shortage made women enter traditional male occupations in the metal and printing industries, various crafts and coal transport. They began to work as tramcar conductresses and drivers, and even found employment in state services that required highly qualified personnel in engineering.[20] Sometimes women took over the posts of their conscripted husbands, brothers, or fathers. Each such post was designated "female" in order to restore the situation to normal after the war – as well as to make sure that the world had, in fact, not changed and the boundaries between the two genders had remained intact. Women's wartime work was accompanied by long working hours – the minimum working time was set at 11 hours, reaching 13 in war industries, and there were numerous cases of overtime amounting to a total of 15–18 hours per day. Nevertheless, women earned a considerably lower income for performing the same work that men had done prior to the war.[21] Still, women's employment did bring about some legal changes in their position within Austro-Hungarian society, e. g. in contract law and inheritance law, and the war appeared to be one of the main contributing factors to this improvement, perhaps even the most important one. Female (and child) labour, long working hours, and poor sanitary conditions resulted in the deteriorating health of women and children; during the third year of war, unhealthy living conditions also led to a severe famine in the Slovenian provinces and an increased mortality rate both lasting until after the war.

Before assuming "classical" jobs in war industries, women performed various kinds of home work (sewing, kneading, etc.). This could be for several reasons: because they were reluctant to take employment in war industries, because they represented the impoverished segment of the middle class and refused to identify themselves with the proletariat or, finally, because they were mothers with small children. However, work at home was usually associated with miserable earnings and excruciatingly long working hours spent in small, stuffy, and poorly lit rooms.

All Slovenian provinces struggled with extremely poor economic and living conditions. The authorities set up special food storage facilities to provide the population with the necessary supplies, introduced food rationing and issued coupons for food and other life essentials (petroleum, clothing, shoes). In February 1915, an order was issued to reduce the consumption of bread flour (200 g per person daily) and that same spring saw bread coupons distributed among the non-rural population. In early 1916, sugar consumption was reduced to 1 kg per person monthly; meat consumption was initially regulated by the introduction of the so-called meatless days (first two days and later three days in a week), but after 1916 meat was

20 Rigler: Frauenleitbild, p. 90.
21 Iglseder-Hesz: Aspekte der Frauenarbeit, p. 17.

only sold against special order forms (180 g per person on a meat day and 750 g of lard monthly). The authorities also issued potato coupons (300 g daily).[22] In late 1917, shoe and clothing coupons were issued for the poor, while the remaining population was to draw their supplies from the free market, which was not only pressured by high prices but also by the black market and war profiteering. Food rationing applied to the entire population, although coupons were only distributed among the non-rural population. Peasants were obliged to sell their excess meat, cereals and potato crops to the state at maximised prices. To ensure the consistent implementation of food rationing and surplus produce sales, requisition commissions were set up which were also empowered to confiscate food and cattle by force. The population perceived the deficient and difficult supply of provisions to be unjust, and in the last year of the war the food supply system completely collapsed. The administration offices' incapacity to provide the population with sufficient food was also manifested in the ineffective and unfair provision of assistance. The brunt of these conditions was borne by the families of conscripted soldiers or prisoners of war. Even the slightest shadow of suspicion that a prisoner of war had perhaps defected to the enemy was enough for his family to be denied assistance. The amount of maintenance did not suffice to cover even the most basic life necessities amidst uncontrollable price rises and local authorities' inflexibility in allocating the funds, which eventually even sparked national antagonisms within linguistically mixed counties. The state administration was also the main culprit in the unequal allocation of other forms of financial assistance and the failure to protect the population from speculators, the black market, price inflation and profiteering. Owing to high unemployment when the war began and the deteriorating conditions throughout its duration, the authorities had to take numerous measures so as not to plunge women and families into even greater poverty. Such conditions also drove many women and girls into prostitution, since many a soldier would pay for their amorous services in the most sought-after wartime goods – food. The situation of urban women was marked by the everyday struggle for wartime bread, which they collected after standing in queues for hours.[23] In 1915 a handbook titled *Varčna kuharica: zbirka navodil za pripravo okusnih in tečnih jedil s skromnimi sredstvi* (*Thrifty Housewife: Collection of guidelines for the preparation of tasty and nourishing meals with scarce means*) was published to offer advice to Slovenian housewives and inspire their ingenuity.[24] But on 22 April 1918 the excruciating poverty drove 200 women into the streets of Ljubljana to demonstrate against hunger in front of the provincial castle.

The lamentable reality of daily life in the Slovenian provinces was aggravated all the more by requisitions, but the situation took a further turn for the worse after the joint Austrian-German military success at Kobarid/Karfreit/Caporetto in the 12th battle of the Soča (24 October – 27 October 1917) when the Slovenian provinces were overwhelmed by German

22 France Kresal: Zgodovina socialne in gospodarske politike v Sloveniji, Ljubljana 1998, pp. 41–42.

23 Petra Svoljšak: Tudi jaz sem pomagala do velike zmage! Položaj in vloge žensk na Slovenskem med 1. svetovno vojno, in: Aleksander Žižek (ed.): Ženske skozi zgodovino, Ljubljana, 2004, pp. 153–158.

24 Marija Remec: Varčna kuharica: zbirka navodil za pripravo okusnih in tečnih jedil s skromnimi sredstvi, Ljubljana 1915.

units which ruthlessly destroyed civilian property, stirring up hatred and contempt among the Slovenes and, in some places, even riots. The situation was most desperate in Istria; owing to the cruelest famine that afflicted parts of Istria, Dalmatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1917 and 1918, the *Croatian National Committee* launched an action to move children from war-torn districts to fertile areas and also assisted starving Slovenian children from Istria and the Littoral. In a similar vein, the Committee also sought families who could offer shelter to Slovenian children from refugee camps.

In wartime, Slovenian female refugees, much like their counterparts in the hinterland, found themselves bearing all the burdens of wartime life, the only difference being that they had to do so in a foreign and sometimes very adverse environment, sometimes in refugee camps and otherwise in Carniola and Styria where they took refuge.

Generally speaking, World War I was a liberating experience for women. It was during the war that they were given the opportunity to enter the public sphere – only to retreat from it once peace was restored. Wartime changes, "imposed" freedom, work, caring for the family, unendurable conditions, hunger, general shortages, sorrow, and despair confronted (Slovenian) women with unanticipated novelties and temptations. They achieved emancipation in clothing, ridding themselves of tight corsets, large gaudy hats and extravagant coiffures.[25] Their new clothes were a more practical range of shorter and comfortable skirts that the public accepted only grudgingly and with considerable protest. In the Slovenian provinces, in fact, the resistance to this change was so high that the then Bishop of Ljubljana, Anton Bonaventura Jeglič, even established a so-called Holy Alliance against the Shameless Women's Dressing Manners.

Although Slovenian women brought the regular activities of their societies to a halt at the outbreak of the war, they swiftly organised themselves to cope with wartime realities. Slovenian middle class women became actively involved in humanitarian efforts. Moreover, after the establishment of the Yugoslav Club and the adoption of the May Declaration in 1917, which claimed a South Slav entity be established within the monarchy equal to Austria and Hungary, they even entered the public political arena by launching the "Slovenian women and girls for the May Declaration" campaign to collect signatures and statements in support. On Palm Sunday, 24 March 1918, when Franja Tavčar solemnly presented the President of the National Council of the Habsburg South Slavs, Anton Korošec, with a list of more than 200.000 signatures.

The atmosphere and sentiments stirred up among the population of the Slovenian provinces, which were initially pervaded by enthusiasm for the war and confidence in an early and victorious conclusion, soon turned into a state of depression, apathy, and anxiety. The Slovenian population remained loyal to their homeland and the Emperor, even when confronted with the harshest ordeals of life. In May 1917, the Supervisory Office's reports still observed that the Slovenes were politically united, but pointed out the risk that this unity

25 Thébaud, Françoise: The Great War and the triumph of sexual division, in: Georges Duby/Michelle Perrot/Françoise Thébaud (eds.): A History of Women in the Twentieth Century, Cambridge (Mass.) 1994, pp. 21–75, p. 71.

could potentially be broken by influences from the United States of America and Russia, where pro-Yugoslav propaganda also involved the recruitment of prisoners of war. Even after the establishment of the Yugoslav Club, the Slovenian population believed in the solutions proposed by Emperor Charles and in a Slovenian existence in an equal community of Austrian South Slav nations within the Habsburg Monarchy. However, the incapacity of the state to take proper care of its citizens, the long duration of the war, and its uncertain outcome left an irreversible scar on the population, in spite of its declared loyalty to the Emperor.

The Soča (Isonzo) front

On 23 May 1915, Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary. When the Great War broke out on 3 August 1914, Italy had declared its neutrality (despite having signed an alliance treaty with Austria-Hungary and Germany), thus avoiding military engagement for a little less than a year. Both the central empires and the Entente Powers conducted secret diplomatic negotiations in an effort to swing Italy to their side. The Entente ultimately succeeded on 26 April by signing a secret agreement with Italy, the so-called Treaty of London, promising it Tyrol to the Brenner, Trieste, Gorizia and Gradisca, the Tarvisio/Trbiž basin, part of Carniola to the watershed between the Sava river and the Adriatic (the Triglav–Snežnik line), Istria to the Kvarner/Quarnero (Volosko/Volosca), the islands of Cres/Cherso and Lošinj/Lussino with their neighbouring islands, northern Dalmatia with its islands, the islands of Sasena and Valona, the Dodecanese archipelago near the coast of Asia Minor and an appropriate share of potential territorial gains in Asia Minor and Africa. On 4 May 1915, Italy withdrew from the Triple Alliance and started feverish preparations for war.

In spring of 1915, despite rumours to the contrary, anxiety in official circles and numerous speculations, people were still confident that peace was in reach; not for a moment did they think that war might actually break out between Italy and Austria-Hungary, notwithstanding the persistently deteriorating living conditions. A mild winter and early spring raised hope that the war would be over by summer. Pessimists who did not share that sentiment were designated as cruel, even noxious; those who dared anticipate that some states would cross over to the Entente camp were denounced as non-patriots and doomsayers. Not even the new fortifications under construction along the Italian border would convince the inhabitants of the Soča basin that Rome was girding up for a war against Austria-Hungary.

The most important battlefield between Italy and Austria-Hungary was the 90 km long southern branch of the front that cut into Slovenian ethnic territory. The so-called Soča Front, the Austrian defensive line, started at Mount Rombon (2208 m), from where it descended through the mountains along the left bank of the Soča river, traversed the Banjšice plateau and continued along the foot of the Kras/Carso/Karst plateau to the Adriatic Sea at the mouth of the river Timav/Timavo.

At the very same moment that Italy declared war on Austria, the Italian army crossed the Italian-Austrian border. At the dawn of 24 May 1915, it made the first offensive move – *il primo balzo* – in which it seized Ježa, Kolovrat and Korada, Brda and Kambreško. Kobarid, the villages along the right bank of the Soča and part of the Upper Soča Valley around Žaga

fell without a struggle, while Bovec/Flitsch/Plezzo resisted until 23 August 1915, when Austrian troops surrendered it to the Italians. Other "liberated" towns were Cervignano/Červinjan, Cormons/Krmin, Monfalcone/Tržič and Medea/Medeja. Italian units reached the Soča between Pieris and Gradisca d'Isonzo/Gradišče ob Soči, which fell on 8 June, and the defensive line north of Gorizia between Sabotin/Monte Sabotino and Selo.

The Soča Front was the scene of twelve offensives, of which eleven were unleashed by the Italian army and the last by joint Austrian and German forces, after which the front "withdrew" from the ethnic Slovenian territory. With two exceptions, the eleven battles brought Italy no major victory. The exceptions were the 6th battle (6–17 August 1916), when the Italians seized control over Gorizia and the Doberdob/Doberdò Plateau, and, even more so, the 11th battle (17 August – 15 September 1917), the last Italian offensive, when in an attempt to make a decisive breakthrough the Italian army pounced upon the Soča front with all its military might. The main battlefield stretched between Tolmin/Tolmein and the sea, and the battle was fought with equal ferocity on both sides of the river – the Kras plateau and the Banjšice plateau, where the Italian army penetrated some 10 km into the Austrian defensive positions. The most ferocious fighting took place behind Mt. Škabrijel/San Gabriele, which guarded the entrance to the Vipava/Vipacco/Wippach valley. The Italians stormed it over and over again, while the Austrian forces fought off the onslaughts with fierce counterattacks. Škabrijel was defended by two Slovenian regiments: the 87th Celje Infantry Regiment and the 2nd Ljubljana Mountain Rifle Regiment.

The Italian military success in this 11th battle of the Soča posed a genuine threat that the next offensive would completely obliterate the Austrian defensive lines. Therefore, during the 11th battle preparations were already beginning for the launch of a joint Austrian-German offensive or the 12th battle of the Soča (24 October – 27 October 1917). Because the Austrian units were severely undermanned, Emperor Charles sought assistance from his ally, the German Emperor William II. The decisive breakthrough was to be made in the Upper Soča valley, between Bovec and Tolmin. Its main assets were the element of surprise, the use of gas and a swift action by combined infantry and artillery forces. The 12th battle of the Soča was launched on 24 October 1917 at 2 a. m. by releasing a thick cloud of poisonous gas over the Italian trenches, supported by a heavy barrage of artillery fire pounding from 2.000 cannons and 1.000 mortars. The first to fall were Bovec and Kobarid; then fierce fighting started on Mount Rombon; almost at the same time Mt. Stol was seized to clear the entrance into the Friulian plain; and, once Mt. Matajur had also surrendered and the path was clear to break into the valleys around the river Adige/Nadiža/Natisone. The Austrians launched yet another offensive on the Banjšice/Bainsizza plateau and decisively crushed the Italian defensive lines. On 27 April, the commander of the Italian army ordered a withdrawal to the Tagliamento river, but in the ensuing days the Italian army retreated all the way to the Piave. The front line between Italy and Austria-Hungary was pushed away from the Slovenian territory; life was slowly returning to the Soča basin, and the reconstruction of destroyed homes began. The battles on the Soča caused around 1,5 million casualties, 187.000 of them died (according to some estimates, the Soča battlefields took the lives of 2.000 to 3.000 Slovenian men), the others resulted wounded and/or captured.

The Italian occupation of the Slovene territory and the Slovene refugees

The movements of the civilian population, which were planned and guided by the state, began on a massive scale during the Balkan Wars and grew even greater with the onset of World War I, affecting hundreds of thousands of persons throughout Europe. The "exchange" of inhabitants between countries continued immediately after the war in order to achieve the greatest possible national homogeneity within the boundaries of individual countries, which in turn affected several million people. During World War I, the basic mechanisms were set for the regulation of mass civilian population movements – including deportations, the use of railway wagons, systems of supervision, and camps. The civilian population became the main protagonist in 20th century warfare: it became the hostage, victim, and subject of the repressive powers of the armed forces which, in their post-1918 efforts to cleanse their territories, concentrated more and more of their military might against the civilian population instead of the enemy. The final outcome was the refugee, whose inevitable presence became an integral element of modern warfare. During World War I, emigration in the Slovenian territory was frequently twofold: on the one hand, it involved men aged between 18 and 50 dispersed across numerous fronts, and, on the other, exiled families were scattered across the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the Kingdom of Italy respectively.

On the day of Italy's entry into the war (23 May 1915), the people who lived along the Soča river awaited the war in their backyards. Mobilisation and the militarization of everyday life were followed by expulsion and homelessness. Their experiences are diverse, multifaceted and so complex that they deserve treatment from various perspectives. One can surely draw some parallels, such as the fear on the eve of the war, chaotic plight, arrivals in unknown places, countless predicaments, hope and despair, and finally the first families returning to their destroyed homes. The scattered population was under extreme pressure and duress as a result of their tumultuous expulsion, without any material and organisational support. They had to adjust to hitherto unknown living conditions pulling them into economic and social dependency. The story of refugees became a story of social differences and relations and also a story of national, cultural, and linguistic differences, reflected in the relations between refugees and with the local populations. Refugees lived in constant uncertainty about what had happened and what still lay ahead; they were overwhelmed by anxiety, hope and constant thought about the times before the war and about what might lie in store afterwards.

The beginning of hostilities on the Soča Front unleashed a widespread civilian migration in retreat from the Italian advance. The direction of evacuation was determined by the front line. The Austrian government evacuated the Slovenian population (approximately 80.000) from the left flank of the front to Carniola, Lower Styria, and Carinthia, as well as to refugee camps in Lower Austria, while 10.000–12.000 Slovenes were transported to the Kingdom of Italy.[26] The next wave of refugees came in the wake of the Italian occupation of Gorizia in August 1916. In 1917, another two refugee waves followed the Italian victories on the Banjšice plateau in August and their breakthrough towards Bovec and Tolmin in October; however,

26 Petra Svoljšak: Slovenski begunci v Italiji med prvo svetovno vojno, Ljubljana 1991.

in this case, the refugees were Friulians. The end of the war triggered yet another wave of Slovenian refugees who, after Italy had re-acquired the Slovenian lands, fled to the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs.

The Italian occupation of Friuli and the Soča basin[27] progressed smoothly, without much resistance from the Austro-Hungarian army – and also without much of the expected enthusiasm among the local population. The occupied Slovenian territories (between the Austrian-Italian border and the Soča) fell under the Princely County of Gorizia-Gradisca with its administrative centre in Gorizia. According to the last Austrian census, the political counties of Gorizia, the environs of Gorizia, Gradisca d'Isonzo, Sežana, Monfalcone and Tolmin had a population of 260.749.

In the territories of the Kingdom of Italy where a state of war had been proclaimed and in those that were occupied by the Italian army, political and administrative authority was in the hands of the Supreme Command of the Italian army. Besides performing exclusively military operations, the Supreme Command was also charged with remedying the situation in the occupied areas, ensuring law and order and the safety of military routes, helping the civilian population and local authorities as well as facilitating or even enabling the normal functioning of public services. The Hague Conventions of 1907 were still valid, determining among other things that the inhabitants of the occupied territory during occupation were allowed to retain their citizenship, since occupation did not automatically invest the occupying force with state sovereignty. Therefore the population was not required to swear allegiance to the occupier, but it was obliged to obey and adhere to the occupier's decrees.

However, these instructions could only apply to general, basic, and (as it turned out in the case of the Italian occupation) theoretical conditions. The Italian Supreme Command concluded that public life had in its entirety (administration, public offices, and public services) come to a halt. This situation resulted from the absence of a major part of the civilian population due to mobilisation and the Austrian and Italian internments, as well as to the voluntary or inevitable emigration of the Slovenian and Friulian population. The public administration measures taken by the Italian authorities were also based on a belief that Venezia Giulia and Trento/Trient were not foreign territories to be strategically occupied during the war but part of Italian national territory in enemy hands which should be "redeemed" and annexed to the nation once and for all.

The Supreme Command assumed direct control and responsibility over the organisation of public services by establishing the General Secretariat for Civil Affairs (It. *Segretariato Generale per gli Affari Civili*) on 29 May 1915. The General Secretariat had its seat in Udine and was run by the prefect Agostino d'Adamo and his deputy Carlo Galli, a diplomat, former Consul General in Trieste and a great authority on conditions in Venezia Giulia. It employed a large number of irredentists who wanted to take an active part in solving the problem of the unredeemed provinces.

To comply with international rules, the Italians essentially retained the Austrian administrative system, but some "adjustments" were nevertheless required regarding unoccupied

27 Petra Svoljšak: Soča, sveta reka. Italijanska zasedba Posočja (1915–1917), Ljubljana 2003.

municipalities in individual districts and partly occupied municipalities transferred from one political district to another. Slovenian towns were divided under civil commissariats: the Gradisca commissariat with its seat at Cormons and the Tolmin commissariat with its seat at Kobarid. According to the 1910 census, the (occupied) Slovenian municipalities had a population of 27.834.

The Tolmin civil commissariat transferred its seat to Breginj in January 1916 when the Austrian artillery first started to bombard Kobarid, which housed a large body of soldiers and, due to the relative security it had hitherto provided, a number of hospitals, with military camps and ammunition storage facilities in the immediate vicinity. The authorities also temporarily evacuated part of the civilian population.

The language used by public officials in the occupied Slovenian territories was Italian; however, in the initial stages of the occupation, military proclamations on the safety and movement of the population in the military zone were issued in both Italian and Slovenian. This is not so surprising, because the Italian wartime occupation was discreetly and carefully preparing the occupied territories for ultimate annexation to the Italian state, even though international regulations forbade any measures with permanent effects. One such example was the so-called Toponomastic Commission of the General Secretariat for Civil Affairs, which changed or adjusted Slovenian place, personal and family names to Italian orthography and spelling – a clear indication of Italian intentions to remain on this part of Austrian territory even after the war.

Another extremely sensitive area dealt with by the Italian administration was education, as the aim of the occupation regime was to introduce Italian schools and the Italian educational system. The skeleton of the school system in the occupied territories consisted of so-called educational and recreational facilities that offered a specific wartime combination of kindergarten education and traditional elementary school instruction. Education was provided by soldier-teachers who were assisted by domestic teacher-refugees, while religious instruction was conducted by Salesian chaplains. Since educational and recreational facilities were state-run institutions, the language of instruction was Italian. The Italian administration made a complete break from the previous (but still valid) Austrian system and, besides completely reorganising the school system, introduced Italian curricula, Italian as the official language and language of instruction (whereas e.g. in Belgium the Walloon and Flemish parts retained their own languages, cultures, and traditions) and Italian national holidays as part of everyday life. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the fact that, in some areas of public life, the Italian occupational authorities pursued an active social policy that brought considerable benefits to the population (various kinds of assistance, regular supplies of everyday necessities and food, an active health care network) and alleviated war-related afflictions.

In economy, agriculture, and finance, the Italian administration soon progressed from provisional measures to introducing the same legislation and tax system that applied throughout the Italian territory, thus clearly violating the international law of war. A particularly noteworthy fact is that the Italian occupation of ethnic Slovenian territory during World War I showed that, even though international law held that an occupying state could not make any claims on the territories under direct occupation, the situation in practice

spoke more in favour of those states which seized enemy territories either by themselves or with their allies' assistance. Thus on 3 November 1918 the Italian army returned to the ethnic Slovenian (former Austro-Hungarian) territory and seized it in compliance with the Treaty of London's stipulations, pushing the border further eastwards. In the summer of 1919, the military administration gave way to a civil administration. And finally, when the Treaty of Rapallo concerning the border between the Kingdom of Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was signed on 12 November 1920, these territories were ultimately annexed to the Kingdom of Italy.

During the first days of the occupation, the Italian administration focused primarily on security considerations, including the expatriation, arrest and internment of Slovenian and Friulian officials and priests whose positions and influence were suspicious of proving detrimental to the authorities. The obvious suspects were usually men aged between 18 and 50. In the initial stage of the occupation, the Italian army therefore arrested and interned 18 Slovenian priests for security and political reasons on charges of "Faiduttianism",[28] "Austriacantism"[29] and Slavophilism. The priests were taken to Cremona in Lombardy, from where they were deported to Italian towns and islands in September. The remaining suspects were driven to internment camps in Sardinia. 1.172 Austro-Hungarian citizens were interned in Sardinia by Christmas 1915, 1.773 by May 1917 and 2.226 by the end of 1917.[30]

Another decisive security measure taken by the Italian military authorities was the evacuation, mainly on security grounds, of the Slovenian population living within 500 m of the operational zone of the Soča Front. The refugee migration to Italy unfolded in three stages – evacuation, a few rest stops and arrival at the place of destination – each involving different measures for dealing with the refugees. Usually, the population was notified in advance of the evacuation to have enough time to arrange their possessions, while the elderly and sick were taken to nearby health facilities. The evacuees were first housed in nearby villages where they were organised in groups, usually families, and taken to camps or rest stops. But the evacuation was most often made in great haste and without prior notice. The refugees usually arrived at rest stops in trains equipped with disinfection facilities, because they came from an area stricken by contagious epidemics which had broken out under the unhealthy conditions of occupation or through contact with Austrian soldiers retreating from the Eastern Front. The refugees were therefore vaccinated against cholera and dysentery in Udine and Palmanova. They were then divided into groups and taken to various Italian towns where they came under the responsibility of the Italian Ministry of the Interior. The Italian authorities first attempted to put the refugees in refugee camps, just as the Austro-Hungarian government had done, but subsequently decided to disperse them to different Italian towns and islands. Such dispersal of refugees, the Italian authorities believed, created better

28 The term derives from a pejorative name for a member or sympathiser of the Friuli-based Catholic People's Party led by Mgr. Luigi Faidutti (trans. note).

29 The term derives from a pejorative name for an ardent sympathiser of the Austrian Imperial Court (trans. note).

30 Svoljšak: Soča, sveta reka, p. 165.

employment opportunities. Nevertheless, the idea of settling the displaced population in refugee camps was realised in two places, Cordenons and Legnano (also called the colony), which took 700 refugees from the Soča area. Each family was given a room, while the colony also had a drinking water supply, a hospital, kitchens, laundries, workshops and educational institutions. Families received daily financial assistance; some performed various public works and others helped nearby farmers in the fields.

Slightly more complicated was the evacuation of villages in the Upper Soča valley, where there was the widest gap between the principles leading to deportation and other possible (political) motives for the evacuation. The Italian army took especially severe measures against the population living at the foot of Mt. Krn/Monte Nero, where bitter fighting took place in late May and early June 1915. The Italian army was diligently executing the orders of its Supreme Commander that all violations had to be punished with exemplary severity. On 4 June 1915, in (unjust) retaliation for its military failures and perhaps also as a warning against collaboration with the enemy, it decimated the civilian population from the villages of Ladra, Smast, Libušnje, Kamno, Vrsno and Krn under Mt. Krn. The fighting on the slopes of Mt. Krn had dealt a hard blow to the Italian forces and many Italian soldiers tried to withdraw from further battles. The Italian military authorities accused local farmers of shooting at their wounded men. Therefore on 4 June 1915 the carabinieri searched all local houses from top to bottom and drove all 61 men from their homes. The apprehended farmers were then taken across the Soča to the village of Idrsko, where the Italian soldiers had them placed in line and shot every tenth man. The remaining population was deported to Italy.

The map of Slovenian refugees' destinations in Italy is variegated and chequered. The refugees were stationed in a wide range of Italian cities and towns from the French border to the southernmost tip of the peninsula and islands. In addition to receiving daily financial support, they could find employment in shops and grocery stores or on farms. Slovenian refugee children did not attend school in the new, foreign-language environment, but they could receive religious instruction which was provided by interned Slovenian priests. The final and long awaited chapter of the Slovenian refugees' story was their return to their destroyed homes, a slow and gradual process. Most of them saw their homes only after the war, in the spring of 1919.

The story of Slovenes forced by the ravages of war to seek refuge in other provinces of the Habsburg Monarchy began on the eve of the war with Italy. The fervour of the imminent battle rose in May, as did confusion and uncertainty among the population, and on the eve of the declaration of war no steps were made to evacuate civilians from the territories along the future front line. On 19 May, the Austrian Minister of the Interior was still urging the population to remain in their homes, assuring them that the government was fully prepared for every possible scenario and that all measures had been undertaken to ensure the safety of all citizens (transport, food, lodging, etc.). However, on 22 May the military authorities issued an order to evacuate the areas along the margins of the Kras region. The population was given two hours to gather up their most essential possessions and board trains taking them to the interior of the Monarchy. The Austrian authorities also emptied Slovenian villages in the region of Goriška Brda/Collio and places along the right bank of the Soča. On

23 May the villages in the Upper Soča valley were evacuated; their inhabitants first took shelter in the nearby Trenta valley, Kranjska gora or Podkoren, from where many were transferred to refugee camps. The administrations of border districts called on gendarmerie commanders to immediately seal all their service areas bordering Italy.[31] The beginning of the Soča Front brought the life of most of the Soča area to a temporary stop. Public, tax and municipal offices as well as courts and mayoralties moved even before the evacuation of the civil population was to begin. The authorities also transferred several parish archives to safety.

Responsibility for war refugees was assumed by the Austro-Hungarian Ministry of the Interior, which conducted its operations through provincial governments, regencies, administrations, and municipalities. In June 1915, the Provincial Committee for Gorizia-Gradisca was moved to Vienna, where the "Auxiliary Committee for Refugees from the South" and the "Information Office for Refugees" were founded. The latter had its branch office in Leibnitz/Lipnica in Styria, through which 100.000 refugees were transferred to the north and 40.000 to Hungary. A fundamental contribution to the care for Slovenian refugees who sought shelter in Carniola was made by the Ljubljana-based *Agency for Refugees from Gorizia*, which was founded by two state deputies, the Croatian lawyer Matko Laginja and the Slovenian catholic intellectual Janez Evangelist Krek. At the agency's behest, around 50.000 refugees who disposed of enough goods and money to provide for their families without burdening the local population were allowed to remain in Carniola, Carinthia, and Styria. The agency, furthermore, extended financial support to many refugee families, procured casual employment and devoted special attention to school-age children. The military supply facility in Ljubljana employed 100 refugees, dressmakers found work in the centre for the promotion of crafts and 100 refugee girls started working in an army shoe factory. Male refugees worked as farmhands, housekeepers, tobacco factory workers, and even as town hall, government and road committee officials. The agency, moreover, provided employment to disabled refugees and arranged trade licences for some. Acting as an intermediary, it also sought to establish contacts between missing prisoners, internees and refugees and their families.

After the war many Slovenian refugees remained in the towns and villages that had provided them with wartime shelter. According to information gathered by the Office for the Occupied Territory at the National Council in Ljubljana, which was in charge of Slovenes outside their homeland, around 15.000 Slovenian refugees remained within the borders of the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, and did not return to what had by now become a part of the Kingdom of Italy.

Those who could not stay with their compatriots were sent to refugee camps – the so-called wooden cities – in Steinklamm near St. Pölten, Gmünd at the Czech border, Wagna near Leibnitz, Bruck an der Leitha/Bruck ob Litvi and Strnišče/Sterntal near Ptuj/Pettau.[32] The hitherto unknown place names were indelibly impressed on the consciousness of the

31 Petra Svoljšak: Vojaki noter – begunci ven., in: Tolminsko mostišče II, Tolmin, 2005, pp. 9–26, p. 10.

32 Among the various studies existing on the refugees of the region cfr. Paolo Malni: Fuggiaschi: Il campo profughi di Wagna 1915–1918, San Canzian d'Isonzo, 1998.

people and their historical memory, and became a synonym for something that should never happen again. Austro-Hungarian refugee camps involved a technically perfected and effective military organisation, a specific aspect of total war, which had created an "artificial" community kept under careful supervision, limited in movement and governed by strict rules and regulations. The centre of Slovenian refugees was located in Bruck an der Leitha. The camp registered its first Slovenian refugees in October 1915 after they had transferred from the major Lower Austrian camp of Gmünd, where conditions were unbearable: the camp could receive 61.000 persons, yet there were already 53.000 Ukrainians and 5.000 Slovenes and another 12.000 of their compatriots on their way. The dire living conditions of the refugees in the camp, which most severely affected children – often, families would lose most or even all of their children in a matter of a few days – eventually encouraged the Slovenian dean Ivan Rojec to organise the transfer of Slovenian and Croatian refugees to Bruck. In comparison with other camps, the Bruck camp was indeed small, stationing around 4.200 refugees, almost all of them Slovenes: 1.600 from Gorizia, 460 from Trieste, 1.200 from Tolmin, 660 from Sežana and 60 from Gradisca, 250 from Istria and Dalmatia, as well as 16 Jews from Galicia. The statistics show that by the end of 1916 there were 70 babies, 380 infants aged between 1 and 6, 750 school-age children, 1.000 men and 2.000 women.

The refugee camp was built in the immediate vicinity of the town of Bruck on the river Leitha. It comprised 22 barracks, each with 20 rooms lodging 8 persons. Refugees were given dishes in the quarantine barracks and food coupons at the registration office with which they could obtain monthly rations. The camp had electric lighting. The system of administration was much like anywhere else; each barrack was under the responsibility of a special supervisor who maintained peace and took care that the residents received their food rations and other life essentials regularly.

The camp administration took special care of the residents' health needs, being well aware of the refugees' circumstances and conditions before their arrival at Bruck. Special concern and attention was devoted to the state of children's health, to which end a counselling centre for nursing and upbringing was set up. Once a week a paediatrician would also come from Vienna, and on other days the barracks were in the care of a nurse. The hospital consisted of internal, contagious and maternity wards; it employed two doctors and two nurses, and received regular assistance from two Ursuline sisters from Gorizia. The Ursulines also ran the hospice and the kindergarten; their other special assignments were paying daily visits to the refugees in the barracks and inquiring about their needs or problems, maintaining the camp in a clean and orderly condition and providing its inhabitants with religious education.

There were many orphans among the youngest refugees, while others had their fathers in the army and their mothers at work. Mindful of this, the authorities at Bruck intended to build an orphanage that would give children complete education and care. However, after the intervention of the camp's administrator, the Ministry of the Interior established an orphanage for Slovenian and Croatian refugee orphans below the age of 14 in Vienna in collaboration with the central office for the care of war refugees. The orphans from Bruck were eventually transferred to Vienna, where they were placed under the care of Slovenian and Croatian educators and their assistants.

Much attention was also paid to the education of refugee children. Those aged between three and six were sent to kindergarten, and school-age children attended a six-grade elementary school. After successfully completing their primary education, youngsters had the opportunity to enrol in trade schools for boys and girls. For refugee girls whom regular work prevented from going to school, the camp administration organised trade courses; the high attendance "was an obvious indication of how well our boys and girls could appreciate and use the time they are spending far away from their native soil".[33] In a desire to provide the girls with the knowledge and skills they could commit to their own well-being, the camp administration also set up a school of agriculture and domestic economy that was organised as a boarding school, receiving girls both from Bruck and other refugee settlements. In all schools, religious instruction was provided by camp priests; the camp also founded St. Mary's kindergarten, which served nearly all refugee children, and the so-called Society of St. Mary composed of 150 refugee women entrusted with educating refugee youth. Education was therefore the most important activity performed by the refugees that also extended to refugee children who lived outside the camp in less condensed refugee settlements. The emergence and success of refugee education was the result of outstanding efforts focused on the ultimate goal of surmounting the refugee experience and its negative effects, on establishing an illusion of ordinary existence, of the life they had left behind and might never see again, the life which could only assure them of drastic, most often tragic and fateful changes. The reasons for undertaking educational activity related above all to helping children to overcome idleness through care and instruction; they were therefore of a moral, political, national, and humanitarian nature.

The goal of the camp's administration, which had been placed in Slovenian hands by the end of 1917, was to provide both young and old refugees with employment. Because they were allowed to move freely, the refugees could find work outside the camp as well. The administration, moreover, leased an agricultural estate and bought milk cattle and pigs not only to provide the refugees with work but also to help increase the stagnating food supply for the camp. Finally, the camp also had numerous workshops that required shoemakers, joiners, blacksmiths and basket-makers. A fresh workforce was also needed for the construction of new barracks intended for the refugees from Gorizia who had fled the city when the Italian army occupied it.

In 1917, when parliamentary life was restored in Austria, the refugee question was finally placed on the Parliament's agenda. The Refugee Act, which had hitherto granted support only to refugees in refugee camps, expanded this right to all provinces that had offered residence to refugees. After the Soča Front had moved to the river Piave in November 1917, a period began of intensive rebuilding of war-ravaged towns and villages and the returning of refugees to their homeland. The systematic organisation of this operation was taken over by the Vienna-based Central Committee for the Return of Refugees and Renovation of the Littoral, established under the Yugoslav Club. Following the Croatian example, the committee ran a charity campaign to rescue Slovenian refugee children from imminent hunger. The

33 Slovenski begunski koledar za leto 1917, Ljubljana 1916, p. 96.

committee issued a proclamation calling on Slovenian families to give shelter to children from refugee camps, who were most seriously affected by the severe hunger resulting from general shortages in the Monarchy. Following the Allied offensive on the Piave and the ensuing defeat of the Austro-Hungarian army, the Provincial Committee for the Return of Slovenian Refugees to their Homeland was founded at the intervention of a Gorizia-born national activist, journalist and politician Andrej Gabršček. Homebound refugees broke their journey at the camp of Strnišče near Ptuj, which during the war first comprised a complex of auxiliary military hospitals, later a military prison camp and eventually a refugee camp. By 1922, when the Strnišče camp was closed, Slovenian refugees returned to their ruined villages and fields.

Everyday life in the hinterland

In places which had not been abandoned by their inhabitants, life continued amidst a constant roar of shells and expectations of the worst. In the autumn of 1915, the centre of Tolmin was still left almost intact, but nevertheless lifeless, as the population retreated to safer places located farther away from the front lines. People found themselves in a dire situation as they began facing an increasing lack of food. The conditions were constantly changing and provisions varied from one day to another. Those parish priests who did not leave their communities attended to their parishioners and were instructed to read and propagate the proclamations issued by district administrations. Most importantly, they had to use their position and invest all their influence in maintaining order and morale; they were even forbidden to baptize children with politically suspicious and "irredentist" names. Anyone who was found giving food to prisoners of war, harbouring members of the *Landsturm* forces or collecting leaflets was punished. What parish priests were ordered to do, however, was recommend people to take out war loans. The local inhabitants were regularly tilling their fields, sometimes even between both fronts, for which some paid with their lives. A major threat – and temptation for children – was posed by unexploded bombs, bullets and shells. Slovenian newspapers urged parents to teach their children about the dangers of discarded unexploded weapons and spare already devastated families even greater tragedies. Inhabitants' lives were marked by limited movement, food rationing and registration by means of food coupons; they were obliged to collect metals for the purposes of heavy industry, and so forth. Since there was no control over licensing, commerce began to thrive in the countryside and everything was on sale: from sweets, chocolate and food to pipes, electric lights and clothing. In 1916, however, the conditions and rules of living along the front line started to deteriorate. Everyday existence became subject to strict wartime regulations prohibiting hanging and drying laundry in the open or lighting rooms with undrawn curtains, and smoking at night was only possible in some hidden corner. Even bell ringing was forbidden – in the early autumn of 1916 hand-bells were melted down to make cannons.

Employment was an area of particular concern. A most vivid example was provided by the inhabitants of the Kras region who mainly sought employment in Aurisina (Slov. Nabrežina) and its quarries; during the war, the quarries had the most modern equipment

and employed around 3.000 workers of various vocations. In 1923, the Aurisina quarries fed at least 15.000 people.[34] During the war, the quarries were shut down and fought over by the Austro-Hungarian troops and the Italian army. The inhabitants of the Kras region, unable to live off the barren land, were thus forced to seek employment opportunities elsewhere. They found work at military facilities, such as storage houses and hospitals.

People took every single opportunity to return to their homes. Often, soldiers would help them; some even offered to transport their possessions by car. This is how the inhabitants awaited the onslaught of the 12th Soča offensive and the retreat of the Italian army. Even though they had nothing left, their villages had been pillaged and burnt down and their fields had been trampled, people were nevertheless filled with relief. From the Italian territories of Veneto and Friuli, which were seized by the Austrian-German troops, came carts heaped with food and goods, and trains carrying supplies from military storage facilities. Drivers sold their merchandise on the streets or from house to house, triggering an increase in trafficking. However, the supplies were soon exhausted and the Italian territories were stripped bare. The days of abundance were followed by a time of shortage and hunger, during which people would traverse mountains near and far to find a piece of bread, a handful of flour or a few potatoes.

The war in the Soča area left indescribable devastation in its wake, a sheer ecological and economic disaster. The material damage incurred by the area around Gorizia was roughly estimated by the Office for the Occupied Territories at the National Council in Ljubljana. Of 107 municipalities 33 had been razed to the ground; 35 severely destroyed; 50 completely plundered; and 25 stood partly ravaged. 28.000 buildings had been damaged: 8.994 had been completely and 3.747 severely destroyed; another 14.736 buildings had been looted. The damage incurred by buildings in 80 municipalities amounted to 166 million kronen (in 1914). Of 8.000 hectares of vineyards 6.000 hectares had been laid waste; of 62.472 hectares of forests 15.000 hectares had been destroyed and another 18.000 damaged; 20 percent of meadows and farmland and 10 percent of pastures had been rendered useless, with the total damage amounting to 86 million kronen. The resulting loss in crops amounted to 145 million kronen and the population was disowned of 80 percent of the cattle. Industrial plants and facilities in the Trieste and Gorizia areas had been destroyed; in Trieste the war left its heaviest toll on trade and port traffic. By 1922 the population of Venezia Giulia had filed 145.650 claims on war damages amounting to 1.075.268.204 lire. The preparations for the reconstruction began as early as 1916, following the establishment of the Provincial Commission for Reconstruction under the regency in Trieste. The Austrian breakthrough at Kobarid and the ensuing retreat of the Italian army prepared the ground for reconstruction, the assessment of war damages, the undertaking of autumn field works and the clearance of discarded projectiles from the fields. By the end of November 1917 the Central Committee for the Return of Refugees and Renovation of the Littoral was founded in Vienna, and launched a campaign to exempt craftsmen from military service because they were much

34 Drago Sedmak: La cronaca dei paesi ai piedi dell`Ermada negli anni 1915–1918. Kronika vasi pod Grmado v letih 1915–1918, Nabrežina/Aurisina 1995, p. 76.

more required for the purposes of rebuilding their home region. In mid-February 1918, the so-called Association of Mayors of War-Torn Municipalities (later renamed Association of Slovenian Mayoralties) was established to continue the reconstruction of Gorizia and its hinterland and above all to rebuild joiners' and masons' workshops, brickworks, lime-burning facilities, quarries. As early as 1919, immediately after the occupation, the Italian government issued a law on compensation for war damages, which was granted only to a handful of Slovenes. Initially it was paid in money, but from 1923 it was to be given only in vouchers. In 1921, a special credit institution was established in Verona that provided advances on compensation at a high interest rate. The renovation was carried out by construction companies at a higher price than the amount of compensation, forcing many claimants to sell their reconstructed buildings at auction. From 1922, the issue of war compensation for Slovenes was dealt with by the Standing Committee for the Protection of War Victims at the Association of War Victims from Gorizia-Gradisca. The reparation of war damage, especially in agriculture, was a slow and never fully completed process.In the war's aftermath, the general enthusiasm over its end and the return home faded, especially in the Littoral, where the Treaty of London had granted the ethnic Slovenian territories to the Kingdom of Italy. "The *facit* of the war? Losses incurred by all sides. Lost fathers and mother, sons and daughters; lost faith in human righteousness, lost homes and lost – freedom."[35]

35 Kronika fare Sv. Lucije na Mostu. Leta strahote in trpljenja (1914–1918), p. 206. Collected and presented by the then administrator Ciril Munih. Produced in 1925. Today the chronicle is kept in the parson's house at Most na Soči.