

“ZONES MORE RELATED TO IMMORTAL SPLENDOR OF GLORY”: ITALIAN WAR MEMORIALS AND COMMEMORATIVE PRACTICES IN VENEZIA GIULIA (1918–1922)

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyses war memorials and commemorative practices in Venezia Giulia from 1918 to 1922. In this regard Venezia Giulia offers an especially relevant case study, as, due to heavy fighting along the Isonzo front, various local settlements and territorial features became present in the Italian national consciousness. They thus became typical Italian sites of memory, a process which was stimulated by national commemorative policy. Furthermore, presence of the Slovene population in the region contributed to the fact, that monuments to fallen soldier did not represent only sites of memory and mourning for the Italian nation, but also sites of national demarcation. They served as a physical reminder of Italian claims over these lands, for which so much “Italian blood” had been spilled. Lastly, they also represented sites of mourning, where the suffering caused by the war was at least implicitly expressed.

Keywords: Isonzo front, commemorative practices, war memorials, sites of memory, Venezia Giulia

“ZONE PIÙ LEGATE AD IMMORTALI FASTI DI GLORIA”: MEMORIALI DI GUERRA E PRATICHE COMMEMORATIVE ITALIANE NELLA VENEZIA GIULIA (1918–1922)

SINTESI

Il saggio analizza i memoriali di guerra e le pratiche commemorative in Venezia Giulia dal 1918 al 1922. A tal riguardo, la Venezia Giulia offre un caso di studio particolarmente pertinente poiché, a causa dei pesanti combattimenti sul fronte dell'Isonzo, vari insediamenti locali e caratteristiche territoriali divennero presenti nella coscienza nazionale italiana. Sono così diventati tipici siti italiani di memoria, un processo che è stato stimolato dalla politica commemorativa nazionale. Inoltre, la presenza della popolazione slovena nella regione ha contribuito al fatto che i monumenti ai caduti non rappresentavano solo i siti di memoria e di lutto per la nazione italiana, ma anche i

siti di demarcazione nazionale. Servivano come promemoria fisico delle rivendicazioni italiane su queste terre, per le quali era stato versato così tanto "sangue italiano". Infine, rappresentavano anche luoghi di lutto, in cui la sofferenza causata dalla guerra veniva espressa almeno implicitamente.

Parole chiave: fronte Isonzo, pratiche commemorative, memoriali di guerra, luoghi della memoria, Venezia Giulia

WAR MEMORIALS AND COMMEMORATIVE RITUALS IN POST-WAR WORLD WAR I EUROPE¹

American diplomat and scholar George Kennan famously described World War I as "the seminal catastrophe of this century" (Kennan, 1979, 3).² Kennan was referring to the influence of the great conflict on the later historical developments during the 20th century, but his quote can also be used to illustrate the loss and devastation caused by the war. It is impossible to comprehend the post-war state of European societies without taking into account the profound disruptions caused by the catastrophe of the war. The unprecedented loss of human life³ was accompanied by the new reality of industrialized mass fighting, which deprived the soldiers of their individuality (Toderò, 2010, 52). The inter-related experiences of loss and mass fighting had profound effects not only on family and social life, but also on the very ways of comprehending reality; historian Paul Fussell, for

1 This article is the result of research performed as part of my PhD study at the Science and Research Centre Koper under the supervision of Dr Borut Klabjan financed by the Slovenian Research Agency ARRS.

2 Kennan coined this phrase in his study about the development of Franco-Russian relations in the 19th century. He saw World War I as a historical fault line, which marked the beginning of a series of catastrophes that followed, above all World War II (Kennan, 1979). The thesis has remained influential, but also controversial. See Jahraus & Kirchmeier, 2014.

3 The exact number of deaths caused by World War I is impossible to clearly ascertain, as it depends on the criteria chosen to delineate World War I in relation to other armed conflicts which accompanied the dissolution of the Russian, Ottoman and Habsburg Empires. Furthermore, the number also drastically increases if the victims of the great "Spanish flu" pandemic from 1918 to 1920, whose severity was strongly augmented by the war exhaustion, are included. The influenza pandemic alone is supposed to have claimed between 50 and 100 million lives, whereas the fighting from 1914 to 1918 is estimated to have caused approximately 10 million deaths (Grant, 2014, 332–333).

example, has shown that industrialized fighting led to the re-emergence of various myths and a pre-modern way of thinking (Fussel, 2013, 179–240), whereas others have pointed out the rise in traditional religiosity (Winter, 2015, 119–144), as well as the emergence of new forms of “secular religion” (Gentile, 2001). All of this influenced the post-war process of grieving, with which societies tried to comprehend and then transcend these tragic events. The search for the “meaning” of the Great War began as soon as the war itself, but intensified in its aftermath (Winter, 2015, 78).

This process of grieving found its reification in the building of war memorials: sculptures, war cemeteries, plaques and other commemorative objects. They represent physical remainders of this quest which are still visible in cities, towns and villages throughout Europe. But whom or what do they commemorate? What about the Great War do they ask us to remember? There are no straightforward answers to these questions. Early historical research into this topic has emphasized especially the role which after-war memorials throughout Europe played in the shaping of public memory regarding the war experience. The memorials and associated commemorative rituals were comprehended by scholars primarily as carriers of ideological messages, which emphasized the value of sacrifice in order to give the war experience a positive meaning and “explain” the importance of sacrifice to the nation (Mosse, 1994; Gillis, 1996; Evans & Lunn, 1997). In this way they served both as the legitimization of political elites who had taken the decision to enter the war, as well as other ideologies, from republicanism to various forms of nationalism and totalitarianism (Becker, 1994; Kämpfer, 1994; Gentile, 2001; Rossol, 2014).

Without repudiating these findings, the newer research has stressed the multifaceted nature of their expressive functions and their roles in post-war societies. As American historian Jay Winter points out, although many, if not most, of the war memorials were meant to express nationalistic or other political ideas, we still have to deal with the fact that they ultimately also point to the losses and suffering experienced during the war (Winter, 2015, 78–79). Moreover, it is necessary to take different national contexts and religious traditions into account when evaluating their role (Winter, 2006).

This paper follows Winter’s conclusions by analysing the role of Italian World War I monuments and accompanying commemorative practices in *Venezia Giulia*,⁴ a multinational borderland, which was first occupied and then annexed by the Kingdom of Italy, from the end of the War until the rise of the Fascist regime in late 1922. Although this topic has already been the object of extensive historical research, some limitations have to be pointed out. First, most of the attention has been devoted to the war monuments built

4 The territory belonging to *Venezia Giulia* cannot be easily described by referencing other administrative divisions. This has to do with the fact that the name itself was not known until 1863, when it was coined by Graziadio Isaia Ascoli, an Italian historical linguist from Gorizia. Ascoli based his designation on (his own) division of the ancient Augustan *Regio X Venetia et Histria*. The westernmost part of this ancient Roman region was said to constitute *Venezia Giulia*, so named for the Julian Alps (Cattaruzza, 2007, 20). *Venezia Giulia* thus roughly corresponded with the Austrian administrative region Austrian Littoral, which encompassed Gorizia with Gradisca, Trieste and Istria, but it was also augmented with parts of the former Habsburg lands of Carniola and Carinthia. For the exact (changing) boundaries of *Venezia Giulia* in the interwar period, see Čermelj, 1965, 11–12.

in the time of the Fascist regime (especially to the monumental ossuary at Redipuglia/Sredipolje),⁵ which are characterized by the aesthetics of a totalitarian Fascist regime and thus unrepresentative of the whole interwar period. Second, most of the authors have approached this topic by studying this process mostly as a conveyor of Italian nationalist aspirations.⁶ The aim of this paper is to supplement the already achieved results, first, by focusing on war memorials and commemorative rituals in *Venezia Giulia* before the rise of Fascism, and second, by proposing a new analytical model of their functionality in the post-war historical context.

WAR MEMORIALS IN *VENEZIA GIULIA* AS ITALIAN SITES OF MEMORY

Ever since French historian Pierre Nora introduced the concept of *lieux de mémoire*, it has remained a central theoretical framework for research dealing with the topics of memory and national identity. Nora defined the term as “any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community” (Nora, 1998, XVII). Nora’s thesis is related to the earlier conceptualizations of memory as a socially dependent construct, theoretically grounded by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. Halbwachs coined the term “collective memory” to emphasize the rootedness of all memory in distinct social-cultural frameworks, as well as the importance of collective memory in creating shared identity and social cohesiveness (Halbwachs, 2001).

The various types of memorials are typical sites of memory, as they refer to distinct (real or imaginary) historical events and thus shape collective memory by creating and/or reinforcing dominant narratives about the past (Misztal, 2003, 160). Semiotically speaking, monuments as architectural works act as a signifier which refers to a specific notion from the material or immaterial world (Norberg-Schulz, 1974, 428). They have an analogous function with respect to other forms of communication. Since they can be understood as a kind of “text”, they have to be read through a recognized code. Their meaningfulness thus originates from the dialectic relationship between architectural forms, which readers invest with meaning through a culturally transmitted code (Eco, 1997, 181).

As monuments and memorials are thus continuously “read” through shifting socio-cultural codes, their meaning is not fixed, but subject to change (Širok, 2012, 634).⁷ In

5 See some of the most important studies in Tragbar, 2017; Dato, 2014a; Dato, 2014b; Dogliani, 2010; Fabi, 1996.

6 See for example Kavrečič, 2017; Nicoloso, 2015; Nicoloso, 2012; Širok, 2012; Klabjan, 2010; Wörsdörfer, 2009, 34–45.

7 A typical example of this process is the central Italian war memorial in *Venezia Giulia*, the ossuary at Redipuglia/Sredipolje. Built according to Fascist monumental aesthetics, it was first conceptualized as a reification of the most important Fascist ideological postulates (Tragbar, 2017). Since then, it has been continuously re-invented in accordance with the cultural-political situation; during the Trieste crisis in the 1950s, it served as a symbolic site of anti-communism; in the last decades, however, it has been presented mainly as a testimony to the tragic experience of World War I in accordance with the dominant European narrative, which sees European nations as joint victims of purposeless killing (Dato, 2014a, 63–140; Klabjan, 2010, 401).

order to recreate the (shifting) conveyed messages, we then have to study not just the architectural forms of the erected monuments, but also the historical context in which they were erected, as well as the performative collective rituals centred around them. The role of war memorials in *Venezia Giulia* in the first post-war years was thus characterized by the volatile situation in post-war Italy and the significance which the region acquired in Italian society before and during the war.

Role of *Venezia Giulia* in post-war Italy

The post-war Italy was, like other former belligerent countries, a nation in grieving. The presence of the losses sustained⁸ was ubiquitous as there was hardly any family who did not lose a husband, son, relative or a friend. The need to commemorate the lost relatives started with the fighting itself but intensified after the end of the war (Mondini, 2014, 318–319). Commemorations enabled the communities to face their grief, but they were also identity-forming elements. As Jay Winter argues, commemoration during and after the war was an act of national affirmation. To remember was to affirm the community, to assert its moral character and to exclude from it those values and groups which placed it under threat (Winter, 2015, 80). Consequently, it was very much in the interest of the political elites throughout Europe to shape the process of grieving by giving it a role which would strengthen the national community. In the process of the nationalization of the masses, the dead soldiers who sacrificed themselves for the nation/nation-state have played an important role since the French Revolution (Koselleck, 1994). As Benedict Anderson pointed out, the fact that a lot of people were ready to give their lives for the nation granted it a special, pure character, which other forms of association could not hope to match (Anderson, 2007, 176).

Since nation-building processes in Italy before World War I were lagging behind other European nation-states, mainly as a result of the economically backward state of large parts of Italian society (illiteracy was still widespread in rural areas in the South), as well as many profound cultural and historical differences between the constituent parts of the country,⁹ the role of the fallen soldiers was especially important. War was supposed to have finally forged Italians into a single nation through the shared suffering and sacrifices made during the war (Janz, 2016, 2). State-led memory politics in post-war years was meant to shape memory according to this goal by establishing the narrative of victorious war, which was conceptualized as the successful completion of the long-desired aims of *Risorgimento*.¹⁰ In this process the territory of the *Venezia Giulia* played a doubly preeminent role for two intertwined reasons.

8 During the war Italian armed forces sustained approximately 650 000 deaths from various causes (in combat, as well as due to wounds and as a result of illnesses), as well as 984 000 wounded. This number represents 12% of the mobilized soldiers (Mondini, 2014, 316; Cadeddu, 2011, 46).

9 Furthermore, as the Italian state was constituted as a liberal monarchy, it was met by deep hostility from many citizens, at first by many Catholics and then also by socialists and radicals. Cf. an overview of the problematic Italian national project and its development until 1918 in Gentile, 2009, 19–130.

10 Regarding the appropriation of *Risorgimento* in war-propaganda, cf. Ridolfi, 2010, 29.

First, although the frontline between Austria-Hungary and Italy was approximately 650 km long, reaching from the Stelvio Pass to the Adriatic Sea, the main theatre of operations was in the territory of the Austrian Littoral along the Isonzo River, where the flatter terrain facilitated the massing of troops and matériel. Consequently, the Italian army undertook its main offensive thrusts in 11 battles along the middle Isonzo and on the Karst plateau between June 1915 and late October 1917, when the fighting along the Isonzo ended, as the combined Habsburg-German army had completely routed the Italian 2nd Army in the Battle of Caporetto (Schindler, 2014; Sema, 2009).¹¹ Consequently, during the war, as a result of intensive war propaganda, as well as fighting with thousands of casualties, the names of formerly unknown villages, hills and mountain peaks along the Isonzo River became generally known throughout Italy. The ubiquitous presence of regions, villages and peaks around the Isonzo in the Italian collective memory was strengthened by naming a great number of streets and squares throughout Italy after them (Rafaelli, 2010, 269–271). The spatial features of *Venezia Giulia* thus became part of the national mental landscape (Klabjan, 2010, 402–403).

Second, the decision to enter the war was hardly consensual. Neutrality¹² was widely popular among broad swathes of the Italian population and also (at first) commanded a parliamentary majority. The decision to attack its former ally was formally justified by the need to liberate the “terre irredente”, chief among them Trieste and Gorizia (Milza, 2012, 700–701; Duggan, 2007, 387–389). It was therefore to be expected that Italian political elites in the crisis-stricken post-war situation¹³ tried to score political points by maximizing the political demands made at the Paris Peace Conference, where they remained largely unsuccessful.¹⁴ The fiery political debates surrounding these themes, the emerging conviction of “mutilated victory” and D’Annunzio’s Rijeka/Fiume expedition (Duggan, 2007, 410–419) additionally strengthened the role of these territories in Italian national consciousness.

The building of war memorials and staging of commemorations in these territories was thus on the one hand a result of the importance of *Venezia Giulia* in post-war Italy, but on the other hand it also strengthened the emotional significance of former war sites and monuments in the mind of Italian citizens. Following the war, state-sponsored

11 Afterwards, the frontline stabilized along the Piave River in the Po Basin, until the underfed and under-equipped Habsburg army was decisively beaten at the Battle of Vittorio Veneto in October 1918. For a general account of the Italian front during World War I, see Thompson, 2009.

12 At the beginning of the war, the Kingdom of Italy proclaimed its neutrality; it declared war on Austria-Hungary only on 24 May 1915 following the territorial promises made by the Entente in the Treaty of London in April 1915 (Lipušček, 2012).

13 The war profoundly affected the Italian economy. Although some parts of industry profited enormously from the high state-led demand during the war, the demobilization of war economy caused deep shocks after 1918 (Milza, 2012, 704–706). The economic crisis led to social and political unrest, as Italy became engulfed in a number of workers’ strikes; both sides of the political spectrum were radicalized, which led to increase in violence (Duggan, 2007, 407–410).

14 The new Italian eastern border was not determined in Paris; it was a result of bilateral negotiations between the Kingdom of Italy and the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. They reached an understanding with the Treaty of Rapallo, signed on 12 November 1920 (Cattaruzza, 2007, 159–164).

narratives thus additionally intensified the emotional meaning of these places. What were the most important strategies in this process? Some distinct processes have to be especially emphasized: the celebrations connected with the honouring of the Unknown Soldier, the establishment of cemeteries, monuments and *zone sacre* and finally the propaganda campaign, which, together with high-profile visits of members of the Italian Royal Family and other political dignitaries in this region, sought to encourage Italian citizens to visit them. In practice, these distinct features of memory politics were often closely intertwined.

Celebration of the Unknown Soldier

In post-war Europe, the central part of the state-led commemorative process was the celebration of the so-called Unknown Soldier. The solemnities associated with the Unknown Soldier were conditioned by the nature of industrialized fighting, which led to many soldiers being left unidentified and unburied on the battlefields. The honouring of the Unknown Soldier enabled the remembrance of all soldiers and at the same time no particular individual. It thus corresponded with the characteristics of the war (Klabjan, 2010, 404).

In Italy, *milito ignoto* was solemnly buried in Rome in 1921,¹⁵ but *Venezia Giulia* played an important role in the commemorations, as official celebrations started in this area, more precisely in Gorizia, and then reached their first peak in the small town of Aquileia near the Adriatic coast. The Italian authorities exhumed the bodies of 11 fallen unidentified soldiers all along the former frontline. Their remains were collected in Gorizia, from which a solemn truck column drove them to Aquileia. In the basilica of Aquileia, one of the corpses was chosen by the *mamma spirituale*¹⁶ of fallen soldiers to be buried in Rome. The ceremony took place on 28 October 1921 in the presence of the Duke of Aosta, member of the royal family and former commander of the Italian 3rd Army, and numerous other political and military dignitaries, as well as veterans' organizations. Following a mass in the basilica celebrated by the Bishop of Trieste, Angelo Bartolomasi, the "spiritual mother" Maria Bergamas chose one of the corpses, which was then solemnly put on a train which started its way towards Rome, where the Unknown Soldier was solemnly buried at the central pre-war Italian national monument, the *Altare della Patria*¹⁷ in the centre of the city on 4 November 1921, the anniversary of the signing

15 The Italian symbolic burial of the Unknown Soldier was not the first among the former belligerent countries. In 1920, the United Kingdom and France jointly buried one British and one French unidentified soldier in Westminster Abbey and Arc de Triomphe respectively. The United States of America followed them the year after (Mosse, 2007, 105–107).

16 The authorities chose Maria Bergamas, living near Trieste; her son Antonio was an irredentist who joined the Italian army and fell in 1916 on Monte Cimone. Since his body was never identified, Maria could play the symbolical role (Cadeddu, 2011, 148–151).

17 The monument, dedicated to Victor Emmanuel II, the first king of unified Italy, was meant to represent the central monument to unified Italy, but also to "Italianize" the state capital, long considered primarily as the seat of the Papacy. The building started in 1885; it was formally inaugurated in 1911 and finally completed in 1925. Due to its monumentality, it dominates the city centre of Rome (Tobia, 2010).

of the armistice at Villa Giusti and thus the Italian victory in the war, in the presence of the highest state civilian and military dignitaries.¹⁸

The ceremonies accompanying the burial of the Unknown Soldier are considered to be the first truly popular national celebration of unified Italy (Janz, 2016, 3). As the central state-led commemoration of the fallen, they played a preeminent role in shaping the dominant narrative regarding the war. The rituals, imagery and discourse employed in the speeches of public figures as well as by most of the Italian press stressed the importance of the sacrifice of the fallen soldiers for the greater good of the whole nation. The path of the column was solemnly decorated with flags, wreaths and patriotic signs. For example, when the train composition reached Aquileia, the train station was decorated with a big banner stating "O divino ignoto / Aquileia genuflessa ti salute"¹⁹ (cited after Cadeddu, 2011, 155). Not far away, a triumphal arch with the inscription "Non chiedono lacrime/ gli eroi/ gloria gloria gloria/ nel sacro nome d'Italia"²⁰ was erected (Cadeddu, 2011, 155). On its way to Rome, the train frequently stopped at railway stations, where big crowds paid homage to the dead soldiers by approaching it, touching it or even kissing the casket (Fili, 2016, 18).

Besides the main commemoration starting in Aquileia and concluding in Rome, countless smaller local commemorations honouring the fallen soldiers were organized throughout Italy by local committees made up of local civil, military and Church dignitaries. They organized various public rituals (encompassing speeches, the singing of patriotic songs etc.) and funeral masses. In some places, smaller memorials were erected (Klabjan, 2010, 412–413).

The *terre redente* played a central role in the public rituals. Not only because the solemnities started in Gorizia²¹ and Aquileia and because the railway cars were constructed in the shipyards in Monfalcone especially for this purpose, but above all by employing discourse which conceptualized and justified the death of Italian soldiers as a noble sacrifice for the redemption of these lands (Toderò, 2010, 61). The whole territory was thus implicitly sacralized. This feature of memory politics was most clearly exemplified by the choice of Maria Bergamas as the spiritual mother of the Unknown Soldier – the woman had to come from the "redeemed territory", for the liberation of which the fallen soldiers had sacrificed their lives.

War cemeteries and *zone sacre*

The solemn burial of the Unknown Soldier represented only the tip of the iceberg of Italian post-war commemorative practices, though. Following the war, the whole country was engulfed in a whirl of commemorations, which ranged from the publishing

18 For a detailed description of all the solemnities, see Cadeddu, 2011.

19 "O divine unknown / Aquileia salutes you on her knees", (translation by the author).

20 "They do not ask for tears / heroes / glory glory glory / in the sacred name of Italy", (translation by the author).

21 The town of Gorizia played a special role in the dominant narrative, which conceptualized World War I as a victorious war, as its capture in 1916 represented practically the only significant success of the Italian army during their 11 offensives along the Isonzo River (Thompson, 2009, 169–177).

of obituaries and memorial booklets to the erection of plaques and monuments. Italian journalist Enrico Janni described the process as "l'invasione monumentale" (cited after Pisani, 2017, 6). In Italy, where a substantial part of the population was still illiterate, monuments and memorials represented an especially appropriate and popular narrative source, compared with medieval *Biblia pauperum*. Solely between 1921 and 1925, 1700 of them were reproduced on the pages of *La Domenica del Corriere* (Mondini, 2014, 326–327), whereas the number of all erected memorials is considered to range between 10 000 and 20 000 (Pisani, 2017, 1).

In *Venezia Giulia*, there was likewise a number of new memorial plaques and smaller monuments.²² Most of them were erected by local communities, as well as nationalist and veterans' organizations, but the state authorities took special care to give this process an orderly and ideologically conforming character. The agency for the protection of monuments, *Ufficio Belle Arti*, established by the military administration in Trieste,²³ sent a circular letter emphasizing its mandate to approve all the monuments commemorating the events of the war. In the case of important monuments, the Office was obliged to assemble a special commission to evaluate the project.²⁴

But all along the former frontline, an even more important role in this process was played by war cemeteries. Due to the high number of casualties along the Isonzo front, some of the biggest and emotionally charged Italian war cemeteries were situated here. The Italian state authorities played a leading role in the process; its action was necessitated by the enormous task of finding thousands of dead soldiers, whose remains had been left on the former battlefields or quickly buried in provisional cemeteries, but at the same time it also gave the state an opportunity to shape these central sites of the grieving process to its liking. This task was first entrusted to the *Commissione nazionale per le onoranze ai militari d'Italia e dei paesi alleati morti in Guerra*, established on 13 April 1919. The following year, the Italian government also established the *Ufficio centrale per la cura e le onoranze alle salme dei caduti in Guerra* (COSCG), with the seat in Udine/Videm. The soldiers who could be identified were buried individually, whereas the rest were put in mass graves (Tragbar, 2017, 5–7). By the end of 1922, the office removed 760 provisional war cemeteries, enlarged or regulated more than 1400 and constructed about 30 new ones (Fabi, 1999, 54–55).

In *Venezia Giulia*, one of the most symbolically charged cemeteries was the *Cimitero degli eroi* near the basilica in Aquileia. Following the departure of the train composition with the Unknown Soldier to Rome, the remains of the other 10 unidentified soldiers were

22 See for example *La Voce dell'Isonzo*, 25. 6. 1919: Un monumento ai caduti del 57.o. fanteria sul San Gabriele; *La Voce dell'Isonzo*, 10. 12. 1919: Lo scoprimento della lapide a Carlo Favetti, 1; *La Voce dell'Isonzo*, 13. 5. 1922: Castagnevizza: tomba di fanti, 2.

23 The occupied territory of *Venezia Giulia* was at first administered by the Italian military. In August 1919, the military administration was substituted by a civilian governor, who was then subordinated to the new *Ufficio centrale per le nuove provincie*. The same structure persisted also after the annexation until 1922 (Kacin Wohinz, 1972, 75–80, 117–123, 379).

24 ASGO, CCGIT, b. 19, f. 100, Cat. 6.14 (Belle arti e monumenti): Attribuzioni dell'Ufficio Belle Arti e Monumenti, 25. 11. 1920.



Fig. 1: Typical post-war military cemetery near Vrtojba (PANG 667, Vrtojba 1048).

left in the basilica until 4 November 1921, when they were likewise buried in the small cemetery nearby (Cadeddu, 2011, 209–210). The second important war cemetery was the *Cimitero degli Invitti della terza armata* near the Hill of Saint Elia at the outskirts of the Doberdob Karst. The cemetery housed the remains of approximately 30 000 soldiers of the Italian 3rd Army, most of them unidentified, which were mostly exhumated from various provisional cemeteries throughout the former war zone. It was formally inaugurated on 24 May 1923 in the presence of Italian king Victor Emmanuel III and new Prime Minister Benito Mussolini (Fabi, 1999, 55; Dato, 2014b, 704).

Beside war cemeteries, which soon began to attract visitors who wanted to pay homage to the fallen soldiers, other important sites of memory in the territory of *Venezia Giulia* were the so-called *zone sacre*. *Zone sacre* were meant to serve as monuments containing the remains of former battlefields. Already during the war, the Italian Army began preparing plans for preserving the sites of the heaviest battles as sacred sites of the nation. In the area of *Venezia Giulia*, the commands of the Italian 2nd and 3rd Armies proposed the establishment of *zone sacre* encompassing the hills of Sabotin, Kuk, Vodice, Skalnica and Škabrijel, whereas the whole Karst plateau in the south was to be declared *Monumento alla guerra nazionale* (Mantini, 2016, 27–29). The plan, elaborated in 1919 by professor Guido Manacorda, proposed the establishment of a *zona sacra* encompassing most of the Karst Plateau where the principal war operations took place; the stated aim was to

conserve most of the war remains left after almost three years of continuous fighting, whereas the places of notable battles were supposed to be connected by *via sacra*.²⁵

The original proposal was not put into practice, chiefly because of the sheer dimensions of the project and the necessary financial expenditures. The Army decided, based on the order of the Italian government, to reduce the protected area to the localities most important to the war effort, as well as most well-known and evocative (Mantini, 2016, 30–31). The hills of Sabotin and Monte San Michele, which were the sites of the heaviest battles during the first six Isonzo offensives, were declared to be *zone monumentali* on 29 October 1922 by the *Regio decreto n. 1386*. Both were chosen because they were “più legate ad immortali fasti di gloria”²⁶ and to ensure the gratefulness “della Patria verso i Figli che per la sua grandezza vi combatterono epiche lotte nella guerra di redenzione 1915–1918”.²⁷ Both areas were placed under the care of the Ministry of War, which was obliged to ensure the maintenance and the accessibility of the monuments (*Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d’Italia*, 3. 11. 1922, 2807–2808).²⁸

War cemeteries and *zone sacre* soon began to attract visitors; the first were former soldiers and relatives, who wished to pay their respect and grieve for their lost ones (Kavrečič, 2017, 144). But at the same time, the stream of visitors to war cemeteries and former battlefields along the Isonzo River was also a result of the propaganda campaign led by Italian nationalist organizations. For example, in June 1919 a branch of *Lega Nazionale* from Servola near Trieste asked the military governor to provide them with 16 trucks in order to arrange a trip to the former battlefields around Gorizia and on the Karst Plateau.²⁹ The young members would thus gain an opportunity to appreciate the “[...] grandezza del sacrificio compiuto dal soldato italiano [...]”.³⁰

Visits to the sites were also promoted by a number of private and state-owned companies and organizations, among which the roles of the Italian National Tourist Organization (ENIT – *Ente nazionale per le industrie turistiche*), the *Touring club Italiano* and the Italian Michelin Company (*Agenzia italiana pneumatici Michelin*) were especially important. Starting with the *Guida dei campi di battaglia* published by Michelin in 1919, a number of tourist guides, which were meant to encourage Italians to make “pilgrimages” to former

25 See detailed plan in Manacorda, 1919.

26 “most linked with the immortal splendours of glory”, (translation by the author).

27 “of the Fatherland to the Sons who for her greatness fought epic struggles in the war of redemption 1915–1918”, (translation by the author).

28 At the time when the discussion about the establishment of *zone sacre* was taking place, Monte San Michele was seriously considered to become a place of one of the most imposing Italian World War I monuments ever erected, as it was chosen by the *Comitato Nazionale per il Monumento Ossario al Fante Italiano* as the site to host a monument honouring the sacrifice of Italian soldiers. The proposed projects were all characterized by excessive monumentality, which was met with negative reactions from the Italian public. After deliberations and postponements, the commission finally chose the project proposed by Eugenio Baroni, which provided for a construction of a giant staircase leading up to the top of Monte San Michele, where an enormous platform would be built. Due to financial difficulties as well as the progressively lower public opinion, the project was finally cancelled by the Mussolini government in March 1923 (Savorra, 2015).

29 ASTs, RCGC Gab., b. 15, Direttive edilizie, Commerciali, Naviglio: Richiesta dela Lega Nazionale a Servola.

30 “greatness of the sacrifice made by the Italian soldier”, (translation by the author).

battlefields, were published.³¹ One of the most successful was an illustrated seven-volume guide titled *Sui campi di battaglia* [On the Battlefields] first published in 1927 by the *Con-sociazione turistica italiana* in collaboration with COSCG (Kavrečič, 2017, 150–153). *Tour-ing club Italiano* also organized excursions to the former battlefields. Between 25 August and 2 September 1920, around 500 members of the Club visited the sites of battles from the upper Isonzo Valley to Trieste and then sailed to the Kvarner islands (Mantini, 2016, 49). The trip was described in the local press as “pellegrinaggio patriotico”.³²

Visits of highest state and military dignitaries, as well as members of the Italian Royal Family, likewise strengthened the awareness about these places and encouraged new visitors. It is noteworthy that monuments and war cemeteries comprised a large part of the itinerary when King Victor Emmanuel III and Queen Elena, accompanied by Princess Jolanda and the Duke of Aosta, made their first official visit in this area. After an enthusiastic reception in the town centre of Gorizia, the Royal Couple first visited *Cimitero degli eroi* in Gorizia and then headed to Oslavia/Oslavje near Podgora, where they laid a wreath at an obelisk commemorating the fallen Italian soldiers. The following day they also visited the war cemetery near Redipuglia, before heading to Monfalcone and Trieste.³³ Monuments dedicated to fallen soldiers and war cemeteries remained a central part of the (frequent) visits³⁴ of the highest Italian state dignitaries in the region, as they did not serve only as sites of memory for the Italian nation, but also as physical reminders of Italian claims for sovereignty over these multinational lands.

WAR MEMORIALS AS SITES OF NATIONAL CONTESTATION

Although Italian nationalist discourse described the war as a war of liberation fought by the need to free “unredeemed Italian brothers” suffering under the Habsburg yoke, the new Italian eastern borderline, established with the Treaty of Rapallo,³⁵ also meant that up to 550 000 Slavic speakers lived in the new provinces (Čermelj, 1965, 13–15). The presence of a non-Italian-speaking population in the area, most of which fought on the opposing side during the war and would prefer the incorporation of these territories into the Yugoslav state, automatically meant that Italian war memorials and commemorative practices did not function only as a site of national unity, but also played another role, the role of national contestation and demarcation (Wörsdörfer, 2009, 34–38; Klabjan 2010, 403). Maria Bucur and Nancy Wingfield have argued that “although commemorations

31 The guides found an echo in the local nationalist press, which strongly supported these efforts. See for example *La Voce dell'Isonzo*, 11. 4. 1922: *Escursioni alla fronte dell'Isonzo*, 1.

32 *La Voce dell'Isonzo*, 4. 8. 1920: *Escursione nazionale nella Venezia Giulia*, 1.

33 *La Voce dell'Isonzo*, 23. 5. 1920: *La trionfale giornata goriziana dei Sovrani*, 1–3.

34 The King and the Duke of Aosta visited *Cimitero degli Invitti* near Redipuglia again the next year, accompanied by Benito Mussolini. In the following years, members of the Italian Royal Family made several visits to Venezia Giulia; Crown Prince Umberto, to name just one example, came to Gorizia and Tolmin in 1929 in order to inaugurate the monument dedicated to fallen irredentists from Gorizia (Fili, 2016, 65).

35 With the Treaty of Rapallo, the new Yugoslav state agreed to renounce its claims to the territories of the former Austrian Littoral, some bigger islands in the Upper Adriatic and the Dalmatian town of Zadar with its surroundings) (Cattaruzza, 2007, 159–164).

seek to validate feelings of pride and entitlement among these groups, they also attempt to legitimate distinct legacies and to cultivate pride about specific moral and cultural traits that differ from those of other groups" (Bucur & Wingfield, 2001, 3). This is certainly true regarding Italian commemorative practices in *Venezia Giulia*, but this function is context-dependent and often multifaceted. How, then, did Italian war memorials and commemorations concretely serve as means of national contestation?

Different discourse strategies have to be pointed out. First, by establishing the narrative of a victorious and eminently just war of national liberation, commemorations in various forms automatically served as a reminder of Italian claims over these lands, for which so much "Italian blood" had been spilled. As national sites of memory in a contested border region, the nation-building function of memorials was intertwined with the expression of territorial claims over the Northern Adriatic, which was further reinforced by the discourse employed by the Italian nationalist press and rhetoric at commemorative rituals. Beside the aforementioned celebration of the Unknown Soldier, there were countless smaller commemorations honouring the dead Italian soldiers and irredentist "martyrs" and at the same time celebrating the incorporation of this territory into Italy in the years following the war. They were mostly characterized by a typical mix of patriotic pathos and exclaiming the ancient Italian character of *Venezia Giulia*. From 1920, local Fascist *squadristi* were frequently part of the celebrations.³⁶

Second, they fulfilled this role by reinforcing the historical narrative which was very often employed by irredentist writers in order to justify their claims of the Italian character of *Venezia Giulia*. Appealing to the legacy of the ancient Roman Empire, which began the settlement of this area in the 2nd century BC, nationalist intellectuals conceptualized the complex history of the whole region as one epic struggle for the preservation of its Latin/Italian character. Even though this legacy was supposed to be partially obscured by centuries of German occupation and Slavic pressure, the region has managed to retain its ancient Latin/Italian character, which should now be put to light again.³⁷

In this regard, choosing Aquileia, the first Roman colony in the Upper Adriatic region, which had served as a springboard for the spread of Roman power into the Balkans and Central Europe, to host the first main ceremony connected with the commemoration of the Unknown Soldier was highly ideologically charged. The local accompanying commemorations also linked the sacrifice of the Unknown Soldier with the redemption of *Venezia Giulia* – as part of the celebrations in Trieste, a plaque commemorating the destroyer *Audace*, the first Italian warship to enter Trieste Harbour at the end of the war, was erected (Fili, 2016, 21). Likewise, in Trieste, on 4 November 1921, when the corpse of the Unknown Soldier was inhumed in Rome, an official city delegation paid their respects at the memorial plaque commemorating 130 fallen war volunteers from Trieste (Toderò, 2010, 61).

36 See for example La voce dell'Isonzo, 1. 2. 1919: Le solenni onoranze a Nazario Sauro, 1; La Voce dell'Isonzo, 13. 5. 1922: Castagnevizza: tomba di fanti, 2; La Voce dell'Isonzo, 24. 10. 1922: L'inaugurazione della targa al Timavo, il 3 Novembre, 2.

37 See Caprin, 1915; Litta-Visconti-Arese, 1917.



Fig. 2: The votive chapel of Saint Mark above Šempeter (PANG 667, Šempeter pri Gorici 1001).

A typical example of Italian commemorative practices reinforcing the narrative of the ancient uninterrupted Italian/Latin character of the Northern Adriatic was the construction of a votive chapel of Saint Mark on the hill above the Slovene village Šempeter near Gorizia, dedicated to soldiers fallen on the hill during the war. It was characterized by a statue of the Venetian Lion of Saint Mark underlined by the inscription “Leo semper vigilans” above the entrance. The Lion of Saint Mark, the symbol of Venetian Republic, was meant to represent the historical continuity of the Italian character of the whole region, as the Venetian State was understood as the carrier of Italian cultural and political presence in the area.³⁸

38 As Iginio dal Ri, writing about art in *Venezia Giulia*, put it, the presence of Italian art, from Roman ruins to Venetian lions, testified to the Italian character of the lands around the Adriatic Sea (1932, 296).

On 8 August 1922, the anniversary of Italian troops entering the town in 1916, a solemn inauguration took place. Local nationalist and civic associations, as well as schoolchildren, carrying flags formed a column heading to the hill, accompanied by local Fascists. There, they were joined by local civil and military dignitaries. The inauguration encompassed a holy mass celebrated by the Bishop of Trieste, Angelo Bartolomassi, as well as patriotic speeches recording the importance of the sacrifice of soldiers for the liberation of Gorizia. The local Italian newspaper accompanied the celebration with the following commentary: "Su questo, alto e imponente si rizza il monumento ai valorosi eroi caduti per la liberazione di questa terra superbamente italiana."³⁹

But perhaps the clearest example of the importance which memorials dedicated to fallen Italian soldiers gained in the national contestation in *Venezia Giulia* was the so-called "Krn affair". The characteristic shape of Mount Krn/Monte Nero⁴⁰ above Kobarid/Caporetto dominates the landscape of the upper Isonzo valley; its capture in 1915 represented one of the most daring achievements of the Italian mountain troops, *Alpini*, during the war.⁴¹ In June 1922, a simple monument in the shape of a pyramid dedicated to the *Alpini* was solemnly inaugurated below the peak of Krn. The ceremony was attended by Italian veterans' associations from Torino as well as local nationalists. A few days later, the monument was damaged by a lightning strike.⁴² When the news about the damage to the monument reached Kobarid on 21 June, it was assumed to be an act of Slovene desecration. As an act of revenge, during the same night, local Italians attacked the monument dedicated to Slovene composer Andrej (Hrabroslav) Volarič in the centre of Kobarid and destroyed it. In the following days, Fascist squads from the whole Friuli descended on Kobarid and the village of Drežnica at the foot of the mountain, where they burnt the vicarage and terrorized the local inhabitants.⁴³ Italian *carabinieri* present in the town failed to defend the local Slovene inhabitants.⁴⁴

The events in the upper Isonzo valley clearly show the symbolical importance which Italian World War I memorials acquired in the struggle for national supremacy. The local Italian press immediately denounced the presumed act of vandalism and threatened the Slovenes with severe consequences.⁴⁵ Following the end of riots, not a single member of the Fascist perpetrators was charged and tried; Slovene dignitaries, on the other hand, were obliged to attend the ceremony of re-dedication, which took place in

39 "On this [hill], stands the high and imposing monument to the brave heroes fallen for the liberation of this superbly Italian land." (translation by the author). (*La voce dell'Isonzo*, 10. 8. 1922: La celebrazione di VI anniversario della liberazione di Gorizia, 1).

40 Italians named the mountain Monte Nero.

41 The peak was conquered by the Alpine battalion Exilles in the summer of 1915. The capture itself was not of great military importance, as the Austrian troops simply established a new frontline on the nearby mountains. Nevertheless, the success of the Italian troops naturally found a wide echo in the contemporary war propaganda (Thompson, 2009, 72–73).

42 ASGO, CCGLIT, b. 51, f. 322, Cat. 10.2: Verbale della commissione nominata dal vice commissario generale civile per la accertamenti sul monumento del Montenero, 24. 8. 1922.

43 ASGO, CCGLIT, b. 51, f. 322, Cat. 10.2: Incursione fascista in quel di Caporetto, 26. 6. 1922.

44 Goriška straža, 28. 6. 1922: Dogodki na Kobariškem, 1.

45 *La Voce dell'Isonzo*, 24. 6. 1922: I profanatori del Montenero, 1.

Kobarid and below the top of the mountain on 16 July 1922, at which local (Slovene) schoolchildren had to sing the Italian patriotic song *Fratelli d'Italia*.⁴⁶ The Slovene press loudly protested against the aggression and even expressed the perception that Italian war memorials represented one of the factors in the process of rising Italianization of the province: "Among completely Slovene villages, a great number of both modest as well as magnificent monuments commemorating and celebrating fallen sons of the Italian nation is now rising. They are rising on *our* mountains, hills and plains [...]"⁴⁷

CRACKS IN THE IDEOLOGICAL FAÇADE

But as convincing as the picture of nationalist functions of Italian memory politics in *Venezia Giulia* is, can we find another side to the aforementioned processes? As Jay Winter argues, although most, if not all, World War I memorials in post-war Europe were meant to express nationalistic or other political ideas, they ultimately also pointed to the losses and suffering experienced during the war. Even though a segment of political elites used them to create nation-building narratives, they were still a place of grieving, where the suffering and grief experienced during the war was explicitly expressed. For a majority of the population, their meaning was "as much existential as artistic or political, as much concerned with the facts of individual loss and bereavement as with art forms or with collective representations, national aspirations, and destinies" (Winter, 2015, 79).

Traces of this process can be observed in most of the major commemorative practices and strategies described so far. The celebrations associated with the burial of the Unknown Soldiers, the enthusiastic participation of crowds throughout Italy can partially be understood as a result of a carefully planned successful propaganda campaign. On the other hand, the official celebrations also corresponded with the needs of citizens, who simply wished to honour and grieve for their lost ones. The consensus achieved during the celebrations could then be gained only at the price of a certain ambiguity, which was reflected also in the absence of speeches at closing the ceremony. As Oliver Janz succinctly put it: "From the political right, the ritual was celebrated as an apotheosis of patriotic duty, while other groups primarily perceived it as a mourning ceremony that recalled the human cost of war" (Janz, 2016, 3).

But what was the situation in the nationally mixed borderland of *Venezia Giulia*? A strong case can be made that Italian war memorials and commemorative practices in *Venezia Giulia* should not be understood solely as a straightforward reification of the dominant narrative, which served to instil into Italian citizens a new sense of national unity, supposedly reached through the sacrifice of fallen soldiers. Nor were they just a manifestation of nationalist ideology, which was used to legitimate exclusive Italian claims over this multinational borderland. The private aspect of the grieving process must also be considered, as it was not completely incorporated into the collective sphere dominated by the prevalent ideological structures described above. The post-war years

46 Goriška straža, 18. 7. 1922: Dogodki na Kobariškem, 2.

47 Goriška straža, 28. 6. 1922: Obramba Slovencev, 1, emphasis added.

were characterized by a multitude of commemorations precipitously caught between personal expression of grief and the need for healing, as well as culturally conditioned forms of understanding as conveyed through the media and the state apparatus (Toderò, 2010, 51, 59).

However, when considering this topic, it is necessary to differentiate between two interrelated but distinct features. The first relates to the architectural language of the erected monuments, the second to their perception in the post-war local context. We can find some traces of Italian war memorials and commemorations transgressing the ideological and national boundaries both in the shape of the built monuments, as well as in the reception of the local populace.

Recent research performed by Borut Klabjan has confirmed that the celebration of the Unknown Soldier not only exceeded the boundaries of political and social divisions, but partially even the national divides. Although the local Slovene and Croatian elite and a substantial majority of the population remained indifferent towards the celebrations, the main Slovene daily newspaper *Edinost* at first characterizing them as exclusively Italian,⁴⁸ a part of the non-Italian population nevertheless took part in them. The Civil General Commissioner thus reported that commemorations had been very successful in the whole province, with no noisy festivities, but in the form of simple, heartfelt ceremonies. He underlined that the population as a whole, without political and racial division, participated in the ceremonies, and specifically commented on the unexpected episodes of kindness by German and Slovene subjects. In Tolmin, for example, the commemoration was attended by vast crowds, including the authorities and "the entire population without regard to any national or political distinction" (cited after Klabjan, 2010, 415). It seems then that in localities where the ceremony was presented and understood as a general commemoration of the war victims, the local Slovenes and Croats also participated (Klabjan, 2010, 418).

Furthermore, although Italian war memorials were deeply linked with the process of the national appropriation of *Venezia Giulia*, they were also inseparably connected with the honouring of fallen soldiers. This automatically guaranteed them a certain aura of sacredness and sheltered them from political attacks. We can thus hardly find any negative reporting about them in the local Slovene press, which instead mostly ignored this process. Even in the case of the supposed act of vandalism directed against the monument on top of Krn/Monte Nero mentioned in the previous section, which enflamed national passions in the region, the Slovene press and politicians were quick to condemn the desecration and to assure that this act was by no means characteristic of the wider Slovene community. The Slovene newspaper *Goriška straža* thus wrote that Slovenes deeply respect Italian war memorials, because they "bow their heads and their souls before the grandeur of death".⁴⁹

Furthermore, it has to be pointed out that many monuments themselves often expressed mainly themes of pre-political suffering, which exceeds the ideological divisions. Such was the case with the aforementioned *Cimitero degli Invitti della terza armata* near

48 See the analysis of reports about this topic in *Edinost* in Fili, 2016, 22.

49 *Goriška straža*, 28. 6. 1922: Obramba Slovencev, 1.

the Hill of Saint Elia, which represented the biggest Italian war cemetery in the region. The structure of the cemetery was designed as a series of concentric circles rising up to the top of the hill. The graves were “decorated” with old military equipment (barbed wire, helmets, etc.), as well as many individually made inscriptions. The whole structure was supposed to invoke the impression of the ascent of Christ to Calvary, as well as Dante’s description of hell (Toderò, 2010, 64–66). It is not surprising that the cemetery did not correspond with the needs of the coming Fascist regime. The realism of the cemetery clearly invoked the tragedy of war; furthermore, the cemetery was too personal, intimate and fragile; it was a site expressing above all personal suffering and loss (Dato, 2014b, 705; Fabi, 1996, 22).

Other war memorials in *Venezia Giulia* likewise clearly express similar messages. Many of them are characterized by the need to cope with the loss caused by the war. In a geographic and historical context deeply imbued with Catholicism, the sculptors mainly employed the traditional images of the suffering of Christ on the cross or other Christian imagery.⁵⁰ Two memorials situated at the symbolically important *Cimitero degli Eroi* in Aquileia, where the remains of the other ten Unknown Soldiers were buried, clearly convey this message.

The monuments are named *L'Angelo della Carità* (Angel of Mercy) and *Il Cristo della trincea* (Christ of the trenches); the former was made by Ettore Ximenes, the latter by Edmondo Furlan. Both monuments were placed in the cemetery in the spring of 1921, but had been made earlier. Ximenes’ statue (made of bronze) represents an angel spreading the hands of a fallen soldier into the sign of a cross; it was made in 1917 at the express wish of the Duke of Aosta. Furlan’s composition, made out of Karst stone, on the other hand, shows Christ reaching down from the cross comforting a wounded soldier. Furlan started working on the monument as a wounded soldier during the war and finished it in 1920 (Daffara, 1998, 62–63). Both sculptures directly address the suffering of Italian soldiers through traditional religious images without clearly invoking any nationalist aspirations.

On the other hand, considering the fact that the meaningfulness of architectural “texts” originates from the dialectic relationship between them and their “readers”, it is understandable that even (supposedly) apolitical manifestations of loss and suffering could be given political interpretations. The “problem” was that by associating the war loss and suffering with exalted religious images, they implicitly presented the war as both tragic and sacred. In a referential frame dominated by notions such as “victory”, “liberation” and especially “*italianità*”, a contemporary could easily describe the meaning of Furlan’s monument as follows: “La passione che portò l’Italia attraverso il martirio alla sua redenzione ha il suo riscontro nella passione e morte di Cristo – che è il primo e il più grande martire – per la Redenzione dell’Umanità”⁵¹ (cited in Daffara, 1998, 62). The Christian

50 As Jay Winter points out, the recourse to traditional religious imagery was very common in all European countries during and following World War I (Winter, 2015, 117–222).

51 “The passion that brought Italy through martyrdom to its redemption is reflected in the passion and death of Christ – who is the first and the greatest martyr – for the Redemption of Humanity.”, (translation by the author).

idea of salvation was thus directly associated with the struggle of the Italian nation for the liberation of its last "unredeemed" brothers and sisters. The instrumentalization of the sacrifices of Italian soldiers during the war could thus paradoxically reach its peak exactly with these, at first sight, apolitical monuments.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is necessary to emphasize the multifaceted nature and even a certain ambiguity of Italian war memorials and commemorative practices in *Venezia Giulia* before the rise of Fascism. The existing research has focused mostly on the ideological dimension of this process, i.e. its role in the legitimization of Italian political elites and its importance in the process of establishing Italian claims over these multinational borderlands. As convincing as these arguments are, I have argued that it would be an oversimplification to approach this topic solely from this perspective. Although a lot of Italian commemorative rituals in *Venezia Giulia* clearly conveyed such messages, often coupled with triumphalist panegyrics and nationalist pathos, a personal or pre-political dimension of grief and sorrow was not completely obscured in the features of erected monuments, nor in their perception by the local populace. War memorials thus incorporated a spectrum of all three main factors working and co-existing together.

However, when we consider specific memorials, it is evident that the boundaries between the three different layers of meaningfulness were far from clear or even final. On the contrary, they often overlapped and even contradicted each other, depending on the context and the "reader". Due to the ubiquitous presence of nationalist notions in public discourse, even seemingly apolitical memorials could easily be given ideologically conformable interpretations. This paradox can help uncover the key to the understanding of the functionality of Italian war memorials and associated commemorative practices in *Venezia Giulia* in the first post-war years. Far from being static, their meaningfulness was constantly subject to change, as they could easily be given different interpretations according to the needs and expectations of their makers and visitors.

**“OBMOČJA BOLJ POVEZANA Z NESMRTNIM SIJAJEM SLAVE”:
ITALIJANSKI VOJAŠKI SPOMENIKI IN KOMEMORATIVNE PRAKSE V
JULIJSKI KRAJINI (1918–1922)**

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POVZETEK

Razprava obravnava italijanske vojaške spomenike ter pokopališča in z njimi povezane komemorativne rituale na območju Julijske krajine od konca prve svetovne vojne do oktobra 1922. Obmejna in večnacionalna Julijske krajina, ki jo je po koncu prve svetovne vojne in propadu Habsburškega imperija najprej zasedla in nato tudi priključila Kraljevina Italija, ponuja zanimivo študijo primera pri preučevanje vloge, ki so jo komemorativne prakse odigrale v povojni Evropi.

Sporočilnost tukajšnjih spomenikov padlih italijanskih vojakov ter komemorativnih praks je odločilno zaznamoval obmejni in večnacionalni značaj tega območja, ki si ga je Italija priključila po Rapalski pogodbi sklenjeni 12. novembra 1920. Poleg tega je potrebno upoštevati tudi dejstvo, da so se naselja, gore, griči in druge teritorialne značilnosti Julijske krajine vtisnile v italijansko nacionalno zavest zaradi hudih bojov s tisoči žrtev, ki so tu potekali v času prve svetovne vojne. Na ta način so postali tipični italijanski kraji spomina; ta proces je nacionalna komemorativna politika še dodatno utrjevala in spodbujala. Prisotnost številnega slovenskega in hrvaškega prebivalstva v regiji pa je prispevala k temu, da spomeniki padlih vojakov niso delovali samo kot nacionalno konstitutivni kraji spomina, temveč tudi kot kraji nacionalne razmejitve. Služili so kot fizični opomin italijanskih zahtev po tem območju, za katerega naj bi bilo med vojno prelite toliko »italijanske krvi«.

Nazadnje pa so bili v očeh velikega dela prebivalstva spomeniki in pokopališča predvsem mesta pred-političnega žalovanja, kjer so svojci lahko žalovali za svojimi preminulimi, medvojno trpljenje pa je bilo marsikje tudi eksplicitno upodobljeno.

Ključne besede: soška fronta, komemoracije, vojni spomeniki, kraji spomina, Julijska krajina

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